

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: The Rebel Cafe: America's Nightclub Underground and the Public Sphere, 1934-1963

Stephen Riley Duncan, Doctor of Philosophy, 2014

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From 1934 through 1963, New York and San Francisco nightspots were community institutions and public forums for radical cultural producers, intellectuals, and political dissidents. This dissertation explores bars, nightclubs, and coffeehouses in bohemian Greenwich Village and North Beach as nodal points in alternative social networks connecting patrons and performers marginalized by their Left politics, race, gender, or sexual orientation. It traces unconventional ideas from subterranean domains through their dissemination by the mass media, examining how local political discourse and cultural diffusion informed social change in the twentieth-century United States. This study illuminates nightclubs' cultural function, shedding new light on familiar subjects such as the Beat Generation, jazz, civil rights, and social satire, and linking the Left's Cultural Front of the 1930s to 1950s dissident culture.

Nightspots provide useful models to study identity formation and oppositional political consciousness, as patrons and performers challenged dominant social norms through cultural avant-gardism, explorations of sexuality and gender, and interracial alliances. Tourism, meanwhile, contributed to the extension of new social norms into the mainstream. Moreover, drinking establishments served a vital function within the public sphere as spaces of discussion and debate which both critiqued and contributed to mass-

media content. As outspoken nonconformists clashed with conservative critics, the result was sometimes legal woes for oppositional figures, from the anarchist libertarians who met in urban cafes in the 1930s to gay-rights activists and the controversial comic Lenny Bruce. Yet the art, literature, music, and satire that emerged from the nightclub underground of the 1950s proved to be forces for social liberation, showing the relation between culture and politics. Subcultural networks provided psychological and material support to the budding gay liberation and feminist movements, as well as the Black Freedom Struggle. By examining the use of public space and built environments, and charting the confluence of culture, politics, and urban geography, “The Rebel Cafe” demonstrates how historical subjects transformed American society by investing nightspots with significance as sites of public discourse.

The Rebel Cafe: America's Nightclub Underground and the Public Sphere, 1934-1963

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2014

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2014

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Acknowledgements

Supposed clichés emerge, and remain, because they so often have a ring of truth. This is certainly the case for the maxim that appears in one form or another in the acknowledgements of almost every scholarly work: that the process of research and writing is not just a solitary one, but relies on a host of interactions within an intellectual community. Without the personal and professional support of many people, I never could have completed this work; the list of those who contributed in ways large and small to this dissertation is long. It would be impracticable to acknowledge every faculty member, fellow graduate student, friend, and archivist whose ideas or assistance aided my doctoral studies at the University of Maryland. I will therefore limit myself to those who most directly had an impact on my academic trajectory and the development of this project.

As an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Arlington, my decision to study history grew from the influence and encouragement of Elisabeth Cawthon, Donald Kyle, Stephen Maizlish, Cedrick May, and Christopher Morris. Most directly, Stephanie Cole advised my first research seminar, providing professional mentorship and personal inspiration that extended well beyond the semester's end. I will always value her guidance, without which I never would have made it to graduate school.

As my graduate advisor, James Gilbert has provided tireless direction, focus, and incisive criticism, simultaneously setting the intellectual bar high while leaving room for me to make this project my own. My occasional stylistic and interpretive “experiments” clearly exasperated him, but to the end Jim faced them, and raised alternatives, with a combination of generosity and determination. So doing, he showed me what *teaching* is really about. I would also like to express sincere appreciation to all of my committee

members: David Freund, Saverio Giovacchini, Robyn Muncy, and Zita Nunes. Especially, throughout the conception and execution of my doctoral work, Saverio and Robyn went above and beyond the call of duty, reading early drafts and offering upbeat yet penetrating comments. They have inspired me not just by who they are as scholars, but as people. In addition, through both coursework and less formal mentorship, Elsa Barkley Brown, Julie Greene, Clare Lyons, David Sicilia, and Daryle Williams provided intellectual challenges and guidance that were essential to my scholarly development. And Thomas Bender's thoughtful assessments of early chapters helped shape my key concepts and arguments.

My conversations with Mary-Elizabeth Murphy and Jon Shelton over our years as grad students together (and often over a beer or two . . . or three . . .) were equally important. They have proved to be as insightful interlocutors as they are astute scholars and good friends (even considering Jon's bafflingly adamant dismissal of the great Billy Joel's songwriting genius: "You may be right, I may be crazy. . ."). Stephanie Hinnershitz-Hutchinson gave me extremely useful feedback on drafts of early chapters. Christina Larocco also extended advice and criticism at several crucial points, providing a reliable map that enabled me to navigate the tumultuous waters of dissertation writing. And Will Burghart (long may his mustache reign!) never let me lose sight of the bigger historical picture.

Particularly helpful as I conducted research were the archivists at the Butler Library of Columbia University, the San Francisco History Center, the Green Library at Stanford, the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA, the New York Performing Arts Library, the Paley Center in New York, the Tamiment Library of New York

University, and the Wisconsin History Center in Madison. I would like to thank Shan Sutton and the University of the Pacific for a summer research grant that allowed me to exhaustively explore the Dave Brubeck Collection in the Holt-Atherton Special Collections. I am especially grateful to Trish Richards, Keith Hatcheck, and Michael Wurtz for their knowledgeable guidance through the Brubeck Collection. I am equally indebted to Susan Snyder for assistance with the Henri Lenoir Collection in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley and to Heather Smedberg and the entire the staff of the Mandeville Special Collections at UC San Diego for their assistance with the Joanne Kyger Papers.

Several people were generous enough to sit down and talk with me about their experiences in the postwar nightlife scenes in New York and San Francisco. Their perspectives were an important addition to textual sources, which are often inherently limited in their ability to convey the subjective senses and feelings of personal experience. Lorraine Gordon of the Village Vanguard graciously shared her memories as a nightclub owner, as well as insight into the life of her partner, Max. Charles and Marlene Inman were similarly kind enough to talk at length about the San Francisco jazz scene, as did Herbie Wong. (Each time I visited, Chuck and Marlene kindly fed me dinner as well—a rare treat for a hungry grad student.) Ragland Tolk Watkins offered both his time and a collection of materials that allowed an in-depth view of his mother, Peggy Tolk-Watkins. Gerald Nachman’s background as a journalist and humor scholar informed my examination of the New Comedians, and Mort Sahl in particular. Also, sincere thanks to Clinton Starr for sharing a rare recording of Blabbermouth Night at The Place. And I would especially like to thank Kush (and Mom) at the Cloud House in San Francisco. Kush’s insights and encyclopedic knowledge of the North Beach and Greenwich Village

poetry scenes were fundamental to the framing of my dissertation, and made possible whatever richness I was able to bring to the subject.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my family, who stood behind me through this long endeavor: my parents, Patricia and Mike Pinkston; my daughter, Leah Skye Duncan; and my brothers and sisters-in-law, Matthew Duncan, Daniel and Kristine Duncan, and Chris and Kuan Yin Knoll (all of whom put me up—and put up with me—at one time or another while I did research in California and New York, as did my good friend, Digant Kasundra). Most of all, my life-partner, Meri, has shown the patience of a saint as the better part of my time and attention for the last three years was absorbed by research, travel, and writing. Moreover, her critiques and suggestions have been invaluable, from the time I first conceptualized the project through this very moment of finishing it. For that, and much, much more, I feel like the luckiest person on Earth. (Boom-Cha!)

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my father, Col. John David Duncan, M.D. Dad passed away on December 11, 2008, just months after I began graduate school, the result of complications from a wound he suffered during the Gulf War in 1991. I feel fortunate that he lived to see me begin work on my doctorate and equally misfortunate that he has not been here as I completed it. He always encouraged my writing, and our debates about politics—over which we fiercely disagreed—were excellent preparation for academic life. After he passed, I found a newspaper clipping among his things that he had saved since high school. A local reporter had done a small piece about teenagers participating in a charity car wash. Below a photo of Dad washing a 1950s Ford with an

impish grin was a caption containing the name he had given the gullible reporter: Alfred E. Neuman, *MAD* magazine's imbecilic mascot. Among many other things my father could be very funny, and he is deeply missed.

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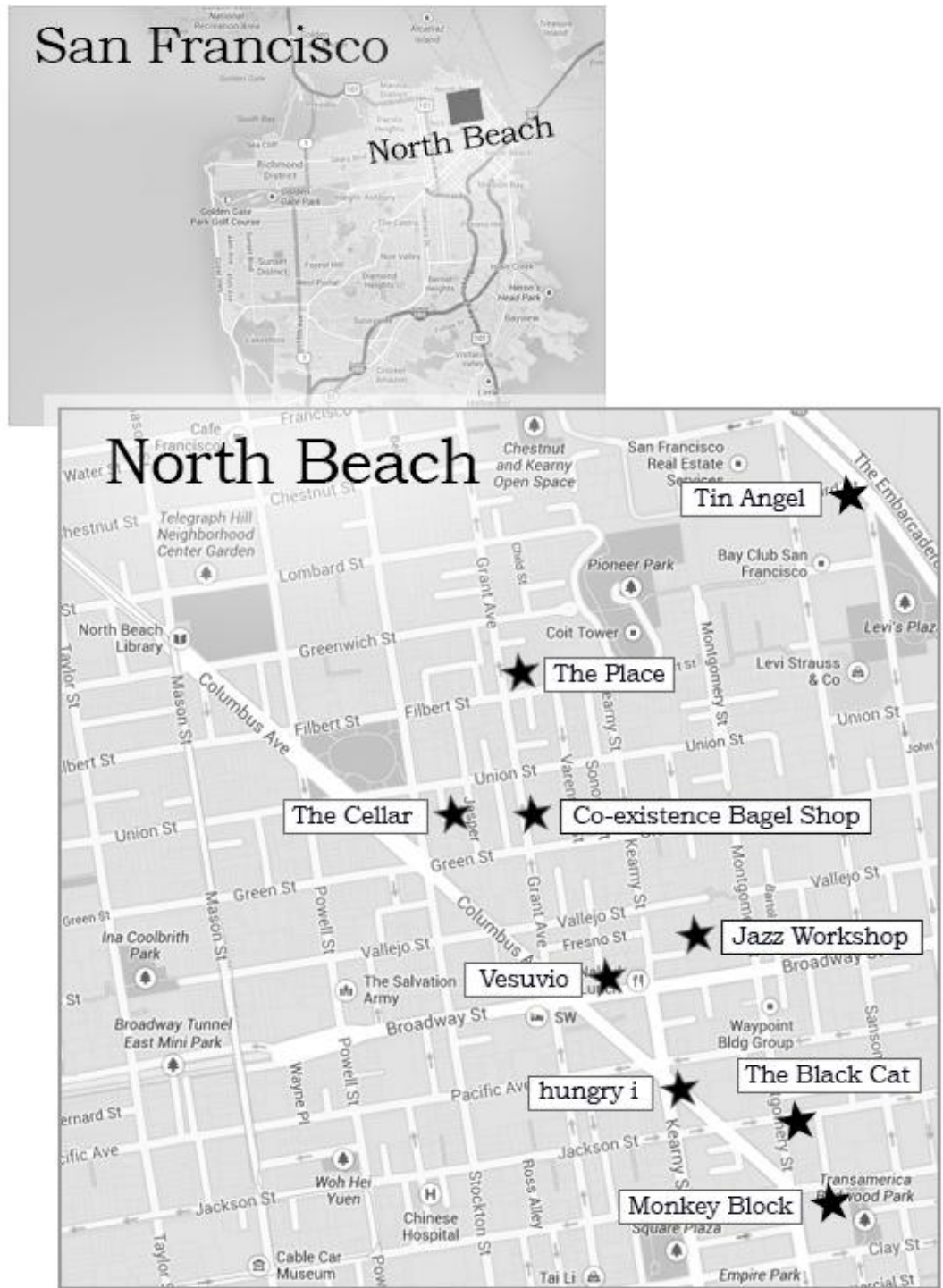


Figure 1.1: Map of San Francisco and North Beach Nightspots

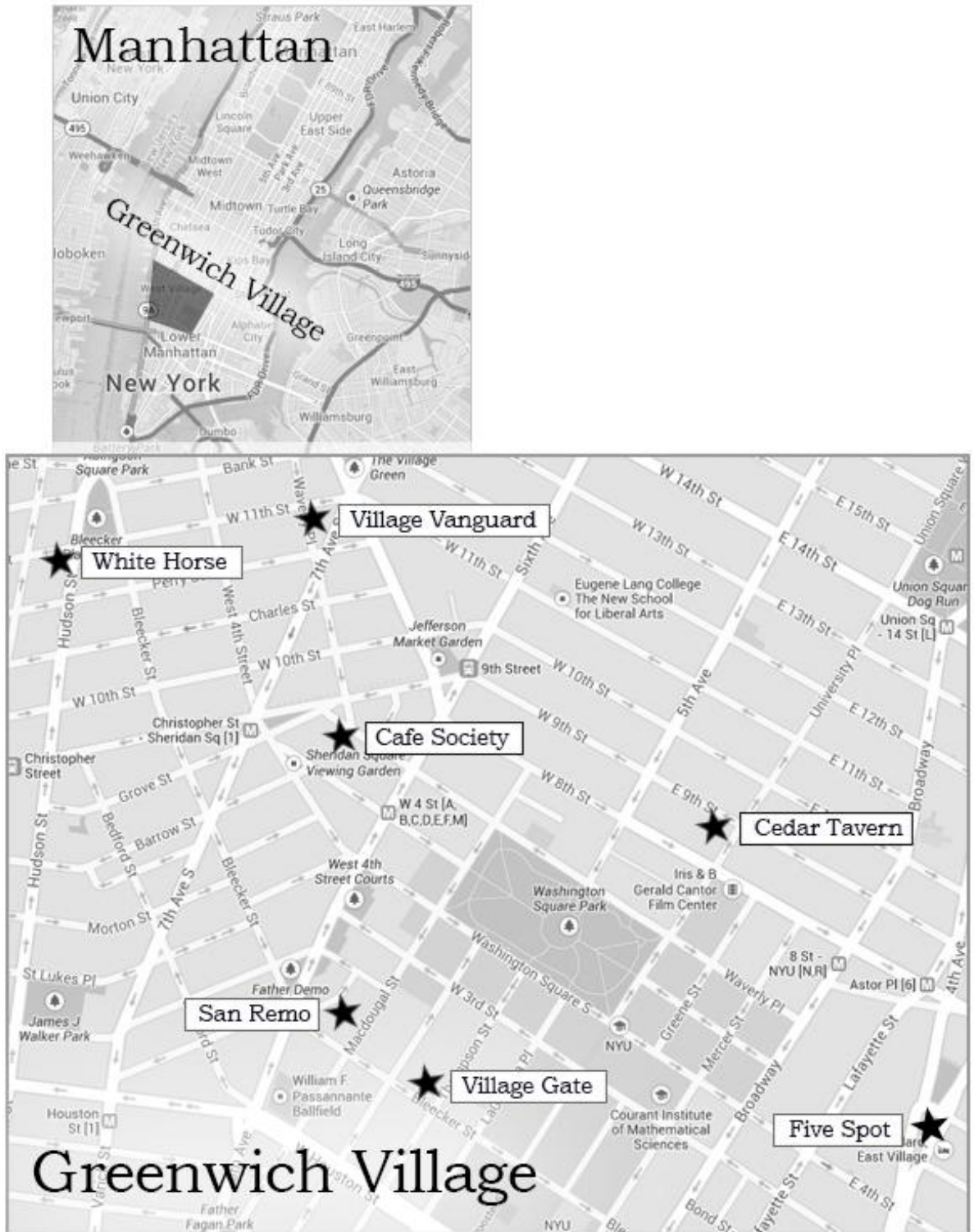


Figure 1.2: Map of Manhattan and Greenwich Village Nightspots

Introduction

“Can You Show Me the Way to the Rebel Cafe?”

But do you know what: I am convinced that we underground folk ought to be kept on a curb. Though we may sit forty years underground without speaking, when we do come into the light of day and break out we talk and talk and talk. . . .

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (1864)

For the most wild yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. . . . Yet, mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (1843)

In 1948, Arnold Green published, “Why Americans are Insecure,” in *Commentary* magazine. The article incisively analyzed the twentieth-century United States’ massive urbanization and rise of bureaucratic technocracy, the erosion of tradition and the patriarchal family, and the deep “insecurity” of Americans who understood culturally that “love” was the ultimate goal of personal fulfillment, even as “modern ‘success’ is registered only through externals: bank account, clothes, mannerisms, automobile, club memberships.”¹ Green concluded that the “demands of shifting and specialized groups with which the individual is associated in home, office, social and professional contacts, require specialized conformities” and would lead to “dissatisfaction, frustration, and intra-family conflict.” What he could not have foreseen was society’s dual reaction, both sides of which were attempts to recreate community and avoid modern alienation. The dominant trend, made possible by the post-World War II economic boom that resulted in

¹ Arnold Green, “Why Americans are Insecure,” in Chandler Brossard, ed., *The Scene Before You: A New Approach to American Culture* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), 161-79. Green noted that, between 1920 and 1934, 46 million Americans moved between rural and urban areas and that during World War II alone, 30 million people changed addresses. More staggering was the shift in labor trends. In 1820, 90% of Americans worked in agriculture, which both encouraged families as economic units and placed their economic gains or losses literally in their own hands. By 1940, that number was 10%. As a result, Green argued, “Economic reality is no longer familial employment on familial holdings, but a series of stations in vast, bureaucratically-organized industrial, business, and governmental structures.” While such economic determinism alone cannot account for the massive sociocultural shifts of the twentieth century, Green nonetheless offered a succinct thesis with tremendous explanatory power.

the 1950s “Affluent Society,” was to re-imagine rural environments in the suburbs—complete with acre-lot green spaces and spiking Baby-Boom birthrates. The opposite, much smaller, trend attempted to turn the urban landscape into its own kind of communal refuge, a postwar counterpart of the premodern village. The most obvious examples of this were the bohemian neighborhoods of Greenwich Village in New York and North Beach in San Francisco.

Urban nightspots—the bars, coffeehouses, cafes, and nightclubs of American cities—responded to the twin poles of postwar “insecurity,” as their owners devised strategies appealing to local bohemians at one end and suburban tourists at the other. For the denizens of the Village or North Beach, “niteries” became informal institutions, places that fed both the body and the mind. For suburbanites, they were places of excitement and entertainment, where they could pull back the nylon curtain and experience the frantic and libertine atmosphere of urban life, spaces of organized “spontaneity” to balance the staid structures of bureaucracy. For both, nightspots were sites of identity exploration, social laboratories where patrons examined and tested artistic, political, psychological, sexual, gendered, or racial senses of self. Out of this nocturnal milieu grew an entirely new form of American culture.

Despite the affluence that defined much of the postwar era, the specters of McCarthyism, the Cold War, racial oppression, the triumph of corporate liberalism and concomitant conformity led some Americans to wonder whether the promise of plenty was worth less than the sum of its parts. This discontent spawned a national community of cultural dissidents in the two decades following World War II. Connected by complex social networks and a broad yet identifiable aesthetic, this community constituted a

unique Cold War counterculture. Music, literature, visual arts, journalism, and stand-up comedy emphasized “authenticity,” claiming honesty and even purity in their modes of sociocultural articulation, and espousing immediacy in language, experience, and ideology. As a result, a diverse coalition of devotees, including both cultural producers and audiences, united in an informal project to redefine the meaning of “America,” placing an experimental pluralism alongside novel notions of personal liberty.

The common thread among them was attention to “liberation,” from psychological or political repression, racial caste, or oppressive sexual and gender norms. Nonetheless, the divergence of liberationist ideas sometimes undermined the ideals of egalitarian democracy. The nocturnal underground was a complex series of sites in which patrons and performers both enacted and contested hierarchies of gender, race, and sexuality. It was therefore a key liminal space in which new identities and political consciousness formed, affecting formal contestations over power from the Black Freedom Struggle to peace activism. As the formal Left was constrained by the Second Red Scare, the knowledge of Stalin’s atrocities, and the narrowing of the postwar political spectrum, the oppositional urban underground nurtured proto-political cultural seeds that carried progressive sensibilities through the winter of the early Cold War. The outcome was a florescence of oppositional cultural expression that affected every facet of the Affluent Society.

Many historians have discussed the role of urban bohemia as a background for radical politics from the 1910s to the 1960s. But while offhandedly mentioning nightspots as central bohemian locales, they seldom examine nocturnal sites themselves as social and cultural institutions. And although scholars have considered the jokers,

jazzmen, beatniks, blabbermouths, playboys, and partisans who populated subterranean communities, few have explored the crucial nodal points that connected social networks into a national “circuit.” These urban underground nightspots—what the countercultural poet Ed Sanders has called, the “Rebel Cafe”—provided interaction and identification for audiences, while shaping the form and content of cultural productions. In “Hymn to the Rebel Cafe,” Sanders situates his own radicalism within a lineage of rebellion spanning back to the American Revolution. The poem opens with the meetings that sparked the Boston Tea Party and the battle at Lexington, held in the taverns and coffeehouses that dotted the colonies. Sanders then follows a radical path through nineteenth-century working-class saloons, the cabarets of Berlin, and Parisian cafes, to the places where his own activism took shape—the jazz clubs, bars, and coffeehouses of the 1950s, which are the subjects of my dissertation.

I use this “Rebel Cafe” image and history to describe a particular set of nightspots that developed in the US from the 1930s through the early Cold War. These were spaces for controversial performances and sites of public discussion for oppositional communities in Greenwich Village and North Beach. The “Rebel Cafe” also encompasses the culture industry that intersected with these locales, from the visual arts and print to record companies and film. Through the 1930s, the political Left had established ties with cultural producers and intellectuals through a range of institutions, from the Communist Party’s Popular Front and literary John Reed Clubs to the New Deal’s WPA arts programs. Amid the upheavals of World War II and the resultant Red Scare, many who deplored the inequalities of capitalism and embraced social-democracy had to go underground. Leftists in the culture industry faced direct or indirect oppression

for their views, seen most dramatically in the prosecution of the Hollywood Ten and the blacklist. As a result, oppositional performers, writers, poets, and painters made a place for themselves in a world of coldwater flats, jazz clubs, and literary cafes. Repudiating McCarthyism, atomic militarism, psychosocial repression, and Soviet communism, the Rebel Cafe emerged as a new site of oppositional culture in the 1950s.

HISTORICAL LINES, CULTURAL WEBS, PUBLIC SPHERES

Norman Mailer once said of the Vietnam War: “It is self-evident that the *Reader’s Digest* and Lawrence Welk and Hilton Hotels are organically connected with the Special Forces napalming villages.” I would like to demonstrate a related proposition, connecting the cabarets of early twentieth-century Paris or Berlin with American protests against the Vietnam; Sigmund Freud with the Five Spot Cafe in Greenwich Village and the Civil Rights Movement; and the American Revolution, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, San Francisco’s hungry i nightclub, and the comedian Lenny Bruce with the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. The force of this sociocultural field, this web of meaning, was not mysterious or metaphysical, it was historical and anthropological, the result of cultural transmission and symbolic action.² These seemingly disparate historical subjects were connected through multiple ideas, people, and places, tied together as threads in an intricate tapestry. Looking back, it is possible to trace an intellectual genealogy through the movement of people and ideas, from fin de siècle cultural radicals to postwar oppositional thinkers who traversed the globe, from the Americas to Asia and North Africa. The result is a fabric that interweaves subjects including utopian urban planning, cinema, anarcho-pacifism, and postmodern aesthetic criticism.

As cultural critics such as Leerom Medovoi have argued, the 1950s were not a

² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (United States: Basic Books, 1973), 4, 17, 24-28.

monolith of conformity and consensus, but were instead years of intense change in which popular culture sometimes drove cracks and cleavages in the calm national facade. W. T. Lhamon, Jr. has offered a useful snapshot of this period, portraying an American culture of contradictions that demanded immediacy while fearing the consequences of change. The “conformist” fifties was a “trade off” that celebrated the end of depression and war by ignoring dissent, racial inequality, and contentious culture. Conformity was actually “contentment” with affluence and (relative) peace as the nation enjoyed the most equal distribution of wealth in its history. At the same time, the 1950s was a decade of “deliberate speed” and a new “common lore,” seen in everything from abstract expressionism to the wail of rock & roll; the Warren Court’s vacillating desegregation decisions and Robert Frank’s gritty photographs; the Civil Rights Movement, the Beat Generation’s ecstatic language, and a folk music revival culminating with Bob Dylan as the voice of generational protest in the 1960s. “Deliberate speed” included Black culture that filled in the hollow middle of American dissent, even as this culture itself became conflicted, with notions of authenticity and assertions of individualism that maintained racial and gender hierarchies and constricted collective action. Yet these trends were opposed by the rise of “poplore”—a form of postmodern folklore, in which popular culture was the “laughing chorus” of the modern world—as stabs of humor deflated the pretensions of a power elite that defined “Americanism” as homogeneous and hegemonic white masculinity.³ Throughout this jumbled image, almost invisible by their ubiquity,

³ W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), xii, 3, 67-72, 89, 98-106, 110-12. See also Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-2, 30-1; Joel Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury Icons* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

and largely missing from scholarly analyses, were urban nightspots which supported oppositional performers, provided social interaction, connected dissident networks, and disseminated vanguard styles into the postwar public sphere.

The Rebel Cafe nurtured a bicoastal bohemian community that transcended city (and occasionally national) borders. I therefore use Greil Marcus's concept of "psycho geography" to trace ways in which participants imagined their own position within the structures of bohemia. Marcus borrows the term from the radical Situationist artists of postwar Paris, who saw their free movement through the city as a counterhegemonic rejection of consumerism and "spectacle," a refusal to use urban space for its designed commercial purposes. By mentally remapping the city on their own terms, marking their way with graffiti and a cycle of modern myths that were exploded as quickly as they were conjured, the Situationists reclaimed autonomy by disrupting and repurposing the objects of modern industrial production. Their goal was to redefine "leisure" not in opposition to labor—the reward for work—but as creative work itself. This "science fiction of urban planning" found meaning not in things, but in narrative, in time and space. The Situationists devised a "city of negation," that simultaneously satisfied the utopian impulse of "possibilities."⁴ I use the notion of psycho geography both more expansively and more precisely, to encompass the mental maps that realize the

⁴ As Marcus writes, suggesting the idea of the city as the twentieth century's inner frontier, "The members of the [Situationist] LI remained planners of an imaginary city, but now they were also its critics—they all saw that all cities were imaginary, complexes of desires turned into geography or suppressed by it, and they saw that all cities could be explored." Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989, paperback edition, 1990), 330-4, 337-8, 345, 362; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983, 2006), 13, 19, 22-4, 34-6, 205. See also Alev Cinar and Thomas Bender, ed., *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xi-xxxvi.

abstract ideas of “community” and “society” into functioning, concrete entities. As political theorist Benedict Anderson has suggested, nations themselves are kinds of “imagined communities,” linked in “horizontal relationships” through mechanisms such as print culture and patriotism. This was also true of the bicoastal bohemia that connected the Village and North Beach. Cultural dissidents located themselves within social networks defined by ideology or artistic style, and imagined a new society structured by media, as well as the sense of place they attached to the streets and nightspots of urban America.

The Rebel Cafe was fundamental to the development of New York and San Francisco into twin poles of oppositional culture by the end of the 1950s. The bicoastal bohemian community saw itself as pluralistic and elastic, yet unified by aesthetics or politics, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Yet this demimonde was no utopia. Even as subcultural networks provided psychological and material support to the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the intensifying gay rights and feminist movements, dominant social hierarchies still held sway. North Beach and Greenwich Village are therefore useful case studies to examine the role of underground nightspots in urban development and the contradictory evolution of social politics.

The nocturnal underground was also transnational, including the first- and second-generation immigrants who owned Rebel Cafe nightclubs and bars, and global influences on American culture brought by the movement of people and ideas.

Widespread tourism and mass-media dissemination of underground nightclub culture introduced previously oppositional ideas into the national and worldwide mainstream by the 1960s. Further, the interaction between Beat Generation literature and cabaret culture

revealed the effects of transnational imaginaries on political consciousness, as Americans grappled with the implications of atomic-age empire.⁵

Focusing on the *places* where cultural producers met and performed illuminates the role of public space within the Rebel Cafe. Nightspots played a significant part in the public sphere, the *social space* that mediates between private citizens and the political realm. As the framework first established by sociologist Jurgen Habermas in 1962 describes, the public sphere's appearance in the eighteenth century accompanied the arrival of civil society, in which private commercial concerns were divided from government, accompanied by abstract law based on Enlightenment principles of reason. Debate and the promulgation of law were carried out through publicity, which informed public opinion as the foundation for political decision making. Therefore, Habermas suggested, "publicity was to serve the promotion of legislation based on *ratio*," or reasoned debate, not arbitrary decree or "secrets of state." Public exchange in the world of letters, adhering to universally recognized rules, confirmed equality and individual subjectivities as the basis of politics (later solidified into notions of "liberty"), while debate was carried out in public spaces such as the coffeehouses of Paris or London. These sites were seen by monarchists as "seedbeds of political unrest," even as the

⁵ While there can be some debate about whether these trends fall under the rubric of cultural imperialism, they do indicate that transnational exchanges were multidirectional. For example, Richard Pells' argument that postwar Europeans both resisted and incorporated American culture on their own terms is convincing, despite his overly-sanguine view which underestimates the influential power of advertising. Pells sees U.S. culture less as a dominant mode of Americanization than part of an process of mutual effect—demonstrated by the continued significance of French cinema in the 1950s. This model certainly applies to cabaret culture and the Beats. Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), xiv, xv, 214, 220-225. For a more critical view of U.S. commercial expansion abroad, see Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 3-11, 75, 226-30, 235-47, 272-84, 336-75. See also John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 1- 5, 16, 30, 96-7 and Brooke L. Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris: Transatlantic Politics and Culture between the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

“commentary and criticism” formed in dialogue between the press and civil society became a constituent part of political authority.⁶

Habermas offers a solid starting point for understanding the relationships between people, media, and political power. And parallels between the Rebel Cafe and the classic public sphere are obvious. Established authorities viewed each as subversive, even radical, as debate and criticism of government policy arose in various places of imbibing. This dialogue was fully enmeshed with the press—particularly in the 1950s when the items being pressed included vinyl record albums. Yet differences are equally glaring, and the Habermasian model falls short of addressing the postwar American public sphere’s complexity in three key ways. First, the classic public sphere relies on the notion of a single, hegemonic public whose rights as private citizens are drawn from patriarchal authority within the “intimate sphere” of the family, which is sharply distinguished from the realm of economics and politics.⁷ As the feminist insistence that “the personal is political” has shown, this is a false dichotomy: politics don’t stop at the household doorstep. Gender and sexual norms have very real effects in the marketplace and in the halls of power. Further challenging Habermas’s “bourgeois masculinist” formulation is

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989, 1962), 51-60.

⁷ This separation was problematic due to women’s role in constituting humanism within literary circles and salons. Habermas only partly recognized this, arguing, “the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm. *The fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple.*” This ambivalence succeeded against authoritarian rule, thereby creating an enduring fiction of a single public that linked the Enlightenment articulation of political rights (life, liberty, and property) with *human* rights. Yet these rights were restricted by historical social norms. Absent from this description are the slaves and servants who also would have been included in any eighteenth-century conception of family dependents. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 56, 82-3; Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”: *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990), pp. 56-80; Carol Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 25; Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), 150, 305.

my assertion that multiple publics represent greater democracy than a single hegemonic one. This challenge highlights the role of competing *counterpublics*, which oppose the elite public sphere, embracing marginality and developing independent institutions dedicated to altering the dominant society.⁸ Finally, this opposition points to the significance of art as a form of social criticism. Public sites affected political discourse not just through cultural content but their form as well, as the aesthetics of built environments and organization of social space opposed mainstream norms of racial or gender segregation. Personal and marginal politics often used claims on public places to demand full rights and visibility, making aesthetic space all the more important. As the Situationist position suggests, the non-rational, even absurd, aspects of artistic discourse—in poetry, music, comic satire—can be potent weapons to deflate pretensions and spotlight the failings of rationalized politics. Moreover, as literary scholar Tyler T. Schmidt has noted, desegregation was private as well as public, involving sexuality and intimacy, “a history located not solely in contested public institutions but in transformed homes and personal lives.” He argues that interracial sex in the postwar period could be counted as part of “queer” history, showing the parallels between racial and sexual transgression—transformative actions that were fundamental parts of urban bohemia.⁹

The Rebel Cafe offers a useful lens to examine all three of these aspects of the public sphere. While many within the Rebel Cafe consciously celebrated their marginal position, more arrived there through a mix of factors, including their class status, race or

⁸ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Transl. by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Susan Herbst, *Politics at the Margin: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8-20.

⁹ Tyler T. Schmidt, *Desegregating Desire: Race and Sexuality on Cold War American Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 3, 13.

ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Social marginality spawned many of the compelling elements of subterranean culture. Particularly, the public function of *talk*—discussion, conversation, and debate, in dialogue with media—was an essential element in the Rebel Cafe milieu. This included performance as a kind of transformed talk in which cultural producers and audiences interacted in physical space and through visual, aural, and literary media. These were publicized through a network of independent publishers and record labels, each with varying ties to urban nightspots, which acted as subcultural institutions. Further, *performativity* was also an aspect of public interaction, as nightspot patrons experimented with new identities. The Rebel Cafe therefore illustrates the social functions of place and space, as well as political consciousness and subject formation, in urban nightclub culture.

The nightspot's function in the public sphere therefore adds another dimension to the Habermasian model: the transformation of the cafe world into the larger one, and the toll that took on the cafe itself. Habermas presented an image of the relation between the state and the press as a dialectic, two poles in opposition with public opinion forming in between as the merits and criticisms of both sides were debated and synthesized in the coffeehouse or cafe. The "transformation" of the public sphere, he argued, resulted from the twentieth-century's mass media and political "public relations" in which the press and the state were no longer independent and opposite. Yet this ignores cafe society as a third, separate entity. As the Rebel Cafe demonstrates, the public continued to deliberate the changes in both politics *and* the press, affecting the wider discourse—a third stage of publicity, with the cafe as an independent institution.¹⁰ At the same time, as its ideas and

¹⁰ "From now on," Habermas declared, "the degree of the public sphere's development was measured by the state of the confrontation between government and press." Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 59-60,

criticisms resonated through American society, the changes that resulted echoed back and transformed the cafe as well. Therefore, a better image for this process is not a line between the two points of press and state, but a three dimensional figure with the cafe in triangulation. Further, these points were always moving in response to each other, making publicity in a democratic society not a linear phenomenon, but a spiral of relations.

The Rebel Cafe marked a particular moment in the history of American nightlife, which had long affected a range of events and transformations, from local politics to changes in middle-class social norms. As social and cultural historians have shown, the urban saloon arose in the nineteenth century as a refuge from the regimented factory system, which both standardized work hours and reduced work-time sociability. Particularly for working-class and immigrant communities, the saloon offered an important “alternative culture” (albeit male-dominated) that served important public and social functions, maintaining control of leisure and providing everything from cheap meals to sites for political organizing. But as the middle class grew in the early twentieth

140-8, 193-5. What remains open for debate is whether the postwar public sphere remained an independent structure or was co-opted into the hierarchical mass-media, as Habermas’s notion of “refeudalization” or Theodor Adorno’s concept of discursive totality would suggest. Refeudalization, while perhaps dishearteningly prevalent today, faced serious resistance during the 1950s. In fact, important lessons can be learned from the oppositional subculture’s efforts to challenge mass media conformity and what critical theorist Walter Benjamin has described as the aestheticization of politics. Habermas asserts that with the rise of large corporations and the welfare state, an expanding public sphere began to lose its political function. *Refeudalization* began when *publicity* was replaced with *public relations*, as “economic advertisement achieved an awareness of its political character.” Also, corporate advertising associated branding with public functions in order to manufacture public consent and afford “quasi-political” functions and authority to large private interests. The active citizenry that had previously made up the public became passive consumers of media, gaining for private interests “respect of the kind one displays toward public authority.” Thus the process of “refeudalization” is intimately tied to mass entertainment, as politicians used the trappings of advertisement to address citizens as consumers and sell themselves as commodities to voters. The issues of personal politics, marginalization, and art as critique bring into question the extent of the twentieth-century public sphere’s “transformation.” Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 140-8, 161-2, 193-5. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 241; Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

century, and the Progressives successfully attacked the saloon as an unhealthy symbol of urban life (culminating with Prohibition in 1920), nightspots began to take on new cultural meanings. The illicit bars, cabarets, and nightclubs of urban red-light or bohemian districts of the 1920s catered to middle-class desires for sophistication and socio-sexual adventurism—which simultaneously, and paradoxically, normalized nightspots as a form of popular entertainment.¹¹ These connotations continued into the following decades. Yet, if the criminal and transgressive qualities of bohemian nightspots helped define the Jazz Age’s new middle-class mores, mass political movements that addressed the downtrodden in the 1930s dwarfed Depression-era cafe culture.¹² As the New Deal’s cultural apparatus was dismantled during the early Cold War, the nocturnal underground once again played a crucial role in the coalescence of bohemian and radical communities.

Examination of Rebel Cafe nightspots brings several frayed threads of urban history together, tying New York’s more established role to the emergence of San Francisco as an intellectual and cultural center. Cultural and intellectual histories have examined esoteric aspects of urban life, presenting an expansive view of the twentieth-

¹¹ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Class Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Andrew P. Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); Jessica Ellen Sewell, *Women and the Everyday City, 1890-1915* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992); Burton Peretti, *Nightclub City: Politics and Amusement in Manhattan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 2009).

¹² *Ibid*, 165-180; James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans* (New York: Wiley, 1968), 17, 49-53; Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 165-180.

century city's ideological effects. As his notion of "psychogeography" suggests, Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* explores the impact of urban environments on consciousness, whether political or aesthetic. And Thomas Bender's *New York Intellect* traces the relationships between Gotham as an evolving intellectual environment, its institutions, and the production of ideas within its social milieu.¹³ The literature on gender and sexuality has especially enriched urban history, recognizing the constructed quality of social norms, questioning previously naturalized categories such as heterosexuality and femininity. Of particular interest are George Chauncey's *Gay New York* and Nan Boyd's *Wide Open Town*, which focus on the relationships between gay and lesbian subcultures and urban environments. Important concepts elucidated in these two works are "sexual topographies"—the urban landscape of safe spaces for socio-sexual exploration—and the rise of nightspots as institutions within developing subcultures and social liberation movements.¹⁴ Neither fully connects queer culture and activism with bohemianism, however, a crucial component that furthered the rise of gay liberation as a national movement. And while biographical works of intellectual history like Linda Hamalian's *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* and Lewis Ellingham's *Poet Be Like God* incorporate aspects of San Francisco's environment and history as significant factors in intellectual development, there has been little work on the Bay Area's national role.¹⁵ An exploration

¹³ George Lipsitz's work on the intersection of politics and culture in the postwar period further expands this view, including working-class culture and oppositional readings of mass media, while Andrew Ross's *No Respect* interrogates the relationships between popular culture and Cold War-era intellectuals. George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 59-60.

¹⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹⁵ The best work on the relation to California arts and political opposition remains Richard Cándida Smith's *Utopia and Dissent*, which demonstrates the relationship between the avant-garde and radical identity politics in the mid-twentieth century. A sweeping work of cultural criticism—insightful in its analysis

of the urban nightclub underground helps fill these gaps, completing a larger picture of dissident urban life.

The urban context is also fundamental to understanding postwar struggles for racial equality. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s is perhaps the quintessential example of organizing for social change in the twentieth-century US, and it was often intertwined with the dissident communities of American cities. Most notably, Martha Biondi's *To Stand and Fight* charts activist's use of New York City's very fabric and culture (including protests against the famous Stork Club) to demand economic gains, fair housing, and education. More work remains to be done, however, connecting the role of cultural producers to the Black Freedom Struggle and the slow erosion of racial caste during the Cold War era. The Rebel Cafe offers a useful lens to examine issues ranging from the funding and organizing of the Movement within the culture industry to the role of entertainment in the construction of race itself.¹⁶ And any cultural understanding of the

connecting bohemian culture and "utopian" visions of community that challenged mainstream tastes and the military-industrial State in the 1960s—it nonetheless sometimes falls short as a work of history. At times relying too heavily on cultural criticism and oral histories, Candida Smith misses contemporaneous commentary that would have offered more context and empirical grounding to his examinations of North Beach's bohemia. For my purposes, his key flaw is the suggestion that the growth of Beat Generation popularity in the late 1950s was accompanied by an explosion of "music and comedy clubs that catered to the general public" and challenged the area's insularity. This ignores North Beach's a long tradition of nightclub entertainment that flourished long before the Beat Generation was born in 1940s New York. In fact, the growth of modern jazz, the so-called "New Comedy" of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, and the beatnik phenomenon developed hand-in-glove, each feeding the other. This longer history, marked by a tight chronology in the 1950s, is what I distinguish as the very particular evolution of the "Rebel Cafe." Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 168. Another notable exception to the lack of study of San Francisco is ; Clinton Robert Starr, "Bohemian Resonance: The Beat Generation and Urban Countercultures in the United States during the Late 1950s and Early 1960s," PhD. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2005, which explores North Beach in relation to Venice.

¹⁶ Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). While Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 2007) best demonstrates this organizing tradition in the much-studied segregationist South, other works stand out for their attention to the problems of racial struggle in the nation's urban north and west. Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) and Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.:

Movement requires a focus on jazz as an expression of social protest, pride in African-American culture, and even transnational political affiliations, that goes well beyond musical aesthetics. This also extends to folk music's political ties. A full exploration of the American urban underground places these cultural forms within the context of nightspots and community development, and challenges the sometimes artificial scholarly divisions between styles that were united socio-culturally, despite being distinct aesthetically.¹⁷

Further, ethnic identity—especially Jewish—was a central aspect of postwar cultural production, but few scholars have fully connected this with underground nightclubs, in which the controversial comedy of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce was seminal. The historical literature on American humor itself is equally limited, but does include excellent studies such as Stephen Kercher's *Revel with a Cause*. The recognition of humor as a part of the American "character" goes as far back as Constance Rourke's *American Humor*, published in 1934. Rourke did not address comedy, however, but rather humor as found in satire and caricature: the use of archetypes and exaggerations to

Princeton University Press, 2003) show the challenges of urban racial politics in 1960s Philadelphia and the Bay Area, respectively. Meanwhile, Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000) offers a larger context for the internationalist civil rights efforts featured in the work of Penny Von Eschen and Ingrid Monson.

¹⁷ The history of jazz is extensive, ranging from Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989, 1993) to Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), Eric Porter, *What's this Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and Robin D.G. Kelley's recent biography of Thelonius Monk. Ted Gioia's foundational works offer overviews of the form's evolution, while more detailed studies such as Jon Panish, *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), Paul Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness: Music, Race, and Humanity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), and Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) illustrate the tangled threads of race and culture which tied jazz and the Black Freedom Struggle. See also Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), William Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), Richard Reuss and JoAnne Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), and Robert Wells, *Life Flows On in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

form the structure of national self-understanding and representation. Later studies demonstrated the social and cultural power of such representations, seen in the denigration of African-Americans through the minstrel imagery of the Sambo archetype, for instance. But others examine the sometimes subversive role of jokes and graffiti, and the use of humor or comedy as a method of resistance by those who faced racial or ethnic prejudice.¹⁸ A more detailed examination of often ignored comics such as Sahl, Bruce, and Dick Gregory illuminates the role of humor in postwar Left critiques.

Historical literature has paid more exhaustive attention to intellectual currents and left ideology. Similarly, the work on American culture in the decades after World War II has grown expansive, with much of it challenging the notion of the 1950s as a staid and conformist decade. Recent studies demonstrate that conformity was questioned almost as quickly as it formed. Yet no comprehensive work has emerged to extend Michael Denning's foundational study of the relations between culture and the Left in the 1930s and 1940s, *The Cultural Front*. Further, no study has offered a detailed examination of

¹⁸ If *Beyond the Melting Pot* by Nathan Glaser and Daniel Moynihan offers some basic insight into the formation of ethnic neighborhoods in New York, recent histories suggest a more rich and complex story of evolving ethnic cultures. As David Lehman argues in *A Fine Romance: Jewish Songwriters, American Songs* (New York: Nextbook/Schocken, 2009), it is impossible to understand jazz (or the comedy of Lenny Bruce, for that matter) without understanding the relationship between urban Jewish and African-American cultures, particularly as they intersected in New York. Similarly, Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) explores the sociocultural significance of Yiddish (itself a hybrid form of language) as a mode of self-identification and even ethnic assertion within postwar American culture. Yet, even as he acknowledges the ambivalent effects of the vernacular's "joke potential," Shandler makes only a single mention of Lenny Bruce, whose use of Yiddish was a trademark of his discordant humor, and neglects Mort Sahl entirely. A strong study of humor is Peter Robinson, *Dance of the Comedians: The People, the President, and the Performance of Political Standup Comedy in America*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010). See also Jesse Bier's critique of social satire in the 1960s in *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968); Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 30th Anniversary ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); and James Bloom, *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003). Each of these works offers an overview of satire, comedy, and political critique, with particular emphasis on liberalism.

the postwar Left in New York's and San Francisco's primary sites of cultural production.¹⁹ The Rebel Cafe goes far to fill this gap in the history of (counter)cultural development.

ON THE BEACH, IN THE VILLAGE, LEFT OF CENTER, IN SIGHT, OUT OF MIND . . .

During the Red Scare following World War II, rebel nightspots in the bohemian neighborhoods of Greenwich Village and North Beach acted as ideological fallout shelters for the embattled Left—safe spaces where oppositional ideas and social networks flourished. The Rebel Cafe's cultural producers tended toward the political left on a spectrum that ranged from radical anarchist-libertarians to mainstream liberals. While its critique failed to develop into a unified political force and was often naive and utopian, it was nonetheless significant as a “performative” phase of American politics, out of which some participants grew into “activists” in the Black Freedom Struggle and the New Left.

From writers and artists who first made their marks in the 1930s, such as John Steinbeck, and Mark Rothko, through luminaries and loudmouths of the postwar decades such as Jackson Pollock and Norman Mailer, Rebel Cafe niteries hosted cohorts of pioneers who challenged the mainstream and changed the course of American culture. In these subterranean spaces, dissidents and intellectuals of the 1930s such as Malcolm Cowley,

¹⁹ Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals & Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) offer comprehensive overviews of the changes and challenges of the Cold War period for left thinkers, while Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998) and Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) chart the effects of the Red Scare on American society. In some ways, these examples challenge the Old Left/New Left divisions commonly asserted by scholars. For further arguments about reframing oppositional politics in the 1960s, see Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). See also Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Howard Brick, *The Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998).

Dwight Macdonald, and Henry Miller interacted with the 1950s oppositional cultural generation, from Jack Kerouac and Michael Harrington to James Baldwin and Susan Sontag. But social changes also grew from the activities of hundreds of second-order participants—the grassroots, if you will, of a new sensibility. This varied bunch can be linked by their embrace of liberationism and the networks of the urban underground. My intention is to place often ignored writers and intellectuals—as far ranging as novelist Lawrence Lipton and journalist Anatole Broyard to the anarchist poets Kenneth Rexroth and Jack Spicer—back into focus alongside more commonly discussed critics of the Organizational Society such as David Riesman and William Whyte as disturbers of the peace.

Of course, liberal critics such as Riesman and Whyte would hardly have step foot in Rebel Cafe nightspots like the Village Vanguard or The Place. The divisions between their ideas and those of self-proclaimed “libertarian socialists” such as Mailer or the Beats were notable. Yet they all shared a postwar concern about the nature of consciousness that was rooted in the period’s assumption that the economic problem of scarcity had been solved. For instance, in 1953 Mailer criticized Riesman (who declared both the “economy of abundance” as a source of “other-directed” conformity and mass media as a source of autonomous critique), excoriating his inattention to power inequalities and the self-righteousness of a liberal consensus that excluded women and African Americans. But Mailer also discussed the “neurotic” aspects of Cold War politics, reflecting an atomic-age awareness that US military strength and global power rested on the constant threat of apocalypse and, for left radicals, the knowledge that the USSR’s brutality allowed their criticisms “no place to go, no country, no cause, no movement.”

Given Lhamon's observation about trading dissent for security, and a rising civil rights movement that demanded the recognition of African-American *humanity* as much as economic equality, it makes sense that a significant form of 1950s social criticism was cultural. Tied to various notions of "alienation," and backed by psychoanalysis, the focus on liberty as the freedom to *think* made culture a key delivery system for dissident ideas. Beat scholar Michael Davidson captured these tensions within postwar dissent when he suggested that Jack Kerouac's writing was the "embodiment of a certain type of pulsating American energy that both enlivens and alienates at the same time."²⁰

Jazz and folk music performed in Rebel Cafe venues informed rebellious postwar literary styles. The bebop and "cool jazz" of Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck, and Charles Mingus helped form the psychological soundtrack of 1950s rebellion, alongside the blues of Billie Holiday and the socially-conscious folksongs of Pete Seeger, Harry Belafonte, and Bob Dylan. These dissident cultural producers provided more than mere entertainment; they offered public models of possibility through radical critiques of Cold War America, cracking the frozen surface of consensus and felicitous consumption to reveal the roiling currents underneath. The search for spirituality in a materialistic world, concerns about the corporate-liberal state, and critiques of conformity born of mass society were not unique to jazzmen, bohemians, or social satirists. But eventually, this culture became part of the national public discourse, adding to progressive political

²⁰ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1959, 1966), 182-9; Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985); David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 528-36; David M. Fine and Paul Skenazy, eds., *San Francisco in Fiction: Essays in a Regional Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 132. As Michael Kazin recently wrote, simply, the Left's "influence was far stronger in cultural affairs than in electoral politics." Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 173, 155-91, 204, 211. For a more critical view of this cultural-political dynamic, see Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

voices, while often confronting the inadequacies of liberalism.

The significance of nightclub culture as lived experience should not be underestimated. Social transformation—even liberation—often grew from the new vistas of thought, the “New Vision” as the Beat Generation called it, that flourished in its sometimes decadent spaces. Moreover, the bohemian call for altered consciousness underscored Freudian psychology’s ubiquity in the postwar decades—even as the Beats’ radical notions of psychic liberation turned Freud’s palliative principles on their head. A common expression of bohemian opposition to American consumerism and conformity, for instance, was the embrace of “madness”—which was also reflected in everything from the rebellious adolescent satire of *MAD* magazine and the jargon of bebop jazz (“crazy, man, crazy”) to pacifist rejections of the atomic strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) as a bulwark against “hot” war with the Soviets.

While this web of cultural connections also extended to the bohemian areas of many US cities, from Los Angeles and Chicago to St. Louis and Boston, the bicoastal bohemian community that formed around the twin poles of Greenwich Village and North Beach had the most identifiable impact on national culture in the early years of the Cold War. During this period California jazz musicians began to develop their own unique style, which soon partnered with that of the San Francisco’s anarchist poets to produce the “beatnik” form of jazz-poetry. Following the well-worn path of touring musicians, channels of cultural exchange deepened between New York and San Francisco, as writers and artists traveled coast to coast in search of opportunity and inspiration, aided by advancements in travel and media technology. Key artists and intellectuals, who exuded the allure of European sophistication and the aura of radicalism, became centripetal

forces in Village and North Beach nightspots, drawing in the next generation of bohemians and attracting hordes of tourists in search of adventure.

By the early 1950s, the Rebel Cafe had already become an identifiable counterpublic. While well-known socialist or left-liberal journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *The Nation*, and *Politics* continued to publish for liberals and old leftists, new centers of dissident and bohemian print culture arose, such as New York's Grove Press and New Directions or San Francisco's City Lights Books. As sites of discussion and oppositional performance, nightclubs and bars including the Village Vanguard and San Remo Cafe in Greenwich Village, and North Beach's hungry i and The Place, rounded out this emerging counterpublic. The subterranean counterpublic was initially independent, standing largely outside the mainstream of ideas and the popular press, but became part of the national public sphere as the dominant culture absorbed its critiques and its institutions grew to a mass scale. Underground culture of the 1950s that had been banned from American shores, such as Grove Press's edition of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, sat openly on bookstore shelves alongside the genteel Jane Austen by the late 1960s; the bebop of Gillespie and Thelonious Monk, scandalously associated with narcotics and social subversion in the 1940s, became standard fare on radio and TV by the late 1950s—and was even officially sponsored by the US Government as a symbol of American high culture when the State Department sent Gillespie on a world tour as a “jazz ambassador” in 1956.

To some extent, even mainstream nightlife stood in opposition to the conservative trends of the 1950s. Polls taken between the 1930s and the end of the century show alcohol consumption at its lowest point in the late 1950s, with abstainers making up 40%

of the public—above the average of 37% for all other decades. After a midcentury peak in 1950, the number of Americans employed in entertainment or as bartenders fell sharply, shrinking from around 1.3% of the total workforce to 1.1% in 1960—again the lowest point between the Depression and 1990. Although nightclub ownership skewed heavily toward white men, employment in entertainment starting in the 1940s showed a fair amount of racial and gender parity, with .98% of white men and .94% of non-white men working in entertainment. White women lagged just a bit behind at .86%. Social prejudices against non-white women were the most noticeable, as only .46% of them joined the entertainment workforce between 1940 and 1960. Nightspots were crucial points of entry for the foreign-born into American society, however: throughout this period, immigrants were *six times* more likely to be employed in the entertainment industry than the native born.²¹

While the Federal Economic Census did not start keeping statistics specifically on the number of nightspots until 1997 (making numerical trends in the postwar period more elusive), the shrinking number of drinkers in the 1950s after a peak during World War II mirrored the end of the large dancehall and swing band era of the 1930s and 1940s. This shift is also reflected in the anecdotal evidence of 1950s nightclub owners, who often bewailed the loss of customers to television and suburbanization. Yet this explanation for decline is too simplistic. As political scientist Robert D. Putnam has demonstrated, public

²¹ Distilled Spirits Institute, *The Distilled Spirits Industry Annual Statistical Review, 1962* (Washington, DC: The Institute, 1962), 42-3; Gallup Polls, “Alcoholic Beverages,” 1939-1997; *Historical Statistics of the US*, <http://hsus.cambridge.org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/HSUSWeb/table/jumpby.do?id=Ba778-795>. Industries are grouped according to the 1950 Census classification. For a discussion of the methodology employed, see Matthew Sobek, “New Statistics on the U.S. Labor Force, 1850–1990,” *Historical Methods* 34 (2001): 71–87. While the native born employed in entertainment averaged .94% of the total workforce, an average of 6.2% of foreign-born workers found employment there. “Entertainment” includes performers, proprietors, managers, film projectionists, and the like, but excludes service workers such as wait staff and bartenders.

participation in everything from political parties to bowling leagues peaked in the US around 1960. As Americans packed churches, union halls, and PTA meetings in greater numbers than ever before, fewer found the smoky, transgressive spaces of the nightclub an appropriate expression of public culture.²²

The slow rise of the Rebel Cafe cast ripples on this otherwise placid surface, revealing the turbulence that lay underneath. As new social movements emerged from the political Left crushed by the Red Scare between 1947 and 1954, a committed core of Americans frequented just a few hundred oppositional urban nightspots—some seeking the strains of radical cabaret and left-liberationism that survived there. Bohemians and radicals used and developed these sites as institutions within a countercultural public opposed to mainstream conservatism. Resisting the constraints of their times, these dissidents developed a cultural style that was not simply a holdover from another period, nor merely a precursor to the sixties, but in itself was something vibrant, a declaration that America was not monolithic, an important expression of a divided fifties. As African-American demands for racial justice made Black culture more visible to Euro-Americans, and the Cold War threat of nuclear holocaust threw a pall over dissent, the jazz-folk culture of the Rebel Cafe criticized complacency.

Also significant within this milieu were changing norms of gender and sexuality. Nightspots had long been a masculine domain, but women increasingly claimed them as sites of social, cultural, and sexual expression in the 1950s. Moreover, gender and race were mutually constructed and were implicated in contestations over social space. The erasure of Black women from much of the scholarship on the postwar US reflects the

²² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 15-24, 32, 48-52, 62-5, 70, 81-4.

invisibility they suffered in this period, as media focused primarily on male cultural producers.²³ This invisibility was overcome by an emerging cohort of powerful performers in the 1950s and early 1960s, such as Maya Angelou, folk-singer Odetta, and pianist-vocalist Nina Simone. The first two came to prominence as entertainers in San Francisco nightclubs that were part of the city's queer culture, indicating the Bay Area's growing role as a national cultural center and hinting at the cultural significance of gay and lesbian communities which have been all but ignored in jazz histories.

The social structure of the US, and cities in particular, fundamentally changed in this period, and underground nightclubs played a particular part in postwar urbanism. As Lizabeth Cohen has argued, a diminished public sphere resulted from massive suburbanization in the 1950s, which underpinned a discourse of consumerism and domesticity that subsumed American politics, making politicians into mass-media commodities. Despite strong community engagement with local issues and activities, broader urban and national publics became atomized. This particularly affected suburban women, with decreased access to viable public spaces, and urban minorities, who were contained in city centers by racist federal housing policies and "red-lining" by real estate professionals, as city resources drained to the outskirts. These practices, along with depressed wages due to racial caste, sowed the seeds of the inner-city crises of the 1960s

²³ This cultural phenomenon was a parallel to the political sphere. For instance, the Civil Rights Movement is often associated with male "leaders" such as Martin Luther King, ignoring the fundamental work of grassroots activists such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer in Black communities and organizations such as SNCC. Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1983); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

and 1970s.²⁴ Throughout the 1950s, urban nightspots countered these trends and mitigated their effects, helping maintain the urban fabric and enriching the cultural life of American cities. These businesses drew from both the local community (as neighborhood institutions) and from outside (through tourism and suburban patrons), propping up the economic viability of urban neighborhoods. Further, subterranean nightclubs offered cultural exploration and cross-racial interactions that challenged dominant ideologies, while jazz and folk music promoted antiracist universalism, contributing to the national conversation about civil rights.

The role of the Rebel Cafe in the evolution of the Cold War counterpublic is sometimes hard to discern; often it simply provided points of connection, places in which artistic aspirants mingled with producers and publishers. Yet these small links gradually added up to an important cultural network, showing the significance of nightspots as social hinges. This function often grew from the ideological foundations of nightspot owners, most of whom had some threads of connection to the Left. Some victims of the Red Scare blacklist found shelter working in nightclubs such as San Francisco's hungry i and New York's Village Vanguard; clubs in the late 1950s, such as the Village Gate and the Cellar in North Beach, directly supported revived activism. In this way, the Rebel Cafe functioned as part of a broader network of social justice institutions, from the Catholic Workers to the Highlander Folk School. In fact, collectively, it was much like a bohemian version of Highlander, a place where activists raised the political

²⁴ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf and Random House, 2003), 289. On suburbanization's effects on postwar US politics, especially in relation to race and gender, see David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Self, *American Babylon*.

consciousness of newcomers, preparing them for roles as public nonconformists or protestors. It became a common trope among bohemians to refer to the Village or North Beach as a kind of “university” or the bars as “schools,” where club owners and performers alike gave ideological and material support to dissident groups.

While this activist stance was more common among nightclub operators than bar owners, who tended to float with the stream of neighborhood tastes rather than steer their venues’ political currents with likeminded performers, Greenwich Village and North Beach proprietors consistently welcomed public discussion and personal expression. They provided a variety of layouts (not always by intention) as useful social spaces for patrons, sometimes fostering public debate, other times sexual exploration; some venues focused exclusively on performances, others divided areas of entertainment from socialization. All maintained relatively small crowd capacities which encouraged face-to-face interaction between both patrons and performers. Perhaps most important, they rejected the gendered, racial, and sexual strictures that characterized mainstream venues, furthering national social shifts from the end of World War II through the early Cold War.

... AND ON THE MAP

In conclusion, maps offer two distinct ways to view New York and San Francisco as the most significant Rebel Cafe locales. The first is geographic. Both developed as excellent ports with protected harbors, which inherently contributed to their cosmopolitanism as waves of workers and visitors poured in and out from overseas during the decades before air travel. Further, San Francisco’s peninsula, at around forty miles in length, essentially functioned as an island, mirroring Manhattan’s long, narrow geography, which confined residents to tight-knit neighborhoods but also facilitated public transportation along their urban grids. But physical geography alone didn’t

determine their cultures. Both cities had enough wealth to support elites and intellectuals who sought to display their sophistication by building a kind of literary infrastructure, from formal institutions such as universities to the salons and informal gatherings of sophisticates. These relied on a transatlantic psychogeography, mental maps that sketched out the Continental traditions of intellectual exchange personified in the *Salon de Paris* or literary figures such as Samuel Johnson.

In a way, these two sides of urban culture were reflected and encapsulated in the dual nature of nightspots. On one hand, they were duplicitous, promising community that by definition was ephemeral and rootless. On the other hand, paradoxically, the conversations fostered by their dark spaces and the social lubrication of alcohol could remove the masks of pretense that often separate people, allowing a certain kind of truth-telling: *in vino veritas*. (It is no coincidence that “saloon” shares an etymological root with the French “salon.”) As historian David Hollinger has argued, the question of “cosmopolitanism” is also a question of “solidarity,” in which to “engage human diversity,” fundamentally relies on the “experience of willed affiliation.”²⁵ Nightspots were signposts on a landscape of public spaces vital to definitions of American democracy that aspired to this ideal, even as it spilled over the borders of the nation-state: *E Pluribus Unum*.

Examining the Rebel Cafe challenges popular views of a placid 1950s by exposing their underlying convolutions, and demonstrates previously unrecognized continuities in social liberation movements, dramatizing oppositional culture’s uneven but significant legacy. Its real and imagined spaces contained the whole of an

²⁵ David A. Hollinger, *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), xviii, xi.

oppositional milieu and its evolution: from the birth of Dada in the Cabaret Voltaire through the campy culture of San Francisco's Tin Angel and the gay-rights uprising at New York's Stonewall Inn; from the works of James Joyce and Henry Miller through the arrests of Lenny Bruce and controversies over obscenity and free speech; from Jean-Paul Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist chats at the Cafe Floré through the novels of the Beat Generation, and Susan Sontag's social and literary criticism; and from the jazz of Harlem and 52nd Street through the southern sit-ins that galvanized the modern Civil Rights Movement with their demands for equality and claims to public space.

The pages that follow present an optimistic look at the accomplishments of people seeking not only their own liberation but the freedom of others as well, on a human scale, in the places where they lived and played. There is no doubt that the Rebel Cafe, reflecting the US as a whole, was dominated by straight, Euro-American men. Yet many of these men chose to relinquish their privileged position, revising national culture in ways that undercut their own symbolic power. In the words of Mark Twain, "It is a mighty fine thing to fight for one's freedom; it is another sight finer to fight for another man's." Of course, this statement (made in support of the 1898 war against Spain in the Philippines) was as problematic as it was noble: it could only be made from a position of power and it presumed to know what someone else's liberation should look like. Yet my assessment of the Rebel Cafe's oppositional culture suggests that closely examining sociopolitical successes holds as much value as criticizing failures, and nightspots are rich sites to explore consensus as well as conflict. I don't remember who said it, probably a lot of people, and anyway it's true enough to simply paraphrase: nightspots aren't just places to drink, people can do that at home. Instead, they represent a complex social

phenomenon, sometimes destructive, but always offering possibility, the chance for connection, conversation, and—occasionally—transformation.

Chapter 1

“Blue Angels and Black Cats: Transnational Cabaret and the Literary Roots of American Bohemia”

They were planning a revolution / to end want & hunger / They were plotting a new form of thinking / They were arguing in blue smoke / a direction for art . . . / in the rebel cafe / Hail to the rebel cafe . . . The Philadelphia taverns/ of 1776 / were rebel cafes . . . / Thomas Paine / in a three-cornered blue / lifting pewter tankards in the Indian Queen / the night a pamphlet called *Common Sense* / came off the press / They were drawing a nation with ink / inside the rebel cafe . . . —da da da da— / in the Cabaret Voltaire . . . Jean-Paul Sartre / sitting with Simone de Beauvoir / in the Cafe Flore / . . . Janis Joplin / leans against the bar / with a guy from Detroit, a / guy from Texas / and a guy from / Salem, Missouri / to sing Amazing Grace / in the Rebel Cafe
—Ed Sanders, “Hymn to the Rebel Cafe” (1993)

The *return of the repressed* makes up the tabooed and subterranean history of civilization.
—Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (1955)¹

Marlene Dietrich stood at the center of the Rebel Cafe.

Not the real Marlene Dietrich, the German film actress and cabaret singer, but her star-persona—Dietrich as she was in the American imagination. And of course the Rebel Cafe was not a real place but an imagined one, an ideal that grew from hundreds of inconspicuous nightspots in American cities of the late 1940s and 1950s, most known only to the handful of local residents who went there to have a beer, or a cup of coffee, maybe a quick, cheap meal, listen to some music, and to talk, often about politics. Whether they thought about it or not—and many of them did in one way or another—Dietrich was with them in spirit, as a ghost that emerged from the 1930 film, *The Blue Angel*, which made her a star and introduced the masses to her signature song, “Falling in Love Again.” Her image and ethos floated through the urban underground, haunting its denizens like a waking dream.

In fundamental ways, Dietrich’s defiant, gender-bending, sophisticated, and unconventional allure was the mythical embodiment of the American underground

¹ Ed Sanders, *Hymn to the Rebel Cafe* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1993); Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, 1966), 16.

nightclub. Its nocturnal milieu was transatlantic, first spawned in the *fin de siècle* cabarets of Paris and Berlin, the kind portrayed in *The Blue Angel*, which had themselves absorbed American jazz into their satirical critiques of society and politics. Much like these twin European centers of arts and entertainment, New York and San Francisco claimed the most significant and infamous nightspots, which largely defined the nation's cabaret culture from the 1890s through Prohibition in the 1920s. Within these sites politics and poetry coexisted—and sometimes conjoined—offering commentary that most often leaned leftward, allied with working-class grievances against the excesses of capitalism. Cabaret owners and performers challenged taboos—both social and sexual—and patrons explored new identities, sometimes embracing changing mores, sometimes distancing themselves through exotic entertainment, exploiting racial or sexual “Others” for their own pleasure.

The cabaret, therefore, established patterns and tropes that later crystallized in the Rebel Cafe, showing both the promise and the limits of socially-conscious entertainment as a force for change. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, nightspots served a vital democratic function in the public sphere as places of discussion, sometimes advancing opposition to social, sexual, or political norms. This function was inherently modern. The cabaret evolved as part of an increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized world, where impersonal relations in labor and life replaced previous paradigms of deference and mutual responsibility. Technology provided increased leisure and mobility, adding to farm and factory production that drove urbanization. New notions of time and space also arose. In a practical sense, the car—and later the airplane—augmented the railway's compression of physical geography, while Einstein's theories quasi-mystically expanded

consciousness of the universe's vastness. The modern city became the new "frontier" for many who left more familiar rural environs, an inward turn paralleled by the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis. Cabaret owners responded to these conditions by presenting entertainment designed (however unconsciously) to alleviate the sense of urban anonymity and alienation through inner exploration—sometimes using exoticism and spectacle, often in built environments that emphasized connection on a human scale.

At its most effective, the cabaret freed patrons from the burdens of the past by grappling discursively with the present: performers and patrons alike scrutinized and skewered social and political issues and coalesced likeminded communities. Although they offered liberatory spaces, nightspots' direct ties to political activism varied. Yet the personal politics of sociocultural opposition was a significant force, particularly for left-leaning social and sexual radicals. The cabaret affected political consciousness by offering a transnational usable past. Feeling connected to the "sophistication" of European cabaret bolstered the courage of American nonconformists and heightened their nocturnal experiences. While this cultural inheritance drove problematic notions of bohemian authenticity—leading each new generation of subterraneans to decry the next as posturing and phony, as well as reinforcing racial stereotypes—it also wove an interconnected web that tied people and ideas across oceans and decades.

Bohemianism was central to the cabaret, connoting the literati and intelligentsia, but infused with nonconformity and a dedication to the avant-garde. The line between a cabaret and a "nightclub" was often blurry, but they were mostly distinguished by size and style of entertainment, as the cabaret featured more intimate spaces and performances that pushed the sociopolitical and artistic boundaries and deemphasized spectacle.

Despite this rebellion, however, the cabaret enforced its own kind of orthodoxy, an exclusionary sense of insider status. Between the “Gay Nineties” and the Great Depression, two distinct bohemiae rose and fell in New York and San Francisco. Each decried new generations as the loss of the genuine article; each new generation looked to the previous one to authenticate their bohemian bona fides—a pattern that continued into following decades. For bohemians, the dark and dangerous cabaret was a site of cultural expression that offered a more vivid engagement with the public sphere than an evening at home with the *New York Times*, a volume of Twain or Poe, and a bottle of claret. Part of the allure of cabaret “sophistication” was its implication of European decadence in a puritan nation continually flirting with prohibition. In the underworld, both real and imagined criminality and transgression lurked.

The Rebel Cafe as an ideal, much like Dietrich’s star power, evolved as both a spectral projection, represented through the media, and a living entity. Each influenced and, in essence, constituted the other. Patrons of American nightspots entered with notions preconceived by a mix of fact and fiction, with expectations structured by everything from the stories of friends to mass media. “Niteries” owners attempted to fulfill those expectations—maybe even exceed them—or to channel them into new avenues of taste and desire. The Rebel Cafe formula that emerged between the 1890s and the 1930s, rested on these three key elements of expectation: the allure of song, satire, and sexuality, all sparkling with the patina of European “sophistication”; bohemianism, either as identity or vicarious experience; and the nocturnal imaginary, which whetted the public’s appetite with literary representations of American nightlife. Patrons arrived with fantasies of titillation, subversion, even criminality, yet the conversations they had in the smoky

confines of nightspots were real enough, as were the relationships—sexual and otherwise—that developed there. That was the subtle promise of *The Blue Angel*, a promise always honored, but never truly kept: that within the cabaret, the ethereal would slowly reveal itself, colored by earthly shades that made the flash of magic visible to anyone daring enough to look directly at its surprising, spectacular, subversive, and sometimes sordid substance.

THE COLOR AND THE SHAPE: THE ORIGINS OF CABARET

The title of Dietrich's film was aptly chosen, reflecting a deep history of drinking establishments in Western culture which took modern form in the cabaret starting in the nineteenth century and solidifying after World War I. European taverns and their American cousins had long used a color-and-totem formula to attract patrons with suggestions of fantasy or familiarity. Many eighteenth-century taverns adopted monikers such as the Red Lion or the White Horse, using easily recognizable signage to alert even illiterate revelers. These sites were also fundamental to a widening public sphere, supplying newspapers, correspondence, and social connections.² This sociocultural nexus sometimes included radical elements: as Ed Sanders's poetic formulation of the Rebel Cafe suggests, the American Revolution was indeed, at least in part, hatched in taverns like the Indian Queen. But whether revolutionary or mundane, the eighteenth-century tavern was a place of participatory publicity, where the news was formulated, transmitted, and digested through a combination of written sources and face-to-face exchanges.

As modern communications began to develop in the nineteenth century, the role

² John W. Harrington, "Tavern Sign Collectors: Hobbyists Now Hunt Out Insignia of the Inns of Early Days," *New York Times*, January 3, 1937, p. XX8; Christine Sismondo, *America Walks into a Bar: A Spirited History of Taverns and Saloons, Speakeasies and Grogshops* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xv.

of the nightspot began to change. The raw (and digested) stuff of information became more widely available with the expansion of public education and mechanized print. Trains and telegraphs whisked correspondence straight to recipients' homes within days or even minutes. The challenge was not simply to get information, but to make sense of it amid an increasingly complex web of media and social relations. For those ill-suited for the demands of industrial capitalism—the artists, intellectuals, and political radicals who had an eye for the problems that accompanied “progress”—mainstream institutions from the university to the national newspaper failed to fully address their subterranean perspective. The cabaret arose as one response to these new conditions, offering commentary, criticism, and context for the modern urban citizen—all spiced with the sizzle of satire and pleasingly washed down with the palliatives of wine and song.

The first known cabaret was established in Paris in 1881 by Rodolphe Salis and dubbed *Le Chat Noir*, or the Black Cat. The name embodied a long history of French culture in which the cat, much like Parisian bohemia, was a symbol of magical and sexual mischief, signaling the social inversion of carnival and caricature as seen in the bawdy satire of Rabelais and medieval “Abbeys of Misrule.”³ As a member of Paris' young and rebellious artistic set, Salis began his feline-invoking venture with poets and musicians in informal group performances, but he soon formalized its ragtag routines for the sake of bourgeois entertainment, setting a precedent of commercializing bohemia that replayed itself on both sides of the Atlantic. By 1925, one bohemian reminiscing about Paris in the 1880s could proclaim, “Ah, this Black Cat, progenitor of every Black Cat, Blue Horse,

³ These priest-parodying youth groups periodically enacted raucous rituals intended to legitimize adolescent males on the cusp of their entry into adult society, as well as to shame older men who failed to live up the expectations of masculine behavior through “charivari” such as spankings and ridings through town backwards on an ass. See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 89-96.

Green Cow, Stuck Pig and similar temples of ‘art’ throughout the civilized world!” The cabaret, he continued, had spawned “numerous progeny” which now dotted “every Greenwich Village, Montmartre and Mayfair in Christendom.”⁴

The original Le Chat Noir closed in 1897, but tourist-trap imitators followed, and its style soon spread to Berlin and beyond. Cabaret performances, first in Berlin at the Motley Theater in 1901 and later at that city’s own Chat Noir, were combinations of sexually suggestive songs and skits, sometimes spiked with political critique. Absurdist lyrics were matched by the grotesque decor (epitomized by the work of expressionist artist and cabaret designer Georg Grosz), with stages that were small, low, and close to the audience. German imitators of the Black Cat invoked Nietzsche’s ideas of humor and “joyful science” in which Dionysian “joy in nonsense” became an antidote to “the arbitrary” in the modern world. One Berlin cabaretier suggested that “we need every wanton, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful form of art, in order to preserve that *freedom over things* that our ideal demands from us.”⁵

European cabaret also highlighted the notion that humor is able (and maybe even necessary) to question dangerous political trends. German cultural critic Walter Benjamin suggested in the 1930s that comedy is useful for introducing new ideas, stating that “there is no better starting point for thought than laughter” and that “splitting your sides normally offers better chances for thought than shaking your soul.” Conversely, the cabaret’s facetious approach to modernity also reflected Freud’s views on the pleasure of

⁴ Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 24-6; Hollister Noble, “Montmartre Mourns Its Poet Laureate: Bruant Is Dead, But the Paris Underworld He Loved and Knew Still Sings His Songs,” *New York Times*, March 29, 1925, p. SM-10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 119, 122, 29. Jelavich argues that this aesthetic represents a shifting approach to politics, sex, and race, noting the significance of modern urbanism and popular entertainment based on sexual titillation or primitivism, later embraced through African-American jazz and performers such as Josephine Baker who grew wildly popular in Europe during the interwar period.

jokes, which asserted their usefulness as a social safety valve, a release of “psychic damming-up” that results from social strictures, which undermined the cabaret’s radical potential.⁶

An ethos of absurdity was at the heart of the Cabaret Voltaire, birthplace of the influential Dada art movement. Founded in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1916, by a small collection of French and German artists, Dada sought to express (on neutral ground) the nihilistic horror of the Great War that raged through the continent.⁷ Cultural critic Greil Marcus has described the aims of Cabaret Voltaire in sweeping sociocultural and liberatory terms: “Dada was the notion that in the constructed setting of a temporally enclosed space—in this case, a nightclub—anything could be negated. It was the notion that, there, anything might happen, which meant finally that in the world at large, transposed artistically, anything might happen there too.” The cabaret itself was short-lived, closing after only a few months, but several of its artists—in particular the poet and performance artist Tristan Tzara—remained influential through the Cold War era as touchstones for American bohemians, including the Beat Generation poets and a few radical jazz musicians.⁸

Cabaret Voltaire was typical of the direct and indirect lineages that connected European nightclub culture with its transatlantic counterpart. Some connections between people, ideas, and styles fall under the slippery rubric of “influence,” yet they remain

⁶ Ibid, 33-5, quoted from Walter Benjamin, *Veruche uber Brecht*, 1966; Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Trans. Joyce Crick (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003; First published, 1905), 7, 114.

⁷ Alan Lareau, *The Wild Stage: Literary Cabarets of the Weimar Republic* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 17-24.

⁸ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 241-2; Barry Wallenstein, “The Jazz-Poetry Connection,” *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1980), pp. 122-134. Wallenstein notes, however, that even the influence of Dada in jazz came through a member of the Beat Generation, LeRoi Jones. The Cabaret Voltaire coterie was led by Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, who also radiated their share of influence.

tantalizing hints of transnational flows. Le Chat Noir was almost singlehandedly responsible for establishing Montmartre as an area of controversial entertainment and revelry—whose romanticized image bloomed in the American imagination for decades to come. And Parisian cabaret, which satirized capitalists and anarchists alike, though usually with more sympathy for the “proletariat,” harbored Tristan Tzara after the demise of Cabaret Voltaire.⁹ While political propaganda was rare in the first two decades of Berlin cabaret, the later Weimar period saw a rise in the Communist Party’s propagandistic “agitprop” venues. One included Weintraub’s Syncopators, who performed the music for *The Blue Angel* and exemplified the importation of American jazz with added German flair. Further, the cabaret Sound and Smoke featured a version of the proletarian play *The Weavers*, a title that provided the moniker of Pete Seeger’s blacklisted folk group in the late 1940s. Most notably, Marlene Dietrich began her career in cabaret, as did composer Kurt Weill and playwright Bertolt Brecht, all of whom influenced US cabaret, as well as left-leaning cultural producers, after their exile from fascist Germany in the 1930s.¹⁰

European cabaret was also emblematic of the contradictions that later appeared in American nightclub culture. Cabaret lyrics offered subtle critiques of modernity and consumerism, facing the difficulty of transmitting these ideas to a non-politicized audience. Themes of social misfits and the “gutter” were common. With roots in 1920s Parisian nightclubs, these tropes critiqued society by exploring the sub-proletarian

⁹ Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 191-2; Lisa Appignanesi, *The Cabaret* (New York: Universe Books, 1976), 9-12, 26, 82.

¹⁰ Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 187, 75; Richard A. Reuss and JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 233-5, 248-53; Lareau, *The Wild Stage*, 116 n.32. Literary critic Alan Lareau notes that Brecht performed at Wild Stage for six days only.

regions, using prostitutes, vagabonds, and criminals to illustrate the depredations of the modern city.¹¹ Many songs parodied upper-crust urban life and fashion, and cabaret artists used this theatrical convention to shock audiences, confrontationally questioning their values. Unfortunately, as cabaret scholar Alan Lareau argues, this resulted in aestheticizing poverty, creating a proletarian picturesque of the “dirty, even vulgar milieu of the underworld” which “held a special romantic attraction for the bourgeois viewer” and failed to address real conditions and causes, or to propose solutions. One satirical lyric reads, “Poetry? I don’t give a damn about it or your lunar idylls! Who cares if it’s ideal—we’re singing in the bars!” Such lyrics may have satirized the philistinism of Berlin, but they also demonstrated the limitations of nightclubs as a site of sociopolitical change. Bridging the gap between popular entertainment and refined, pointed social critiques proved a continual dilemma for owners and performers alike.¹²

Berlin cabaret of the 1920s, then, was most important not for its partisan satire, but for its artistic freedom and challenges to established notions of good art; its political effects were minimal in the face of fascism. While there were some workers’ revues by former cabaretiers (including Brecht), by the end of the Weimar Republic in 1933 many bemoaned the loss of outsider bohemian status and the cabaret’s embrace of the bourgeois. And although women gained some agency, most remained stereotyped as apolitical objects of desire. Yet some subversive and potentially liberating elements

¹¹ *The Blue Angel*’s main setting, for instance, was an example of a “tingeltangel”—translated roughly as “honky-tonk”—provincial working-class nightspots which were a precursor (along with vaudeville) to cabaret, but distinct due to the lack of aesthetic polish or pointed social satire.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1-17, 35, 49, 76, 84-5, 92. Lareau argues that while most histories focus on the political aspects of cabaret, to do so is to mistake “form for method.” Cabaret, he suggests, was an attempt to find an audience while also asserting artistic styles, particularly *Kleinkunst* (or “chamber art”). Brechtian and literary efforts to differentiate *Kabarett* (or literary cabaret) from the lewd pub styles that were most prevalent, including efforts at theatrical elements and small doses of political satire, but political material was largely individualist. Dada elements lost their shock value, becoming commonplace and adopted by commercial elements; political material was moralistic and vague.

persisted. For instance “The Lavender Song” (“Das Lila Lied”), published in 1920, featured brazen lyrics about gay rights.¹³ And Dietrich’s early work included a hit about lesbian lovers, demonstrating that defining “the political” is a legitimate function of oppositional artistic forms.¹⁴ The Gestapo closed most cabarets in 1935, however, and while a few continued as liberal enclaves, they did not offer much “intellectual resistance.”¹⁵ But a tradition of avant-gardism, satire, and belief in the social power of art did survive. The lineage spawned by Le Chat Noir had already crossed the Atlantic decades before Hitler’s Reichstag Fire burned a clear line across European history and it played an equally significant, if uncelebrated, role in the society and culture on the western edge of The Pond.

WHITHER (OR WITHER?) BOHEMIA: CABARET IN THE U.S.

The infusion of cabaret styles significantly affected the color and shape of American nightlife. Especially in San Francisco and New York, elements of theatrical performance—from stages and lighting to well-rehearsed vaudeville or floor shows—

¹³ Ibid, 185, 104, 186-8; Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 191-2; Shane Vogel, “Where Are We Now? Queer World Making and Cabaret Performance,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 6, Number 1, 2000, pp. 29-60. Vogel discusses cabaret “not simply as a genre or site of performance but also as a mode of performance, characterized by fluidity and improvisation, intimacy and contact, immediacy and spectacle—a mode that confuses distinctions between performer and spectator.” The cabaret as a “social space,” therefore transcended performance. This, he argues, lends itself to what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, among others, call ‘queer world making,’ the mapping of commonly accessible worlds that allow for the creation of counterpublics and ‘criminal intimacies,’ ‘relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture.’” However, Vogel is primarily concerned with the imaginary of cabaret as interpreted in the US, rather than the historical reality of Berlin cabaret.

¹⁴ Post-1933 critiques of the Nazis became veiled and the cabaret’s brazen resistance to fascism, often celebrated in postwar American culture, was perhaps exaggerated: little evidence survived the Nazi regime to support such a view. For instance, struggling against censorship had “larger implications, since many literati believed that art was the ultimate sanctuary of individual freedom,” a view that was reflected in Heinrich Mann’s *Professor Unrat* (whose titular character was the model for *The Blue Angel*’s pedantic protagonist). German censorship was institutional, enforced by local police departments, and prior to 1918 cabaret scripts and lyrics required authorization before performances. And while police made few objections, largely because authorities recognized the increased notoriety that would accompany publicity around such censorship (a lesson that seemed to elude US censors), racy nocturnal performances did serve to test the boundaries of the socially acceptable. Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 75, 33-5.

¹⁵ Lareau, *The Wild Stage*, 161, 164.

began to define “night clubs,” whereas taverns or saloons featured informal entertainment at most. Yet venues that embraced the label “cabaret” maintained some of the saloon’s community functions—part of what later set “Rebel Cafe” nightclubs apart from the mainstream. Even as bohemian coteries of the 1920s embraced the cabaret as an informal sociopolitical institution, the pendulum swing toward jazzy routines met resistance from the previous generation of subterranean literati. The San Francisco and New York incarnations of the Black Cat Cafe illustrated these changes, as patrons ranging from radicals to rich socialites used the cabaret’s atmosphere to confirm their urbanity and worldliness. Nightspot owners, meanwhile, used exotic allure to support their own commercial and sociocultural endeavors.

As the *San Francisco Chronicle* expounded in March 1897, “The cable from Paris saying that Rodolphe Salis, founder of the Black Cat, is dead will revive many memories of one of the most original and eccentric characters in Paris.” The article went on to describe Salis’s transformation from bohemian artist to cabaret impresario, all the while reveling in descriptions of the cafe’s wild decor and flamboyant clientele:

The place was decorated in fantastic style, and when famous artists drew caricatures on its walls its fortune was assured. The sign of the establishment is:

THE BLACK CAT.
CABARET STYLE LOUIS XIII.

Founded in 1114

By a Practical Joker. . . .

Mouths of wrought-iron cats are used for gas-jets, and . . . On the second floor is a real picture gallery, and here are some gems that are comic, others that are horrible.

Salis, the article continued, subtly mocked the formalities of high culture by attiring his waiters in the “green palm-embroidered coats of French academicians” and by speaking to his customers “in the French of three centuries ago, in the language of Rabelais.” After describing a mock funeral Salis once held for himself as a practical joke the article

concludes that the Black Cat was one of the places in Paris “to which all foreign visitors go.”¹⁶

By the time of Salis’s actual demise, New York City had already enjoyed its own bohemian Black Cat Cafe for just under a decade, and in a little over that same time-span, San Francisco would feature one as well. By midcentury, the Bay Area’s Black Cat became a central literary and intellectual institution.¹⁷ Many of the elements that made Le Chat Noir a must-see boite—from playfully improvised artists’ murals to an embrace of absurdity and dark humor—were incorporated by stateside club owners seeking to capitalize on the alluring atmosphere of continental cabaret. But more important, several of these nocturnal entrepreneurs cultivated a clientele that included the cream of their cities’ literary and artistic crops, sometimes to boost their venture’s renown, sometimes satisfying their own desires to be among the young bright lights and shining wits. Often, some combination of both led to the most enduring American cabarets, ensconced in the bohemias of Greenwich Village and North Beach.

San Francisco embraced bohemianism earlier than the more cautious New York. Perhaps because of its reputation as “The Wickedest City in the World”—a port city with a majority male population, and the concomitant proliferation of saloons, brothels, and gambling—it was generally more tolerant of its residents’ radicalism, eccentricity, or libertinism than the older and more socially-stratified Gotham.¹⁸ A group of writers that

¹⁶ “The Founder of the Famous Black Cat Cafe Is Dead,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 23, 1897, p. 4.

¹⁷ Leonard Lyons, “The Post’s New Yorker,” *The Washington Post*, June 8, 1938, p. X11; “Black Cat Cafe Will Celebrate Anniversary,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 8, 1913, p. 14.

¹⁸ Ephraim Mizruchi, “Bohemia as a Means of Social Regulation,” in Cesar Grana and Marigay Grana, eds. *On Bohemia: The Code of the Self-Exiled* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 13-41; Jerrold Siegel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books-Viking, 1986), 389-97; Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 2-3, 11-12, 19-27, 89-92; Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University

included Ellen Terry, Rudyard Kipling, and Henry Irving founded the city's Bohemian Club in 1872, which initially held informal meetings in local restaurants and other haunts, but which grew into a local elite institution by the mid-1900s. San Francisco's early literary bohemia claimed notables such as Ambrose Bierce and Jack London, who reportedly engaged in many late-night and sodden debates over the latter's stubborn socialism.¹⁹ In the 1890s, novelist Gertrude Atherton brought a brand of upper-crust feminism to the group and blended journalistic accounts with stylized memoirs and fiction that helped define the Bay Area's literary image.²⁰

Atherton's globetrotting immersion in both the worlds of literary salons and cafe society illustrates the ways in which cabaret culture and bicoastal intellectualism overlapped and intertwined during the first three decades of the twentieth century. By the time Atherton began engaging her writing career in earnest, the city's wealth was just beginning to support its establishment as a cultural center. This was soon followed by the rise of an early form of West-Coast jazz, exemplified by Art Hickman's vaudeville orchestra, a style that was especially popular in the cabarets that opened on Powell and Mason streets before World War I.²¹ There is little evidence that Atherton participated in the city's nightlife to any great extent. But she was nonetheless a protégé of Bierce and local writers frequented her literary salons, which were modeled on the bohemian salons

Press, 2000), 1-35; Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West 1900-1954* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

¹⁹ *San Francisco: The Bay and Its Cities. Originally compiled by the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration for Northern California* (New York: Hastings House, 1947), 133-5; Oscar Lewis, *Bay Window Bohemia: An Account of the Brilliant Artistic World of Gaslit San Francisco* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 71-4, 192-3.

²⁰ Gertrude Atherton, *My San Francisco: A Wayward Biography* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1946), 105-6, 124-30. See also Carolyn Forrey, "Gertrude Atherton & the New Woman," *California Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall, 1976), pp. 194-209. Also significant in reframing San Francisco's image were Idwal Jones and Oscar Lewis in the 1930s and 1940s.

²¹ *San Francisco: The Bay and Its Cities*, 133-5.

that she experienced in both private homes and the nightspots of Paris, Munich, and London. Atherton herself described these private gatherings as somewhat scandalous for their gender mixing and embrace of French styles—despite her primary focus on welcoming the city’s elites and socialites for an evening of witty repartee.²² Atherton’s European travels informed her expansive approach to American literature and her egalitarian approach to politics—although, as was all too common in this period, the limits of her inclusion lay with the acceptance of gays and African Americans. Nonetheless, Atherton cultivated friendships with promising young artistes and leftwing performers, from Kenneth Rexroth and Hilaire Belloc to Orson Welles, playing a significant part in San Francisco’s reputation as cutting edge a city in the years between the great earthquake of 1906 and the 1940s.²³

Atherton’s prejudices also illustrate the embryonic Rebel Cafe’s evolution. Even as intellectuals and elites quaffed the atmosphere of nightspots to quench their thirst for artistic adventurism, the cabaret’s transgression of racial and sexual boundaries was often more than they could swallow. Jazz in the 1910s and 1920s was still considered sordid and lowbrow by prominent critics, even when performed by white musicians, so the rise of American cabaret was first and foremost a grassroots expression of popular tastes that only slowly commingled with intellectual circles. Echoing the nineteenth-century saloon, early-twentieth century nightspots became informal institutions that satisfied modern

²² Gertrude Atherton, *Adventures of a Novelist* (New York: Liveright, 1932), 116.

²³ *Ibid.*, 214-16, 310-22, 338, 435-7; Kenneth Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, Inc., 1964), 365. Atherton frequently made offhand disparaging remarks about African Americans as uncultured, including a concern about those attempted to join white society by “passing.” Her concern about homosexuality seemed primarily focused on the feminizing effects of modern civilization, highlighting the slow and uneven process of change concerning views on gender in this period. For the broader context surrounding Atherton’s views on masculinity, authenticity, and culture in the American west, see Peter Stoneley, “Rewriting the Gold Rush: Twain, Harte and Homosociality,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Part 2 (Aug., 1996), pp. 189-209.

desires for titillating entertainment and sexual outlets. As patrons watched chorus girls in luxurious cabarets and “lobster houses,” what historian Lewis Erenberg has called “vicarious bohemianism,” working-class saloons were meeting places for the underground gay community, and often housed prostitution or live sex shows. As Chad Heap has shown, these two trends met in the phenomenon of “slumming,” in which middle-class patrons sought working-class partners for sexual entertainment (or exploitation) and “sophisticated” satisfaction of desires not condoned by polite society. Slummers found their diversions in Harlem’s “black and tan” nightspots during the 1920s “Negro Vogue,” bohemian “thrillage” in Greenwich Village cafes, or vicarious excitement during the 1930s “pansy and lesbian craze.”²⁴

Another aspect of the American cabaret, however, also bears some emphasis. Just as the urban saloon was an institution that maintained an autonomous “alternative culture” for workers which offset poor housing by offering indoor plumbing, affordable fare, check-cashing, mail, work and union information, and socializing, bohemian literary cafes and cabarets served a like purpose for writers and artists—a function that continued through the Rebel Cafes of the 1950s.²⁵ In San Francisco, this community function was most notable in the symbiotic relationship between Coppa’s restaurant and the Montgomery Block building. Built in 1853 by the future Civil War hero Henry Halleck, the Montgomery Block was located just south of North Beach at Montgomery and Washington Streets. Built to display the Bay Area’s wealth—the tallest building west of

²⁴ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 9-27, 36; Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xi, 113-42, 177, 206-27, 234-59; Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 2009), 25-96.

²⁵ Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 35-64.

the Mississippi—by the 1890s it was well-known as a site of affordable housing for bohemians, who nicknamed it the “Monkey Block.” To escape its Spartan rooms, the Monkey Block’s poets and painters gathered in Coppa’s on the ground floor, where they soaked up the Italian atmosphere along with food and wine.

Coppa’s attractions ranged from minstrel shows to the patrons themselves, including Bierce, London, and occasionally Mark Twain or Robert Louis Stevenson. In exchange for their tabs, a group of local artists painted an elaborate mural on Coppa’s walls, featuring surreal images of angels, devils, debauched patrons, black cats, acrobats, and a list of writers and philosophers from Nietzsche and Rabelais to Goethe and Kant. As a frequent hangout for socialists and anarchists, alongside its reputation for revelry and racial mixing, Coppa’s drew bohemians and slummers alike until the earthquake of 1906. Although the sturdy Montgomery Block survived intact, the chaos in the quake’s wake left Coppa’s without enough customers to survive. Coppa’s nonetheless had established North Beach as a bohemian foothold and solidified a romantic image of San Francisco’s “Gay ‘90s” as period of freedom and excitement.²⁶

Of the increasing numbers of American cabarets between the turn of the century and World War II, Coppa’s successor, the Black Cat, perhaps best illustrated this blend of exoticism and bohemian community. The Black Cat was originally located in the heart of the prewar cabaret district, at 56 Mason Street. Opening in 1911, owners Myer P. Cohen and John F. Crowley immediately embraced the label “cabaret,” hinting at the inspiration provided by Salis’s Le Chat Noir and marking a new trend in Bay Area nightlife. The

²⁶ Warren Unna, *The Coppa Murals: A Pageant of Bohemian File in San Francisco at the Turn of the Century* (No Location: The Book Club of California, 1952); Idwal Jones, *Ark of Empire: San Francisco’s Montgomery Block* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1951); Oscar Lewis, *Bay Window Bohemia: An Account of the Brilliant Artistic World of Gaslit San Francisco* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 15-23, 59-65, 100-20, 156-60.

aspiring nitery offered music, dancing, and “table d’hôte” dinners with wine, shared in the continental style at a communal table, all for one dollar—not to mention “Free Confetti”—making it San Francisco’s “Classiest Cabaret.” Within a few years, a plethora of cabarets with monikers such as Stack’s Cafe and Spider Kelly’s opened in the area around Mason, Eddy, Geary, and Powell, north of Market Street, advertising everything from dancing and billiards to “Home-made Tamales.”²⁷ The Black Cat itself promoted bohemianism, novelty, Parisian style, and gender-inclusive ethos of their cafe, with local talent, vaudeville musicians, dancers, and comedians all lit with “serpentine” electric lights, “an effect never before staged in a San Francisco Cafe.”²⁸

Cohen and Crowley themselves were prototypical Rebel Cafe owners, with many of the nightclub underground’s defining characteristics. Both were second-generation immigrants—Crowley the son of Irish parents, Cohn of Russian-Jewish descent—and they appear to have been deeply ensconced in their community, living near their venue in neighborhoods that included residents of similar ethnicities.²⁹ The Black Cat advertised

²⁷ *Crocker-Langley San Francisco City Directory 1920*, (San Francisco: H.S. Crocker Co., 1920), 551; “Black Cat Display Ad: Opening Night: Nov. 9th,” *San Francisco Call*, November 9, 1911, p. 2; “Display Ad: You Are Cordially Invited to Attend the Fourth Anniversary of the Black Cat Cafe,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 11, 1915, p. 8; “New Theatrical Star Yearns to Emerge From Under Bushel,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 1, 1920, p. SM9; “Classified Ad 4,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 30, 1917, p. C1; “Display Ad 8,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 17, 1913, p. 18; “New Paris Louvre Cafe a Big Success,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 1, 1913, p. 12; “Display Ad 29,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 27, 1913, p. 8. For evidence of the cabaret craze, see in particular, “Display Ad 34,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 1919, p. 53. Nan Boyd mistakenly states that the Black Cat opened in 1906 and that Charles Ridley was the manager after 1911. See Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 56. City directories list both Cohn and Crowley as liquor suppliers and bartenders before 1911, but do not list the Black Cat until the following year. And they originally opened the cabaret with partners Johnny Grosso and H. Adreozzi.

²⁸ “Black Cat Cafe Offers Great Show,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 14, 1913, p. 36; “Display Ad 63,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 29, 1913, p. 51; “Display Ad 1,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 15, 1913, p. 2; “Display Ad 24,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 18, 1913, p. 7.

²⁹ Department of Commerce and Labor—Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920*, San Francisco, Enumeration District No. 174, 8-B; Department of Commerce and Labor—Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910*, San Francisco, Enumeration District No. 356, 11-A; *Crocker-Langley San Francisco City Directory 1915*, (San Francisco: H.S. Crocker Co., 1915), 477;

that “family groups are especially catered to by the genial management.” The cabaret also hosted benefit shows to aid local organizations and residents—one of which, in 1920, featured an unusual combination of jazz music and speechmakers ranging from literary figures to civic leaders, all to aid an area old-folks home. While this inclusive approach certainly represented a strategy to widen the cafe’s clientele (and perhaps to ward off prosecution following the start of Prohibition earlier that year), it also suggests the cabaret’s parallel role as a public meeting place for the community. This public function was aided by the cafe’s connection to local unions, in particular the AFL-affiliated San Francisco Labor Council, which in 1917 lobbied authorities to aid the Black Cat’s acquisition of a dance license.³⁰

Yet, while Cohn and Crowley promoted the Black Cat’s “highest class and most wholesome entertainments,” the management’s emphasis on bohemianism was a cultural code that invited adventurism and perhaps the chance for social or sexual transgression. A pair of incidents in 1914 spotlighted the cabaret’s place in the city’s underside. The first, characterized by the *Chronicle* as a “Thrilling Adventure,” involved the robbery of one Mrs. J. Shultz by a “stranger” she met at the Black Cat. Leaving the establishment together at 2 A.M., the stranger offered to hail a taxicab and “take her home,” but during the ride he snatched Mrs. Shultz’s purse and jewels, valued together at a tidy sum of

Crocker-Langley San Francisco City Directory 1920, 551. Cohn further embodied this phenomenon by marrying a second-generation Irish immigrant named Mary. And both Cohn and Crowley kept residences and shared an office within two miles of the cabaret. In 1915, the Cohn home was at 1231a Masonic Ave., for example, while the office was at 56 Market St. In 1920, Crowley lived at 647 Hayes.

³⁰ “Display Ad 1,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 15, 1913, p. 2; “Old Folk Too Made Happy on Christmas Day,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 26, 1920, p. D6; “Classified Ad 11,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 16, 1914, p. 13; “Cafe Wants to Run as a ‘Soft’ Drink Cabaret: Is One of Those Affected by Police Order: Labor Council Pleads for Black Cat,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 6, 1917, p. 9.

almost \$1,200.³¹ The second was a complicated case in which a jewelry store employee embezzled diamonds and cash in order to fund his trips to the Mason Street cafes and the city's "tenderloin" red-light district. The culprit apparently abstained from liquor and instead found amusement in gambling and the attentions of young women. The latter included a singer at the Black Cat—a failed actress named Corrine Lesser Houston, who had fled from a wealthy New York family and married a working-class suitor in Los Angeles. The police tracked the embezzler's movements and ultimately captured him through information provided by a taxi company, which he had used for excursions to the cafes.³²

While it would be imprudent to draw overly broad conclusions about cafe culture from such a limited pool of evidence, some commonalities between the two cases are certainly notable. The central role of expensive jewelry—especially in conjunction with the Black Cat's emphasis on "high-class" style—suggests that early twentieth-century notions of bohemia were fully compatible with the fashions of the well-to-do. However, it was the mixing of different social classes, such as the cabaret singer's marriage or Mrs. Shultz's late-night rendezvous, that perhaps underpinned the excitement and "adventure" of an evening on Mason Street. Further, there are hints that this adventurism was tinged with sexuality, both in the jeweler's attentions to Tenderloin ladies and in Mrs. Shultz's brief liaison with her charming jewel thief. Each case betrays subtle signs of slumming, and the sense of "thrillage" would only have been enhanced by the air of criminality—especially considering their relatively safe and nonviolent nature. At the same time, the obvious aplomb with which Mrs. Shultz and the female singer participated showed signs

³¹ "Woman Robbed by Bandit in Taxicab," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 6, 1914, p. 55.

³² "Fischler Is in Santa Cruz Jail," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 12, 1914, p. 1.

of the “new woman” who was beginning to assert her independence in the early twentieth-century public sphere.³³

The urban geography of these cases enriches this picture. Each of the named participants lived within a one and a half-mile radius of the Black Cat, just like Cohn and Crowley, indicating that the cabaret continued to cater to patrons within a fairly compact city district, much like the traditional saloon.³⁴ The frequent mention of taxicabs, however, foreshadowed the Rebel Cafe milieu of the 1950s, which encompassed both its role as a community institution and a site of entertainment for a broader swath of (sub)urban residents and tourists. In 1914, taxis, streetcars, and subways were still transforming America’s walking cities into highly mobile metropolises; within a few short years, the psychogeography of San Francisco or New York would completely change and residents would think little of traveling miles across town for a night out.³⁵ The national mobility and bicoastal bohemia that characterized nightclub culture in the 1950s was already in evidence at the early Black Cat as well, both in the cabaret singer’s transcontinental career and the embezzler’s escape plan, in which he intended to flee “to the East.” All together, these elements complete a picture of the Black Cat Cafe as more than simply a place of local entertainment in the vaudeville tradition.

Darkening the glimmer of their festivities, however, Cohn and Crowley featured minstrel shows, a popular form of entertainment with a tangled ambivalence toward

³³ Heap, *Slumming*, 101-88; Stansell, *American Moderns*, 56-7, 227-43, 250-1.

³⁴ The cabaret singer and her husband, Corrine and Jack Houston, were noted as living at the Waldorf lodging house, located at 128 Jones St. according to the 1910 city directory, about three blocks from the cafe. While the embezzler Joseph Fischler’s home address is not given, the jewelry store was located at 895 Market St. and he stashed his goods at the Bank of Italy at Mason and Market, all within one block of the Black Cat. Mrs. Shultz’s address is given as 402 Grove St., the furthest from the cabaret at just over one mile.

³⁵ See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1985).

African-American culture. Minstrelsy, primarily defined by white performers in “blackface” makeup, and often clownish songs or comedy, was deeply woven into the vaudeville tradition and sat comfortably beside the strongmen and Broadway hits featured on the cafe’s stage. The addition of a Tango band and its singer, a “dainty fiesta queen,” may have ensured that the Black Cat had “the liveliest entertainment in Bohemia,” but it also carried deeper racial connotations—what Eric Lott has termed “love and theft”—in which admiration and exploitation converge. Moreover, minstrelsy itself was a transnational form, arising in the early and mid-nineteenth century as a blending of African-American styles (themselves born of the synthesis of African and European musical forms) with the balladry of Irish immigrants—the kind of genealogy also seen in jazz as it grew from the confluence of John Philip Sousa’s minstrelsy-inflected marches and New Orleans ragtime.³⁶ The inclusion of minstrelsy alongside such “captivating” acts as the fiesta queen hints at the sort of commodified exoticism that increasingly defined nightclub entertainment in the 1920s. Both the Cotton Club in New York and American émigré Josephine Baker’s Parisian performances during those years became infamous for their art nouveau-inflected jungle themes that associated non-whites with a dense nocturnal urban milieu of primal sexuality and decadent modernity.³⁷ Although less noted by historians, San Francisco nightspots also embraced this formula.

³⁶ “Display Ad 25,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 15, 1913, p. 7. For a more detailed description of the role race played in San Francisco cabaret, see “Purcell’s Cafe,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 19, 1921, p. A-68. See also Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19-20, 26, 29. Radano notes that Black performers themselves often adopted forms of minstrelsy due to economic necessity to please white audiences, yet found tactics to subvert its more degrading aspects through subtle satire whose codes were largely recognized only by fellow African Americans. Further, Nan Boyd has noted cross-dressing as an aspect of minstrelsy that became part of the performative heritage of San Francisco’s twentieth-century gay culture. Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 29.

³⁷ See Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) and Micol Seigel, *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), who notes that this process included the exoticism of Latin American styles as well.

The first incarnation of San Francisco's Black Cat Cafe failed to survive Prohibition, eventually resulting in a subtle diversion toward a more bohemian and literary path. As is often the case with drinking establishments, the Black Cat had a history of trouble with local authorities. City supervisors brought charges of collusion in 1917 due to Cohn and Crowley's ties with labor unions, and in 1921 the cabaret apparently violated restrictions against interaction between female employees and male patrons.³⁸ The suspension of the cafe's dance license led to another police raid, followed within weeks by the Black Cat's closing night on May 5, 1921. Despite the flair with which Cohn and Crowley advertised the end of their nefarious feline's first life—holding “Funeral Services at Midnight” to celebrate its “Grand Closing”—they quickly opened a new venue, the Old Madrid Cafe, in the same location.³⁹ By November, however, the new cafe was on the defensive—along with other cabarets in the area—and was struggling for legitimacy as authorities publicly railed against its ill repute, citing “improper” conduct and the costume code violations of scantily-clad performers. The Police Commission adamantly refused to issue the Old Madrid a dance license, despite vocal and public support from prominent area literary figures who sought to maintain San Francisco's “bohemian atmosphere.”⁴⁰

Cohn and Crowley's woes were not primarily rooted in Prohibition per se, but rather in civic groups committed to “sweep clean” the cabaret district in order to make it

³⁸ Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 56. In addition to accusations that the club had hired “disreputable” women (hinting at prostitution), police furthered the portrait sketched by the case of Corrine Houston and the jewel embezzler by noting that some performers had “mingled with the guests, singing to them, sometimes eating and drinking at their tables, and usually dancing with them.”

³⁹ “Police Commission Stops Cafe Dances,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 26, 1921, p. 16; “Display Ad 50,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 5, 1921, p. 7.

⁴⁰ “Police Commission Stops Cafe Dances,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 26, 1921, p. 16; “Portola-Odeon Cabaret Show Interspersed With Vaudeville Makes Dining a Real Pleasure,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 25, 1920, p. 9; “Dance License for Down Town Cafe Rejected,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 15, 1921, p. 13.

safe for the expansion of a neighboring shopping district.⁴¹ This alliance of businessmen, law enforcement, and moral reformers saw the cabaret as a sign of compromised female virtue, and in a Progressive-Era version of gentrification forced out the very cultural institution which had first raised the profile (and thus the value) of the area's property. By the end of the year, Cohn and Crowley were arrested and the Old Madrid closed its doors. Cohn's arrest the following year on a Prohibition violation apparently ended his career in cabaret and the Black Cat's fixtures were sold by auction.⁴²

The second incarnation of the Black Cat Cafe, opening in 1933, lacked the original's commitment to cabaret entertainment, yet it maintained much of its predecessor's spirit. Owners Jack Ricossa and Peter Lucchesi, both second-generation Italian immigrants, rekindled the cafe's bohemianism, as well as its literary connotations. Moreover, its ties to unionism remained strong and after its sale to Carl Haberkern sometime between 1936 and 1938, the Black Cat maintained its radical Left patronage well into the 1940s.⁴³ Other venues in San Francisco's bohemia were quick to ingest the formula that made up the Rebel Cafe, with its mix of cabaret culture and leftwing politics.

⁴¹ Ibid; "Police Asked to Ban Costumes of Cafe Singers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 7, 1921, p. 11; "Old Madrid Cafe Owners Arrested," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 27, 1921, p. 3. An organization called the West of Powell Street Association found common cause with the Police Commission, the Women's Vigilant Committee, the Hygiene Board, the YMCA, and the Federation of Women's Clubs, as financial incentives blended with concerns for public morals, resulting in a campaign to expunge "certain elements which interferes [*sic*] with this region in development as a business district [and] will infest any cafe owned by men who have heretofore permitted them to carry on unlawful vocations." A *Chronicle* reporter continued that "unless this policy is adhered to the good work of the commission will have been in vain as well as all effort to extend the shopping district across Powell street westward."

⁴² "Vote Seekers Present When Raid Is Made," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 2, 1922, p. G3; "Golden State News of Interest to All," *The Gridley Herald*, October 27, 1923, p. 2. Prohibition left an uneven legacy in San Francisco. As noted in the above article, many local politicians flaunted the law, openly imbibing while on the stump. However, prominent residents were also arrested to Volstead violations and many of the cities niteries were closed down during the 1920s, shifting the center of nightlife northward, away from the central shopping and financial districts. See also "Banker Held For Carrying One 'On Hip'," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 6, 1920, p. 1.

⁴³ *Polk's Crocker-Langley San Francisco City Directory*, 1936-1939; Department of Commerce—Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, S.D. No. 4, E.D. No. 38-26, Sheet No. 82-B.

In New York, a parallel process was at work. Greenwich Village's Black Cat Cafe opened within seven years of the original Le Chat Noir, spanning a turbulent history over five decades before fading into obscurity.⁴⁴ New York's Black Cat was a mirror image to its sister on the West Coast, beginning with a strictly literary bohemian cast and only embracing the cabaret craze following the closure of its original site sometime after the turn of the century. An account from 1910 offers both a window onto its largely masculine world of letters and a prime example of the generational lamentations that accompanied each succeeding permutation of bohemia. "There was a time," the *Times'* sulking scribe began, "when New York held many haunts dear to the hearts of men whom the world called bohemians; now it holds places dear to the hearts of those who love to call themselves by that name—and have thereby made the title odious."

Many things and much genius have died as a result of overpopularity. At some time enthusiastic admirers scaled the walls of bohemia and proceeded to smother it with their embraces. . . [then] sent word broadcast of their remarkable discovery.

Before that invasion, to be a bohemian was, and is yet when rightly interpreted, a state of mind. Dress, occupation, and mode of living have nothing to do with it . . . Today the popular conception of a bohemian is one who washes little and indifferently, and whose manner of dress is studiously freakish, rather than carelessly following the lines of least resistance . . .

And so with New York's bohemian resorts. The places not killed by prosperity have been driven out by commerce . . . [such as] in West Broadway, near Bleeker Street, and . . . the old building that at one time housed the hospitable "Black Cat."

The Newspaper men knew this place best. It was here they sat and ground out their daily toil of copy, taking it for granted that the purchase of a glass of mazagan [a drink made from a kind of Moroccan bean] entitled them to an unlimited supply of "the old man's" stationary as well as the use of a table for hours at a time. . . .

The death of the "Black Cat" seems shrouded in somewhat of mystery. The advent of the elevated road, that darkened its doors and rattled its windows, might be held responsible for several of its lives, though it drew out its remaining existences for years after the building of this structure.

The article proceeded to describe the travels of these journalistic compatriots, from San

⁴⁴ Leonard Lyons, "The Post's New Yorker," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 1938, p. X-11.

Francisco to Paris, fueled all the while by tales of coffee, sumptuous meals, and ale.⁴⁵ The Black Cat reopened as a cabaret at 557 West Broadway, still squarely in the heart of Greenwich Village, all the while cashing in on its evocation of the Continent and touting its Italian ownership as a badge of authenticity. While the club suffered two closings due to Prohibition raids, it survived into the late 1930s before going down for good.⁴⁶

The bohemian lament for the Black Cat's first incarnation presaged the losses of other esteemed sites to the steamroller of economic expansion or urban renewal. Of course, rumors of bohemia's demise were always greatly exaggerated. The 1910s were in fact a kind of bohemian golden age in Greenwich Village, where the artistic salons of Mabel Dodge and Max Eastman's *Masses* journalism sat side by side—if a tad uncomfortably. The Village's intellectualism was intertwined with its internationalism, as cross-class alliances were bolstered by notions of immigrant “authenticity.” Floyd Dell called the Village bohemia a “moral health resort.” Yet, as urban historian Thomas Bender has argued, even amid its radical politics and feminism, there was “a greater concern about *repression* of personal desire . . . than about class *oppression*.”⁴⁷

Djuna Barnes, whose later novel, *Nightwood* (1936), became a classic of lesbian literature, captured the “atmosphere” of bohemia in her pre-Jazz Age journalism. She summoned forth the spaces of Village nightlife, from the Liberal Club, where the radical John Reed rubbed elbows with novelist Theodore Dreiser and professional bohemian

⁴⁵ “New York's Real Bohemia is Dead and Gone,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1910, p. SM11.

⁴⁶ “Dry Agents Sweep City in Big Raid: 100 Are Arrested,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1921, p. 1; “Cleared in Night Club Raid: Jury Frees Proprietors of Village Resort of Liquor Charges,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1929, p. 10; “Classified Ad 7,” *New York Tribune*, January 1, 1922, p. 12; “Display Ad 15,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1934, p. 16; “New York City Under Spotlight: The Big Town Mirrored Here Revealing Who's Who And What's What,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1936, p. 8; “Harlemites Guests At Village Black Cat Cafe,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 24, 1939, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Thomas Bender, *New York Intellectual: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, From 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 228-32; Wilson, *Bohemians*, 85; Stansell, *American Moderns*, 19-27, 89-92.

Harry Kemp, to the Hell Hole, where debauched patrons drank until dawn. For Barnes, the Village was a place of youth and sex, birth-control pamphleteers, poetry, and a living past among the “memories of great lives and possibilities.” It was a place of both cruelty and “amusement,” where bohemians found joy in suffering as the “feeling of autumn comes into the soul.” Barnes was largely insensitive to the complications of race. Yet she did not obliterate them from her accounts, in which a “colored girl on the sidewalk jostles a Japanese servant and wonders whether he, too, is colored or if he is thought to be white like ‘dem dagos”” and a “colored sweetheart with a smile set in her face like a keyboard into a night” straggles into the Hell Hole’s “dirty back room with its paper cutouts of ladies in abbreviated undergarments.” Despite crowds of “slummers,” both the “real” and “the unknown” were to be found in “basements below Bohemia,” where even a waiter could claim equal social space and therefore must be “negligent before he can be Nietzsche.” Most of all, it was “not where one washes one’s neck that counts but where one moistens one’s throat.” And at the Black Cat, before the end of its second life, Barnes proclaimed, a local singer “steps upon a table” for a rendition of “Way Down South in Greenwich Village,” as the “Radical pests come in with flowing ties and flowing morals, walking from table to table, maintaining that Baudelaire was right when he said, ‘Be drunk on wine or women, only be drunk on something.’”⁴⁸

RIDING INTO THE SUNSET

The bicoastal Black Cats demonstrated the continuities between bohemian generations as well as any symbol might. Yet the role of such sites changed as America’s urban bohemia ebbed and flowed over the course of the twentieth century. Turn of the century bohemia in the Village and in San Francisco were defined by community and a

⁴⁸ Djuna Barnes, *New York*, Alyce Barry, ed. (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1989), 225-31, 240-4, 252.

common progressive sense of purpose—binding together reformers, feminists, and political radicals from Atherton, London, and Bierce to Margaret Sanger, Randolph Bourne, and Emma Goldman. The 1920s was defined by diffusion, as the disruptions of war and the First Red Scare sent oppositional figures either deeply inward—searching for usable historical, philosophical, or political models—or abroad, as seen in the Parisian literary émigrés like Hemingway and Djuna Barnes.⁴⁹ The 1930s, conversely, saw a new, more institutionalized oppositional community, forged in the fires of the Depression, and formed around literary and state institutions ranging from the Communist Party’s John Reed Clubs to *Partisan Review* (founded in 1934) and the New Deal’s WPA Writer’s Project.

The politics of the pre-Depression cabaret cannot be dismissed so easily, however. While the strategies of cultural radicals varied through the course of the mid-twentieth century according to shifting political winds and ideologies, a basic Rebel Cafe formula remained throughout. Cabaret culture set a precedent for nightspots as sites of psychic or sexual freedom, a brand of personal politics which also challenged mass culture by insisting on face-to-face interactions on a human scale. Although cabaret entertainment was often exoticized, its ethos of nonconformity and democratic expression opened social space for changing notions of “liberation,” which ethnic or racial outsiders used to bolster public demands for equality. And activists’ grassroots strategies continually invoked “sophistication” to establish cultural authority, making the cabaret’s Continental atmosphere fundamental to the Rebel Cafe’s oppositional blueprint. This transnational imaginary worked *because* it transcended traditional boundaries of time and space, allowing socially-conscious patrons and performers to envision alternatives to the status

⁴⁹ James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans* (New York: Wiley, 1968), 49-51.

quo. Denizens of the Rebel Cafe used the past and perceptions of foreignness to create a less constrained *weltanschauung* by identifying with senses of difference—a dialectic in which, for instance, “American” and “European” identities became subsumed within a single cosmopolitanism. To imagine new ways of being in the world, and sometimes to enact them, was inherently, even if unconsciously, political.⁵⁰

It was therefore in the interstices of the interwar bohemia that the Rebel Cafe’s roots first gained ground. While central figures such as Dylan Thomas, Jack Kerouac, or Susan Sontag did not arrive until the 1940s and 1950s, a collection of radical poets and artists in the 1930s laid the foundation for a significant postwar oppositional culture and community. In San Francisco, these included Elsa Gidlow, Kenneth Rexroth, Shirley Triest, and Ralph Stackpole, each of whom contributed to the blending of Left, literary-artistic, and queer culture that emerged after World War II. In New York, the anarchist poet Max Gordon made his mark not through his art, but by founding the Village Vanguard—a nightclub that perhaps most fully incorporated the archetypal Rebel Cafe elements of literary salon, jazz club, and political cabaret.

⁵⁰ Mathew Pratt Guterl, “Comment: The Futures of Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (February 2013): 130-9. While I am clearly nodding to Guterl’s call for transnational history to move beyond accepted periodization, I also think that to do so requires continual attention to changing contexts. Therefore, I differentiate between the 1920s and 1930s not on the basis of the long-outmoded “decade” as a historical marker, but because the severe economic conditions of the Depression, and the rise of fascism in Europe, affected the political thinking and activities of actors in those years. That said, usable pasts and the transnational imaginary simultaneously challenged any clear lines of demarcation for either time periods or geographical borders. As David Hollinger has argued, cosmopolitanism carries crucial sociopolitical potential due to its ability to develop solidarity—as opposed to community—through the “experience of willed affiliation” that embraces difference as it denaturalizes previous group identification based on race, religion, class, sexuality, or other categories. David Hollinger, *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), ix-xxv.

Chapter 2

“Stumbling toward the Rebel Cafe: Go to the American Cabaret . . . and Turn Left”

Localities and atmospheres should be left alone. There are so many restaurants that have been spoiled by a line or two in a paper. We are in the same danger. What can we do? Nothing. The damage has been done, we find, and the wing of the butterfly is already crumbling into dust.

—Djuna Barnes (1919)

Yessenin Esenin as a whole is a disgusting, vulgarly painted and powdered Russian obscenity. His poetry is saturated with alcoholic tears and therefore still more vile. A monstrous mix of “male dogs,” ikons, “glaring candles,” birches, the moon, bitches, gods, necrophilia, a lot of drunken tears, and “tragic,” drunken hiccoughs; religion and hooliganism, “love” for animals and a barbarous attitude toward men and especially women, impotent longings for “wide” open spaces (while sitting within the four narrow walls of a common cabaret), decadence raised to the height of a principle . . .

—Nikolai Bukharin, Deputy to Joseph Stalin (1925)¹

The predominant nightclub culture that emerged in San Francisco and New York between the world wars was largely defined by the broad national contexts of Prohibition and the Great Depression; and it was against this shifting backdrop that the earliest forms of the Rebel Cafe emerged. In response to enforcement of the Volstead Act in 1920, cabarets had the twin choices of either establishing themselves as legitimate by becoming restaurants or small theaters—thereby welcoming patrons *sans-spiritueux*—or becoming speakeasies and balancing liquor sale profits against their illegality. It was during the Roaring Twenties, of course, that organized crime moved wholeheartedly into the nightclub business. Many of the most renowned clubs in New York and Chicago—from the Cotton Club and Copacabana to “Diamond” Jim Colosimo’s Cafe and the infamous hangouts of Al Capone—were run by gangsters and continued to be so through the 1960s. While San Francisco avoided Mafia control of the nightclub business, the high profile of New York and Chicago syndicates (further enhanced by the popularity of crime fiction

¹ Djuna Barnes, *New York*, Alyce Barry, ed. (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1989), 226; Bukharin quoted in Richard A. Reuss and JoAnne C. Reuss. *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 31-2.

and gangster films) entrenched nightclubs in the public imagination as sites of illicit allure. As a result, patrons increasingly arrived at Prohibition-era clubs with the expectation of uninhibited and sexually explicit entertainment, often in the exploitative form of primitivism exemplified by the “Negro Vogue” of Harlem nightspots, which extended into the early 1930s.²

The main effects of Prohibition and the Depression on urban nightlife were threefold. First, earlier trends begun during the cabaret craze of the 1910s intensified as middle-class white patrons sought entertainment that combined the glamour and glitz of modern stage productions with exoticism. Second, the rising regulation of nightspots squeezed out legal venues in Midtown Manhattan and downtown San Francisco, siphoning patrons toward marginalized areas such as Harlem, Greenwich Village, and North Beach, where the ethnic and racial demographics made authorities less likely to enforce Prohibition. This had the effect of loosening taboos against women in drinking establishments and interracial interactions as nightspots went underground. Finally, after Repeal took effect on December 5, 1933, the Depression’s deprivations continued to fuel desires for lavish entertainment, even as the legitimization of nightclubs and civic leaders’ concerns about moral decline led to a backlash against the most sexually explicit shows.³

² Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 2009), 192, 221, 189-230; Lorraine Gordon, as told to Barry Singer, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 106; Robert A. Holland, *Chicago in Maps: 1612-2002* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 164-7; Dominica A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 219-48; Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 42-52. See also Christopher Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

³ Erenberg, Lewis A. *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 234-59; Heap, *Slumming*, 229; Lewis A. Erenberg, “From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression”: *American Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (Winter, 1986), pp. 761-778. See also John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality on America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, Second Edition), illustrations following p. 274, # 45-46 for examples of this culture’s spread into the nation’s “hinterlands.”

In Gotham, 1934 began with a flurry of new dinner-and-dancing venue openings in the theater district downtown, many in previously abandoned hotel lounges, which now openly welcomed natty New Yorkers and tourists. Local boosters proclaimed the return of European-styled “decorum” to the city’s nightlife—declaring the demise of both the gloomy subterranean speakeasy and the “horror” of the old-time, all-male “open saloon.” Mayor LaGuardia and the city’s police department, however, clamped down on an explosion of smaller nightspots, restricting cabaret licenses in residential areas, reinforcing rules that banned obscenity and the fraternization of female employees with male patrons, and making arrests for curfew violations.⁴ Authorities also discouraged middle-class slumming by increasing arrests of white women in African-American neighborhoods and tainting Italian or Eastern European venues as racially precarious “gyp” establishments. Moreover, as venues such as the Tic Toc Club and the Greenwich Village Barn touted their chorus lines and promises of “Wine, Dance, Romance,” the “novelty” of Harlem’s exotic cabarets began to wear off. The Harlem race riot of 1935 only further cemented the feeling that its venues were no longer worth the risk for white, middle-class pleasure seekers; the Cotton Club’s relocation to the midtown theater district in 1936 symbolized the return of nightclub entertainment to America’s mainstream.⁵

⁴ H. I. Brock, “Now Our Night Life Glows Anew: In the Two Months Following Repeal, New York Has Taken On the Color of a European Capital, Found Its Old Gayety and a New Decorum in Drinking,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1934, p. SM10; “Cabarets Banned in Home Sections,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1934, p. 15; “Police Open Drive on ‘Gyp’ Resorts,” *New York Times*, September 5, 1934, p. 23; “Guests Mauled in Raid on Bar,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1934, p. 39; “Court Holds Two in Weylin Bar Raid,” *New York Times*, September 17, 1934, p. 38; “Weylin Bar Raid Held Unjustified,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1934, p. 20. See also Burton W. Peretti, *Nightclub City: Politics and Amusement in Manhattan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 99-169 and 220. Peretti notes that the LaGuardia administration regularly enacted cleanups of the city’s nightclubs in response to municipal pressures, most notably during preparations for the 1939 World’s Fair.

⁵ “Classified Ads,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1934, p. 20 and February 7, 1934, p. 16; B.C., “Night

San Francisco witnessed a similar trajectory as clubs such as the Moderne and the Montmartre were quick to trade on the city's bohemian past and abounded with Parisian themes.⁶ San Francisco boasted of its wild nightlife with imagery that evoked carnivalesque humor, minstrelsy, and thinly veiled sexuality, as nightclubs' "mad" atmosphere and nymph-laden adornments betokened their "cosmopolitan" style.⁷ This self-promoting tone, however, hid the darker side of Bay Area nightlife. In early 1935, municipal authorities raided local venues, seeking to quash underage drinking and prostitution. The front pages of the city's press splashed charges of "white slavery" (which tacitly implied that widespread prostitution among Asian girls was of little concern), and restrictions on liquor sales accompanied prosecutions of tavern owners. By February, nightclub owners were scrambling to redefine bohemianism as simply "sparkling" and free from "degrading influences" as their display ads suddenly replaced images of scantily-clad young women with couples in black-tie dress.⁸ As in New York, nightclub culture flourished in line with the Depression's conservative mores: European styles no longer implied exotic and open sexuality, but rather refinement and highbrow

Club Notes," *New York Times*, October 6, 1934, p. 20; "Topics of The Times," *New York Times*, October 25, 1934, p. 22; "Police Open Drive on 'Gyp' Resorts," *New York Times*, September 5, 1934, p. 23; "Nightlife Problem," *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 20, 1938, p. 6; "Harlem Boycott Seen When Whispering War is Begun," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 25, 1939, p. 11; Heap, *Slumming*, 229.

⁶ "San Francisco Heralds 1934 amid Wild Repeal Whoopee," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 1, 1934, p. 4; "Display Ads," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 4, 1934, p. 13 and October 11, 1934, p. 13.

⁷ "Gorgeous Girls, Scintillating Shows, Moving Music at S.F. Night Clubs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 22, 1934, p. 30; "Alfred Dupont, Artist, Trims Walls of Club," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 26, 1934, p.28.

⁸ "New Liquor Law," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 8, 1935; "Hard Drinks Sale Banned in Drug Stores," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 9, 1935, p. 1; "S.F. Grand Jury Launches Probe of Girl Traffic in Liquor Taverns," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 9, 1935, p. 3; "Police Open Drastic War on Beer Halls," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 10, 1935, pp. 1-3; "Beer Parlor Girls Prey of White Slavers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 11, 1935, pp. 1-4; "Proprietor, Seven Patrons Seized in Drive on Drink Taverns," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 12, 1935, p. 1; "Liquor Dealers Approve Chronicle's Demand for Cleanup," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 13, 1935, p. 1; "Display Ad: San Francisco, A City Famed 'Round the World for Its Cafes and Clubs,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 11, 1935, p. 22; "Bright Night Spots Lure Crowds to Dine and Dance," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 15, 1935, p. 18. New York and California differed in the structure of authority over liquor regulation, with New York maintaining statewide efforts while California was more reliant on local control.

decorum (at least as advertised).

Against this complicated backdrop the Rebel Cafe began to emerge as a distinct nocturnal milieu with nightspots such as San Francisco's Black Cat and Iron Pot and New York's Village Vanguard. During the 1930s the influence of European cafe society flowed into American culture. This influx manifested in both the imagination, through the literature of those like Henry Miller or James Joyce, and in person, through a diverse cohort of émigrés seeking asylum from fascism. These included cinematic cabaret singers Marlene Dietrich and Lotte Lenya, the artist Max Ernst, and Herbert Jacoby, the founder of New York's Blue Angel nightclub—all of whom had some leftwing ties. Between 1935 and the end of World War II, bohemianism and leftism began to absorb each other, leaving both utterly transformed. Rebel Cafe nightspots played a crucial role in this tangled process, developing into informal but politically-charged artistic institutions. As bridges between 1920s bohemianism and the postwar jazz culture and Beat Generation, their left-radical habitués and European styles set them apart from the predominant nightclub culture. Rather than lavish settings with elaborate floorshows and wide dance floors of the kind found at mob-owned boîtes such as the Copacabana or Bal Tabarin, owners like Carl Haberkern and Max Gordon maintained independent oases of socially-conscious entertainment. With capacities below 200, they emphasized conversation and performances on an intimate scale, and were distinct from the bulk of American nightclubs due to the remarkable number of innovative and controversial cultural producers they could claim as regulars.

If these criteria defining the Rebel Cafe seem arbitrary, that is just as well—they are. In the 1920s Duke Ellington launched arguably the most important career in jazz

from Harlem's Cotton Club, a venue with the kind of racist policies and ties to organized crime that were absolute anathema to a club like the Village Vanguard. And to most patrons, Vanguard owner Max Gordon's uptown club, the Blue Angel, probably seemed little different than mainstream competitors like the El Morocco, with plush interiors and many of the same acts. It is only in hindsight, as the nuances of booking preferences and connections with a larger network of leftwing and literary nonconformists form visible patterns, that the outlines of the Rebel Cafe become apparent. In Greenwich Village and North Beach, Rebel Cafes like the Vanguard and the Black Cat became visible public symbols of left-bohemian culture, as well as informal institutions that connected and nurtured radical artists, intellectuals, and literati.

NORTH BEACH AND THE NEW DEAL

Of all the notable nonconformists who frequented America's subterranean nightspots in the 1930s, radical poet and essayist Kenneth Rexroth best embodied the spirit of bohemian leftism. An irascible and insightful public intellectual, the droopy-eyed, mustachioed Marxist was something of a twentieth-century renaissance man throughout his long career, which lasted from the 1920s through the 1970s. A self-educated multilingualist who never shied away from self-aggrandizement, he was quick to tell tales of his youthful work on western cattle ranches and as a merchant marine, or to discuss Japanese poetry and Left politics. Born in 1905, Rexroth came of age amid the labor conflicts of early twentieth-century Chicago. He precociously participated in the city's socialist movement in the late 1910s and 1920s, gaining something of a reputation as a young soap-box speaker. Like many Rebel Cafe radicals, he sought to reconcile social justice and psychological liberation. As a result, Rexroth rejected statist approaches, such as the Leninist-Stalinism of what he later facetiously called the "Russian Orthodox Communist

Party,” in favor of an artistic brand of anarchist-libertarianism.⁹

Rexroth’s ambitions found outlets in Chicago’s Prohibition-era cafes, the Dill Pickle Club and the Green Mask (of which he was part owner). Each offered a venue to publicly proclaim his poetry and political philosophy, all within a milieu that welcomed both intellectuals and working-class subterraneans.¹⁰ He later wrote of the Green Mask: “Around the walls were blue nudes dancing with silver fauns under crimson trees and shelves with books of free verse and books about the sexual revolution, and all the current little magazines.”

The place was a hangout for bona-fide artists, writers, musicians, and people from show business. . . . We gave poetry readings or lectures once a week. The Chairmen were people like Ben Hecht and Sherwood Anderson. Once we had Clarence Darrow. . . . June Weiner [the club’s co-owner] had been a friend of Emma Goldman, and both were friends of Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, the editors of *The Little Review*. . . For a long time June managed to replenish the book stock as fast as it was stolen. On the shelves were all the early books of the poetic avant-garde and the theoreticians of revolution. Their authors were around the place if they lived in Chicago or when they were passing through town.

Rexroth’s interactions with an older generation of bohemians such as Mabel Dodge and Floyd Dell made him a bridge between early twentieth-century bohemia and later incarnations of the American underground. He was also an exponent of multiculturalism and the transnational imaginary. Rexroth first met the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes in Chicago’s bohemian cafes, for instance, and together they devised a form of

⁹ Kenneth Rexroth to Weldon Kees, December 11, 1939, Box 23, Folder 15 and Rexroth to Louis Brigante, December 16, 1950, Box 23, Folder 14, and The Libertarian League, “Provisional Statement of Principles,” (undated) Box 14, Folder 4, Kenneth Rexroth Papers (Collection 175), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA; Kenneth Rexroth, *Excerpts from a Life*, Ekbert Faas, ed. (Santa Barbara: Conjunctions Books, 1981), 61. The New York Libertarian League’s statement offers some insight into the (admittedly idealistic) principles of libertarian anarchism. They proposed that “the only salvation for a world satiated with exploitation and war . . . lies in a new, free, classless social order yet to be created,” resting on “the goodness of people and in the possibility of Humanity saving itself and emerging on a higher plane of social consciousness.” This would rely on mutual aid, collective effort, the end of statism and racism, and the maintenance of “individual freedom.”

¹⁰ Morgan Gibson, *Revolutionary Rexroth: Poet of East-West Wisdom* (Guilford, CN: Archon Books, 1986), 1-5, 7-11, 14-23; Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), 10, 14-21, 33-4.

poetry accompanied by jazz that influenced beatnik culture in the 1950s. “Here I was, living it out,” he recalled of the 1920s, “part of the scene, just like Tristan Tzara, even if it was only on Grand Avenue in Chicago.”¹¹

Rexroth soon made the trek to Paris himself, working aboard a steamer, and according to his own account, met Tzara while basking in the Montparnasse salons and the Montmartre cafe scene. He returned to the US determined to construct a such scene of his own, an American version of the Parisian avant-garde, but one more fully committed to both artistic and political progress.¹² Rexroth felt Greenwich Village was too claustrophobic, so in 1927 he headed to San Francisco. There he found a permanent haven. Rexroth connected with the city’s intellectual circles through Gertrude Atherton and anarchist poet Elsa Gidlow. He was quickly immersed in the city’s bohemia, which was “a tiny enclave in Italian North Beach,” primarily identified by Isadore “Izzy” Gomez’s cafe, some young painters, and “a group of Socialist newspapermen.” The poet found a welcoming home among the artists and bohemians of the Montgomery “Monkey Block” Building, and by the mid 1930s, the Black Cat became his regular haunt.¹³ Rexroth’s activism helped turn the cafe into the district’s social center, as he launched a radical poetic movement later dubbed the San Francisco Renaissance.

In his memoir, *Excerpts from a Life*, Rexroth staked a claim to “movements

¹¹ Kenneth Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, Inc., 1964), 162-4, 167; Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 33-4, 378, n. 7.

¹² Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel*, 341-2. There is, as far as I have found, no independent confirmation of Rexroth’s meeting with Parisian luminaries such as Tzara. It is entirely possible that he manufactured this meeting in his memoir for the sake of lending himself further authority as the, by then, elder statesman of the Beat movement. But whether or not the meeting actually took place, what is significant was his advocacy of Dada at various points in his career, making him an important point of connection between the Cabaret Voltaire and the Rebel Cafe.

¹³ Hamalian, *A Life*, 44-8, 67; Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel*, 365; Department of Commerce—Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, Enumeration District No. 38-397, Supervisor’s District No. 6, Sheet No. 19-A.

which younger people think they invented in the late 1960's—sexual freedom, racial equality, militant feminism, homosexual liberation, Native America.” While hindsight led Rexroth to exaggerate his liberal views on gender, racial, and sexual equality, he was indeed a powerful voice for liberation throughout the 1930s and 1940s. “I believe that the field of the artist, at least of the poet worth his keep, is the moral consciousness of history,” he wrote in 1941. “The artist functions truly when he devotes himself entirely to a struggle to surpass [politics as ‘the art of choosing between two evils’]. Such activity I believe to be truly ‘permanently revolutionary.’”¹⁴ Pivotal Depression-era figures such as Rexroth established a North Beach nightlife tradition of political leftism tinged with humanistic notions of personal, psychic, and artistic liberation.

The collision of outsider art and Left politics within bohemian nightspots is not as surprising as it may first appear. Both American cabaret and the American Communist Party owed large debts to the flow of ideas and individuals from Europe, a central element of their outsider status—whether by exclusion or choice. Cultural critic Irving Howe’s classic description of the Left could almost as easily describe the owners of bohemian “niteries” like the Black Cat’s Charlie Haberkern or the Vanguard’s Max Gordon: “Many students have noticed that a high proportion of the American party membership consisted of either first-generation immigrants or the sons and daughters of such immigrants . . . [who suffered] not absolute deprivation but a sense of social disparity. . . . It was only when a series of blows fell upon a social group—when, for example, urban immigrant workers suffered the handicap of being part of a minority ethnic group together with the frustration of being unable to live by the American values

¹⁴ Rexroth, *Excerpts from a Life*, 14; Kenneth Rexroth to Franklin Folsom, May 12, 1941, Box 23, Folder 14, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

they had begun to accept—that anti-capitalist ideologies acquired a power of attraction.”¹⁵ This combination of European outsider sensibilities and Depression-era disillusionment with the American Dream contributed to bohemia’s rejection of pure avant-gardism, or “art for art’s sake,” that had supposedly defined dissent in 1920s cabarets. Radical artists such as Rexroth invested nocturnal culture with more direct political purpose.

Soon after Carl “Charlie” Haberkern acquired the Black Cat, sometime around 1936, he took on a partner, Letizio Bonetti—known to the regulars as “Pucci.” Haberkern had lived around the corner from the Black Cat since at least 1935, working as a cook and a bartender. He then moved to the middle of North Beach, at the Hotel Reims on Columbus Avenue, after purchasing the Black Cat. Bonetti later joined him at the same address, which was a boarding house largely occupied by recent immigrants, many of whom worked in local nightspots. Several cafe habitués, including the artist Maynard Dixon (who had married famed WPA photographer Dorothea Lange), also lived near the cafe at the Monkey Block or in boarding houses. Others shared studios in the Canetti building which housed the Black Cat.¹⁶ The cafe combined with the Montgomery Street scene to play a pivotal role in the transition of North Beach from a primarily ethnic neighborhood with some bohemian elements to the reverse.

¹⁵ Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Praeger, 1957; Rev. ed. 1962), 518-19.

¹⁶ Haberkern first lived at 645 Clay Street, then moved with Bonetti to 36 Columbus Avenue. Polk’s Crocker-Langley San Francisco City Directory, 1935 (San Francisco: R.L. Polk & Co., 1935); *Ibid*, 1938-1944. Other artists included Jose Ramis and Harry Dixon. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, 4: District 38-26, Sheet# 82-B and District 38-24, Sheet # 1-A; “Gaye LeBaron’s Notebook,” *The Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), 1990; Jennifer Shaifer, “Metal Rising: The Forming of the Metal Arts Guild, San Francisco (1929-1964)” (MA Thesis, The Smithsonian Associates and Corcoran College of Art & Design, 2011), 27-31. See also Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (London and New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 75-87, 91-131. Lange and Dixon’s “Coppa’s” circle included Ansel Adams and the poet Elsa Gidlow and, later, their “Monkey Block” compatriots included Kenneth Rexroth and Shirley Triest. Gordon’s account also indicates the limits of interwar liberalism, noting Dixon’s prejudice against Jews and African Americans.

The Monkey Block had long been known as a hub of creative activity. But its turn of the century residents, whom the *San Francisco Examiner* described as “those pioneers with more of a thought toward wine, women and song,” found their entertainment not only in Italian North Beach, or simply downstairs at Coppa’s, but in the cabarets along Mason Street farther south. By the 1930s, the massive rooming house was making North Beach itself the “center of Bohemianism,” where “the great and the near great and those who never will be great . . . plug away day after day, eating cheese and crackers and kidding models out of their pay. . . . Meanwhile, they drink a bit (or a lot, according to borrowing ability), and grow long hair and forget to wash below the Adam’s apple.”¹⁷

This statement captured a sense of the artistic colony emerging along Montgomery Street north of the Monkey Block, along with the rebirth of literary bohemia in San Francisco’s nightspots. In addition to the Black Cat, cafes such as Izzy Gomez’s and the Green Lantern mixed highbrow patter, radical politics, jazz, and “torrid” dancing. The “Beret and Smock Brigade,” reported one local scribbler, went nightly to “guzzle and truck and shoot intellectual breeze among the friendly candles,” as “hot black men orchestrate[d] the latest jit.”¹⁸ Gomez in particular was legendary in as the bearer of the city’s bohemian tradition, a “Magnificent Mug” who opened his venue before the great quake and openly defied Prohibition—reputedly continuing to “wine and dine” supporters while behind bars. Famed society columnist Herb Caen, in a composite profile of an archetypical “Mr. San Francisco,” later intoned that “he is contemptuous of the beatniks (because in his era at the Black Cat and Izzy’s all the bohemians were fired up about something every minute, and once in a drunken moment he even volunteered for

¹⁷ John Bruce, “The Block,” *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*, June 14, 1933, p. 11.

¹⁸ Jack Lord and Jenn Shaw, *Where to Sin in San Francisco* (San Francisco: n.p., 1939), 55.

the Abraham Lincoln Brigade; sober, he changed his mind).”¹⁹

This invocation of the Spanish Civil War was appropriate, given the leftism of North Beach’s urban underground. Knute Stiles, a pivotal figure in the city’s postwar bohemia, noted that even after his arrival in 1949, Communist Party and union stalwarts who participated in the wave of dockworker strikes that shut down the city in 1934 continued to haunt the cafes. “The Black Cat went through an evolution such as is common in bohemian bars,” Stiles said. “It started out . . . [as] a hangout for bohemians; and then it gradually drifted into the radical camp. And was very much a hangout for the enthusiasts for the General Strike.”²⁰

The transition from Italian enclave to radical bohemia was uneven, however. Reporters cited North Beach nightspots as bohemian locales featuring “mixed crowds” of artists and the upscale “smart set,” but as late as 1938, they just as often noted the area’s ethnic flavor. City fathers planned “North Beach Nights” to promote its touristic European appeal and journalists gobbled up its nightclub “gayety,” extolling the “merry and heartfelt” strains of German folk bands or the charm of the neighborhood’s Italian sidewalk cafes.²¹ By contrast, the press also painted lurid pictures of the city’s nightlife with stories about prostitution and murder. Editorials decrying women’s presence in the city’s 1,400 saloons and cafes as a public safety concern sat incongruously beside notices for burlesque shows. Illustrating North Beach’s discursive mix of exoticism, sexuality, and politics, in 1938 the *San Francisco News* ran an article by Gertrude Atherton denouncing both the socialist and fascist sides in the Spanish Civil War as anti-

¹⁹ Ibid, 35; Herb Caen, *Only in San Francisco* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1960), 16-17.

²⁰ Knute Stiles Interview, May 30, 1982, East-West House, 733 Baker Street, San Francisco, CA, pp. 69-70, Papers of Lewis Ellingham, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California San Diego.

²¹ Ruth Taylor, “Bohemian Spot’s Gayety Liked—And How!” *San Francisco News*, February 7, 1938, p. 28; Ibid, February 18, p.4 and February 23, p. 14.

democratic beside a notice for Marlene Dietrich's appearance in a local stage production of "Angel"—the story of an adulterous housewife on a European fling.²²

The Black Cat was a microcosm of this wild medley, an embodiment of San Francisco's pluralism, playfulness, danger, debauchery, and political debate. Entertainment included jazz performed on the cafe's upright piano, tucked away in a corner, or perhaps a game of pinball between pick-up lines, guzzled drinks, and poetry readings. A local tourist guidebook offered a telling description:

The dictionary says a Bohemian is "one of a class of artists, intellectuals, etc., who adopted a mode of life in protest against, or indifference to, the common conventions of society . . ."

Rebels have been flaunting convention at the Black Cat for over twenty years. Any night you can watch genuine artists, intellectuals and andsoforths boisterously protesting, or being loudly indifferent to such common social practices as sobriety and amiable conversation.

Rebellious art work lines the littered, smoke-stained walls.

"Even Rebels have their institutions," the guidebook concluded. "Sunday morning breakfast at the Black Cat is one: three eggs, a quarter-pound of bacon or pork sausages, four pancakes, fruit juice, coffee, and one repeat . . . for one buck."²³

Other less celebratory, if still sympathetic, accounts offered views of the playfulness, but also the pathos, that defined the Black Cat's role in North Beach bohemia. Columnist Herb Caen, writing in the 1960s, fondly remembered the cafe as a symbol of literary San Francisco, the place where playwright William Saroyan could be found "booming his loud dreams" to fellow patrons and where author Konrad Bercovici left his "literate mark on the men's room wall . . . 'Veni, vidi, Bercovici'."²⁴ Associated

²² *San Francisco News*, February 3-23, 1938. Atherton's article in return elicited at least one letter to the editor in response calling Atherton herself a "fascist," indicating how quick was the city's Left response to rhetorical challenges.

²³ Jack Lord, *Where to Sin in San Francisco* (San Francisco: Richard Guggenheim, Mid-Century Edition, 1953), 113.

²⁴ Herb Caen, *Only in San Francisco* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1960), 262 and 233.

bohemian romance, the Black Cat offered pseudo-Parisian adventure without a lengthy sea voyage. In a piece comparing exploits in the cafe to a theater production, the *San Francisco Examiner* captured this performative aspect. “This little doll,” cooed the *Examiner*, “represents INTRIGUE.” An archetypal ingénue, the paper continued, she “approaches the bar, pretending not to notice the din, the smoke and the characters” seeking “art, lore, fire, and the fragile strains of love.” Her coed companion is intimidated, frozen “bug-eyed before Bohemia,” so the more adventurous student “speaks up for two rum cokes—in French.” Charlie Haberkern, recognizing the naïf’s “high school French,” serves the cokes sans rum and paternally watches over the young women. Haberkern plays along, pretending that “these two colts are mysterious . . . Parisian refugees” who “have come into his place to recapture a little of the genuine European touch they left on the Left Bank.” The *Examiner* then suggested that Haberkern’s jovial German bearing, along with a supporting cast of feminists, radicals, and other nonconformists, allowed the coeds to successfully perform their sophisticate roles. Meanwhile, however, two despondent scribblers—precisely the kind of “characters” who gave the Black Cat its allure—were driven to suicide by their failures to reconcile art and commerce, the life of starving artists having lost its charm.²⁵

THE BLACK CAT CAFE AND BOHEMIAN-RADICAL NETWORKS

For some Black Cat patrons, the cafe’s resemblance to its Montmartre counterparts fulfilled more than mere fantasy; it was a tangible reminder of past experience. Tourists may have seen its atmosphere as performative, to be watched at a distance since those “who come into the Black Cat, habitués or strangers, are usually

²⁵ Richard Donovan, “The Black Cat: A Drama in Four Acts,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 14, 1942, unpaginated clipping, The Black Cat envelope in “Cafes,” *Examiner* Morgue Collection, San Francisco Public Library.

looking for something, and people on the make for life comprise a good cast.” But for local nonconformists the “lusty tavern of talent at 710 Montgomery street” was a reliable institution, a true home away from home. Haberkern was renowned for supporting starving artists by adorning the cafe’s walls with their work. More directly, for wandering souls down on their luck, he was also “good for a touch or credit.”²⁶ Many notable patrons of the 1930s were either recent European immigrants or returning American expatriates fleeing fascism and the looming threat of war. The Black Cat’s offbeat cosmopolitanism offered continuity to Left or Jewish artistes for whom the Continent had become too hostile a homeland.

This coterie included the Swiss jazz musician, painter, and occasional Dada performance artist Henri Lenoir, who played a central role in North Beach bohemia. Born Silvio Velleman in England, the son of a German national, he began his career as a trap-set drummer and manager in European nightclubs from Paris to Budapest. In the mid-1920s Lenoir reinvented himself, moving first to Los Angeles and then arriving in San Francisco around the time Haberkern purchased the Black Cat. Starting off selling silk stockings to prostitutes in North Beach and the nearby Fillmore, he picked up a job as an Old Gold cigarette salesman in the mid-1930s. Lenoir became a cafe regular and a familiar face at the Montgomery Block, although he was soon fired for supplying too many gratis packs to strapped smokers.²⁷ Entrenched within the local scene, Lenoir

²⁶ Ibid; Henri Lenoir, undated press release, “A Brief Account of the Black Cat Cafe and of the Painting by Cornelius Sampson, depicting the ‘Regulars’ in the Depression Year 1938,” Henri Lenoir Pictorial Collection, BANC PIC 2004.158—C, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Shirley Staschen Triest, “A Life on the First Waves of Radical Bohemianism in San Francisco,” an oral history conducted in 1995 and 1996 by Victoria Morris Byerly, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley, 1997, p. 120.

²⁷ Henri Lenoir to Kenneth Rexroth, undated letter (c. 1964), Box 13, Folder 11, Rexroth Papers, UCLA; *Census of England and Wales, 1911*, Number of Schedule: 355; Mel Fowler, “Henri Lenoir—A Sketch,” *Comprehension*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (Winter, 1950-51): 20, photocopy in the Lenoir Pictorial Collection, and

applied his talent for self-promotion to become a kind of mobile art dealer, arranging showings for local painters at the Black Cat and an ailing cafe across the street at 639 Montgomery, the Iron Pot. Starting in 1941, Lenoir offered raffle tickets to Iron Pot customers on Thursday nights, giving away a painting by a local artist at the end of the evening—and tripling the bar’s receipts in the process. For his trouble, Lenoir was paid one dollar and had two dollars removed from his previous bar tab per day.²⁸ The Black Cat-Iron Pot hub quickly became the nucleus of North Beach bohemia.

Press accounts of the Black Cat and Iron Pot sensationally focused on the flamboyance of San Francisco’s artistic community. Reporters noted Chinese-American artist Dong Kingman’s “contemplative and exotic Oriental spirit” or Lenoir’s shirtless “rendition of Big Fat Butterfly,” performed while his accompanist on the Black Cat piano attempted to “keep the ivories from catching fire, a feat peculiar to the hirsute adornment of Henri’s poitrine.”²⁹ But the hidden history of North Beach bohemia’s more revolutionary aspects occasionally broke the surface. While openly activist gay and lesbian groups such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis had yet to organize in the 1930s, the Black Cat played a formative role in the development of queer activism. The cafe did not become a predominantly gay bar until the 1950s, following its successful state supreme court challenge to laws banning public displays of

Henri Lenoir, “The Painting by Cornelius Sampson of the Habitues of the Black Cat Cafe in 1938,” undated press release, Henri Lenoir Papers, BANC MSS 92/842 c, Vol. 1, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. At one point Lenoir took the name Henry Black and identified himself as an antique dealer from Liverpool. See “Stiles, Knute, Transcript of Interview by Ellingham,” May 30, 1982, East-West House, 733 Baker St., San Francisco, p. 14, Papers of Writer Lewis Ellingham, MSS # 126, Box 4, Folder 7, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego and “List or Manifest of Alien Passengers,” S.S. Carmania, Sailing from Liverpool, September 5, 1925, U.S. Department of Labor.

²⁸ “A Comparison of the Daily Bar Receipts before and after I handled the promotion starting July 24, ’41,” and “Agreement between Johnny Romero and Henri Lenoir, July 20, 41,” Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1.

²⁹ “Items of Peculiar Interest,” *The Montgomery Street Skylight*, December 24, 1945, “Dong Kingman,” *The New Yorker*, October 10, 1942, pp.10-11, and unidentified clipping, Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1.

homosexuality in 1951. But its bohemian atmosphere made it a welcome home for many gay and lesbian artists and writers, including the poet Elsa Gidlow. Gidlow made the Black Cat one of her few nightlife destinations, visiting its intimate confines with gay novelist Clarkson Crane and his partner Clyde Evans, an indication of the way queer culture intertwined with bohemia. The *Examiner*, a conservative Hearst publication, facetiously winked at the cafe's reputation as "ultra-Bohemian—or something" when it reported that the Black Cat shared a similar telephone number with the Chamber of Commerce, "which keeps getting calls in high-pitched falsetto voices wanting to know 'if that mad, mad Audrey has come in yet.'"³⁰

Charlie Haberkern's good-natured indifference to his customers' sexual and political preferences provided a foothold for broader social movements in the 1950s. As historian Nan Alamilla Boyd argues, public spaces for the expression of dissident views were fundamental to the development of San Francisco's alternative public sphere and queer activism.³¹ The *Examiner* was always quick to report nightspots' sexual infractions and subsequent policing, including prostitution, "B-girls" (young women hired to solicit drinks from male customers), and gay patronage. Such reporting also made for sensationalist copy and lent the rag an air of moral superiority. But even the communist-hunting Hearst paper missed the leftward currents that flowed together with sexual liberality at the Black Cat and Iron Pot, as patrons such as Gidlow and Rexroth dosed

³⁰ Elsa Gidlow, *Elsa: I Come with My Songs: The Autobiography of Elsa Gidlow* (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1986), 77-8, 224-8, 296; *San Francisco Examiner*, May 7, 1948, unpaginated clipping, Black Cat envelope, Examiner Morgue, SFPL. Clarkson was one of many American émigrés who, like Hemingway, first experienced France during World War I and returned in the 1920s to gain perspective on his native land. His more notable work, *The Western Shore*, was hailed as a trenchant critique of university life and its relation to the entrenched power of capitalist societies that C. Wright Mills would later term the "Power Elite." See the finding aid to the Clarkson Crane Papers, 1997-46, at The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

³¹ Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 61-2, 159-93.

their brand of Marxist anarchism with notions of sexual liberation for both men and women. The press's focus almost entirely on sex is explainable partly by anarchism's tendency to avoid large-scale organizational ties—making it harder to identify—and partly by the simple distraction of bohemia's colorful nonconformity.

Analysis of North Beach cafe politics necessarily relies on circumstantial evidence: social networks, offhand and artistic statements, tangential institutional ties—in other words, “guilt” by association. Some San Francisco dissidents could indeed be found on the membership rolls of Left organizations: Rexroth joined the Communist Party-affiliated John Reed Club, for example, and his first wife Andree' was an active CP member. But most others, like the poets Robert Duncan and Philip Lamantia, artists Shirley and Frank Triest, and journalist George Leite, were part of a looser affiliation of Trotskyists and anarchists who urged political change through psychological and artistic transformation, rather than programmatic Marxism.³² Even these categories are untidy, however, as many Black Cat habitués remained linked to Left institutions by thin and tangled threads: Rexroth, Leite, and the sculptors Harry Dixon and Peter Macchiarini, for example, each taught at the California Labor School, which the independently libertarian Rexroth later denounced as “the local Stalinist institute.”³³

Anarchist-libertarians in the 1930s saw the contradictions of capitalism all around them, as the Depression grew from exactly the kind of unequal distribution of wealth that

³² Kenneth Rexroth to Lawrence Lipton, January 15, 1953, Box 2, Folder 5, Lawrence Lipton Papers (Collection 819), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA; Alan Wald, “A Minority within a Minority: Cannonite Bohemians after World War II,” *Against the Current*, (July/August 2012): 25-35; Stephen Schwartz, “Cultivating The Fine Art of Printing,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 11, 1997 in SF Gate online, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SUNDAY-INTERVIEW-Cultivating-The-Fine-Art-Of-2841559.php#page-1> (accessed August 31, 2012).

³³ Shaifer, “Metal Rising,” 27-31, 65-7; Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 160; Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 122-3. The Labor School is best characterized as a “progressive” institution, despite its being closed in 1957 amid charges that it was “Communist dominated.”

Karl Marx had predicted in the nineteenth century. Drawing on a the ideas of organizations such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or “Wobblies”), they envisioned the growth of unions as the first step in ending the exploitation of workers. Autonomous voluntary labor collectives, anarchists hoped, would lay the foundation for local-production “soviets” of the kind that were gradually betrayed by the Bolshevik centralization following the Russian Revolution. This approach was matched by the Communist Party’s organizing efforts for groups such as the National Maritime Union and International Longshoremen’s Association, which was fundamental to the General Strike of 1934. While anarchists differed from the CP in rejecting the USSR’s brand of statism, both agreed that socialism offered the next step after capitalism’s inevitable collapse.

Shared desires to end poverty and confront racism and fascism led to a brief alliance among otherwise divided leftist and liberal groups in the mid-1930s known as the Popular Front. Although short-lived—largely collapsing after the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939—the Popular Front’s ethos ran through the ideas of postwar intellectuals such as C. Wright Mills, whose 1948 study, *The New Men of Power*, successfully articulated its liberatory stance:

Classic socialism shares its master purpose with classic democracy. The difference between Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx is a half century of technological change, during which industry replaced agriculture, the large-scale factory replaced the individual workshop, the dependent wage and salary worker replaced the independent proprietor. Left movements have been a series of desperate attempts to uphold the simple values of classic democracy under conditions of giant technology, monopoly capitalism, and the behemoth state—in short, under the conditions of modern life.³⁴

If the CP’s 1930s slogan, “Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism,” obscured its continued ties to the Soviet Union, neither was it entirely disingenuous. The Party’s

³⁴ C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 251-252.

support of the CIO and essential elements of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal helped establish worker rights and crucial programs such as unemployment insurance. And the CP was often a lone voice calling for the inclusion of African Americans within these new institutions that supported "Jobs, security, democracy, peace."³⁵

For Montgomery Street bohemians, the most unifying organization to arise out of this wide Left alignment was Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. Offering only the faintest ideological boundaries, the WPA nonetheless was a point of reference for the oppositional North Beach milieu and fostered bicoastal ties with New York's left-bohemians. Organized in 1935, the cultural division of the WPA offered work relief for artists, writers, and theater folk. In addition to providing income for cultural producers, administrators promoted public art and education through murals, art classes, and publications.³⁶ While CP networks played a part in the WPA, helping secure positions through the kind of favoritism present in almost any large-scale enterprise, its artists and writers were anything but doctrinaire Bolsheviks. Many were concerned about social justice and promoted the Popular Front as a way of achieving political, economic, and cultural democracy. But even among the most radical, the multiplicity of ideas and social connections belied any straightforward political allegiance.³⁷

³⁵ What left radicals failed to predict was the success of liberal reforms and the union movement in ameliorating the imbalance of power between capital and labor, along with Keynesian economics, which proved successful in lifting the Depression when forced as a necessity by the U.S. entry into World War II. Buhle, Buhle, and Georgakas, *The Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 36-8, 146-58, 593, 672-4; Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 337-9, 355-6, 363-4. See also Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) and Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), especially 4-9.

³⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 44-5, 77-81. See also A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

³⁷ Right-wing ideologues of the 1930s, such as Martin Dies—who led the Special House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1938—as well as liberal critics of the 1950s, such as Irving Howe, denounced the WPA cultural program as a Communist-infiltrated boondoggle; revisionist historians, on the

North Beach bohemia's interwoven web of relations is perhaps best illustrated, literally, by the Black Cat's most renowned mural, sometimes dubbed "The Regulars." Painted in 1938 by the WPA artist Cornelius Sampson (in exchange for his \$75 bar tab), it features seventy-eight "regulars" of the cafe sitting, drinking, talking, and cavorting in classic Black Cat style.³⁸ Although the mural's figures skew heavily toward visual artists, the list includes writers, journalists, labor organizers, and other sundry characters. Of the twenty-three "regulars" for whom reliable information is extant (aside from owners Haberkern and "Pucci"), thirteen were WPA artists. Among those included without confirmed WPA ties were Sam Fusco, liberal art critic and supporter of peace activist-artist Beniamino Bufano, and Dr. Ernest Nast, a descendent of nineteenth-century cartoonist Thomas Nast who followed his famous forbear into the art world. Two of the figures, photographer Karl Siegel and Henri Lenoir, became notable in the Beat Generation and 1960s counterculture. Still others, such as artist-philosopher Hilaire Hiler and labor organizer George Hitchcock, were part of Rexroth's anarchist circle.³⁹

Perhaps the most intriguing figure in Sampson's mural is Cecil McKiddy. Tucked

other hand, have decried its middlebrow style and lack of radicalism. In reality, elements of both were true, although the latter ultimately proves a more satisfying characterization. Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 90-1; Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 365. See also Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Lawrence Lipton Oral History, Interviewed by Donald Schippers, Oral History Department, UCLA, 1962, 770 and 830.

³⁸ Print of Cornelius Sampson mural and accompanying list of figures, Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1. The regulars were later identified and numbered in a key provided by the artist, Henri Lenoir, and four other 1930s habitués.

³⁹ The identified artists are Matt Barnes, Harry Dixon, Luke Gibney, Hilaire Hiler, Larry Holmberg, Tom Lewis, Linn Olson, Peter Macchiarini, Max and Jean McCarty, Jose Ramis, Tim Wulff, and Roger Sturtevant. An online search reveals most of their WPA ties, but see also Donald J. Hagerty, *Desert Dreams: The Art and Life of Maynard Dixon* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith Publishers, 1993), E. Breck Parkman, "Missiles of Peace," *California History* 2007, Vol. 84, Issue 3: 43-63, and Oral Histories with Theodore C. Polos, Dong Kingman, Max McCarthy, Richard Ayer, Shirley Staschen Triest, and Hebe Daum Stackpole and Jack Moxom, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The name of another unidentified mural figure, "Bae Zaleel," suggests perhaps a wry nickname: *Bezaleel* was a Biblical character, called by God to be the architect heading work on the Tabernacle. He was the artist who made the ark of the covenant.

away just to the left of center, the mustachioed McKiddy's inclusion as a Black Cat regular establishes an important connection between bohemian culture and the formal Left. A Communist labor organizer, McKiddy was active in California strikes throughout the 1930s. Specifically, he helped organize the agricultural strike on which John Steinbeck based *In Dubious Battle*. Steinbeck met McKiddy through CP organizers and secretly interviewed the young radical while he was in hiding from police in an attic in Seaside, California. McKiddy's account of the strike gave substance to the novel's characters "Mac"—based on McKiddy's mentor Sam Chambers—and "London"—modeled on McKiddy's labor-leader cousin, W.D. Hammett. This connection gave rise to the possibly apocryphal North Beach lore that Steinbeck raised a glass or two at the Black Cat.⁴⁰ But whether the author of *The Grapes of Wrath* imbibed his beer at the Black Cat or some other Bay Area dive is beside the point. His writing exhibited the same elements of metaphysics-meets-Marxism that defined North Beach's radical cafe ethos. And it is certain that Steinbeck was deeply influenced by McKiddy, a Black Cat regular and part of a tight-knit group unified by their WPA activities and political sensibilities.⁴¹

In this light, the Black Cat visibly symbolizes an elusive and ephemeral world, a heady swirl of lost conversations, seedling ideas, and spontaneous art whose only

⁴⁰ Anne Loftis, *Witnesses To The Struggle: Imaging The 1930S California Labor Movement* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1998), 57; Rick Wartzman, *Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning of John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 76, 122. Kenneth Rexroth later claimed also to have taken Steinbeck to a cotton-workers strike in Bakersfield in conjunction with his work for the Agricultural Workers Industrial Union. See Interview: "Kenneth Rexroth (1969)," in *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*, David Meltzer, ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 231. Such claims are, at this point, unconfirmed. Nan Boyd, for example, refers to Steinbeck's patronage of the Black Cat, but she relies on Michael R. Gorman, *The Empress Is a Man* as her source. Gorman's book is an impressionistic collection of North Beach oral histories and offers no contemporaneous textual support for the claim of Steinbeck's presence there.

⁴¹ Photograph of McKiddy in uniform at the Iron Pot by Henri Lenoir, undated, Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1.

vestiges lay in the memories of participants and happenstance audiences. Despite the Black Cat's bar-cafe atmosphere, it also maintained elements of pre-World War I cabaret, with Continental and cutting-edge performances. Sampson's mural featured, front and center, a guitar-wielding Haberkern and a merrily dancing Pucci, hinting at the musical entertainment served up by the German émigré and his Italian partner. And alongside Lenoir's Dadaist routines, Rexroth and the pioneering bassist Charles Mingus offered an early example of "poetry and jazz" that became associated with the Beat movement a decade later.⁴² Yet the Black Cat and Iron Pot continued to be most significant as literary and artistic centers. Rexroth often held court among young poets at both nightspots, building the influence of his literary salons on the emerging San Francisco Renaissance. One local observer noted the Black Cat's literary bent, suggesting that "the place didn't attract writers with drinking problems, but drinkers with writing problems."⁴³ Rexroth's Black Cat performances and literary salons foreshadowed a defining characteristic of North Beach: the use of nightspots as sites of artistic expression, social and political protest, and subcultural networks centered around jazz sensibilities and sexual nonconformity. For the literary left, the Black Cat was a place where they could "sit and talk forever" about art, politics, and where the twain should meet.⁴⁴

In addition to radical artists and labor organizers, waterfront workers were common patrons in the cafe, which was an easy half-mile walk from San Francisco's

⁴² Interview, "Kenneth Rexroth (1969)," in *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*, ed. David Meltzer (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 241.

⁴³ Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2003), 34. See also photo of Rexroth at the Iron Pot, by Henri Lenoir, Lenoir Papers, Vo. 1.

⁴⁴ Triest, "A Life on the First Waves of Radical Bohemianism in San Francisco," 86. That this intellectual talk leaned leftward is unmistakable. In a letter to Rexroth from his friend and publisher at New Directions Books, James Laughlin, Laughlin congratulates the poet on a recent rave review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, before jokingly asking the notoriously anti-Communist anarchist, "Or was that a crypto-Stalinist reverse English plot to ruin you in The Black Cat?" James Laughlin to Kenneth Rexroth, "Wed." (c. 1951), Box 13, Folder 7, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

famous piers. While there is no detailed evidence of the Black Cat's role in the 1934 General Strike, at least one of its regulars, Pater Macchiarini, was injured by police during the violent clashes known as Bloody Thursday. And Macchiarini's injury was reported by another Iron Pot habitué, radical journalist Mike Quin, in his account of the demonstrations, *The Big Strike*.⁴⁵ Other WPA artists from the Black Cat-Iron Pot circle who participated in the 1934 strike wave included Ralph Stackpole, Jack Moxom, and Shirley Staschen Triest, as well as Rexroth, who had worked as a National Maritime Union organizer.⁴⁶ All four were active in the local Artists and Writers Union, which organized a sympathy strike around the WPA Coit Tower mural project at the peak of North Beach's Telegraph Hill.⁴⁷ Shirley Triest, recalling Stackpole and Rexroth's union organizing (along with William Saroyan's), later placed her earliest radical experiences in relation to the Black Cat: "I remember the first meeting that I attended of the Artist and Writers Union which was in the late fall of 1933 down on the . . . main block where the Black Cat is on Montgomery Street . . . [T]here was this gathering of artists and writers

⁴⁵ It is unclear whether Macchiarini was himself a member of the CP, but he was accompanied at the waterfront protest by Communist activist Louis Goldblatt. "Louis Goldblatt: Working Class Leader in the ILWU, 1935-1977," Interview Conducted by Estolv Ethan Ward in 1978, 1979, Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, p. 100; Mike Quin, *The Big Strike: A Journalist Describes the 1934 San Francisco Strike*, from "History Matters" The U.S. Survey Course On the Web, George Mason University, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/124/>, (accessed September 1, 2012); photograph of Mike Quin in the Iron Pot by Henri Lenoir, Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1.

⁴⁶ Oral History Interview with Hebe Daum Stackpole and Jack Moxom, January 9, 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Harvey Smith, "The Monkey Block: The Art Culture of the New Deal in the San Francisco Bay Area," in FoundSF, http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Monkey_Block (accessed September 1, 2012); Triest, "A Life on the First Waves of Radical Bohemianism in San Francisco," 75-8; Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 82.

⁴⁷ Stackpole had been instrumental in bringing communist Mexican muralist Diego Rivera to the US to participate in the WPA, and the Coit Tower strike was a show of support for Rivera and other muralists whose work was under attack for containing Marxist imagery. He also helped establish a collection of studios with cafe regular Timothy Wulff at 716-720 Montgomery Street, which (along with the Montgomery Block) solidified the Black Cat a key bohemian site. Raymond L. Wilson, "The Northern Scene," from *American Scene Painting: California 1930s and 1940s*, edited by Ruth Westphal and Janet Blake Dominik, (Irvine, CA: Westphal Publishing, 1991), <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa52.htm> (accessed September 1, 2012) and "Canessa Gallery Artists Resource," <http://canessagallery.wordpress.com/history/> (accessed September 1, 2012).

and Kenneth Rexroth was very instrumental in organizing it. . . . [with] Ralph Stackpole.”⁴⁸ While establishing only an oblique connection between the union and the Black Cat, Triest’s impressionistic memories highlight the cafe’s place in the mental geography of San Francisco’s radical bohemia.

The Black Cat was fundamental to Triest’s development as an artist and activist as she developed a close relationship with Rexroth, becoming immersed in anarchist and pacifist circles of the 1930s and 1940s. Like Steinbeck’s CP-labor organizer “Mac,” Triest rolled her own Bull Durham cigarettes to save money, and found the Black Cat to be a friendly site to get a cheap meal or cadge drinks from a flush patron. But far more important was the radical talk that flourished there. “Well, there was just a tremendous amount of political discussion, and a tremendous amount of artistic discussion that could get pretty hot,” she recalled. Triest described the Black Cat, along with Izzy Gomez’s (and occasionally the drag-show nightclub Finocchio’s), as common hangouts for newspapermen and union organizers, a colorful mix of “town drunks” and Trotskyists. The notion of proletarian art, promulgated by the CP press such as the *Daily Worker*, was “just there,” she insisted, amid the “conversations at the Black Cat, or living with the people on the 1000 block of Montgomery Street.”⁴⁹

Other local activists were also drawn into Rexroth’s Montgomery Street orbit. “At that time, Rexroth had regular gatherings at his house,” recalled printer Jack Werner Stauffacher, who pressed George Leite’s anarchist journal, *Circle*, and rubbed elbows

⁴⁸ Oral history interview with Shirley Staschen Triest, April 12-April 23, 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴⁹ Triest, “A Life on the First Waves of Radical Bohemianism in San Francisco,” 80, 82, 84, 101. The Black Cat’s social and political networks also extended into the realm of the personal. Triest met her husband Frank at the cafe through Rexroth, who had previously brought Frank into the San Francisco branch of the John Reed Club during the time they shared lodgings at the Montgomery Block.

with literati such as Henry Miller. Portraying North Beach as an intricate tapestry of social, political, and transnational elements, he continued:

We would all read these magazines coming from England, anarchist and pacifist journals, and then, also, in North Beach, there were a lot of people who had gone through the Spanish Civil War—some of them Basque sheep herders . . . I met some of them, in the restaurants. . . .

There was also an anarchist group of Italians. Rexroth would take us to their dances. This, again, was like Europe coming right into our world, these were people who fled the tyranny of fascism. . . . Kenneth loved their dances, their food; he was very much a part of that connection.

It was before the Beats. Somebody said to me, “Oh, you’re a Beat, Jack.” But I’m not, I came out of the earlier period that reflected a different social consciousness.

Diego Rivera was here in the ‘30s, and there then existed a whole marvelous dynamics of different artists, writers, together. It all flowed into the postwar movement. The artists didn’t put themselves in compartments . . . where the sculptor doesn’t talk to the writer; the writers and the poets keep to themselves. Then they had a sense of a larger community, mainly in North Beach. The “Black Cat” was a very special place.

Shirley Triest later underscored this sense of shared community (tinged as it was by romanticized notions of the southern European picturesque), suggesting that North Beach “was still pretty much a village, and in some ways still is.”⁵⁰

This characterization of North Beach as a village highlights the communal and economic strategies of urban bohemians and suggests a useful paradigm in which to place its cafe society. Niteries like the Black Cat and Iron Pot paralleled the taverns and saloons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, offering repast and refreshment, communication, and camaraderie for working folks—even if their work was cultural. But unlike the traditional male-dominated saloon, bohemian sites recognized women’s demands for freedom to work and love how they saw fit. Much like utopian “intentional communities,” North Beach bohemians created a largely self-contained economy in which mutual support and lenient credit became tactics to weather the economic storm of

⁵⁰ Stephen Schwartz, “Cultivating The Fine Art of Printing,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 11, 1997; Triest, “A Life on the First Waves of Radical Bohemianism in San Francisco,” 86. For an insightful exploration of the significance of the “picturesque” for Italian assimilation in the early twentieth-century US, see Georgio Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema: Race, Landscape, and the Picturesque* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).

the Depression and to maintain ideological cohesion. Of course, the federal government's steady flow of WPA funds played a large role. Yet the WPA had a real impact in San Francisco for only four short years, from 1935 to 1939, before Martin Dies and other conservatives put an end to artist relief programs. Both before and after, North Beach nonconformists devised strategies for survival that made their anarchist principles a reality within the existing industrial capitalist framework.

For both practical and ideological reasons, the Black Cat and Iron Pot were crucial. Even during the WPA years, but more importantly before and after, these venues displayed and sold local art, much of it produced by "proletarian" artists who sought to capture the "voice of the people."⁵¹ At the most basic level, artworks like the Black Cat murals by Cornelius Sampson or Hilaire Hiler were bartered for food and drink. But Lenoir's project of blending the Iron Pot's nightlife with gallery accouterments proved fundamental to the broader development of North Beach. By displaying local art and promoting a weekly raffle in which the prize was a painting, Lenoir made the Iron Pot a singular success, bringing in large numbers of bohemian and tourist patrons. "There is something extremely alive—one might even say lusty—about these Iron Pot exhibits," wrote *Art and Architecture* magazine. Noting the cafe's proximity to the "Monkey Block," the article highlighted its inclusive role in the "very heart of San Francisco's art quarter":

There is no charge to exhibit and no attempt to "jury" the works. . . . There is not the ordered presentation of the chaste gallery—rather it is the shout and murmur of the market place, each picture fighting for recognition. . . . Prices are listed and sometimes things are sold quickly. This example might well be followed by other restaurants—to the mutual advantage of artist and restaurant. If people eat with pictures in view they are living with those pictures. Some may laugh at what they see but others may find they like

⁵¹ Triest, "A Life on the First Waves of Radical Bohemianism in San Francisco," 86. See also Oral history interview with Hebe Daum Stackpole and Jack Moxom, 1965 Jan. 9, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

living with good contemporary art.⁵²

Showings at the Iron Pot provided much needed income for dissident artists; but equally significant, it made socially-conscious art part of the lived experience of San Francisco cafe society. Art was no longer contained within the formal halls of galleries—spaces that were often intimidating to the uninitiated—but rather placed practically in the laps of anyone entering the Iron Pot for the most basic of human needs: food, drink, and conversation.

Further, exhibitions and murals were reflections of the bohemian anarchist-utopian project, marking these spaces as social institutions—in some ways analogous to the use of sacred art in holy sites—providing ideological symbolism for the initiated and cultural transmission for neophytes. This was the ideal of “democratic art,” participatory culture that realized the WPA’s loftiest goals. The Black Cat was also a significant node in a larger social network that connected dissidents and artists alike. For instance, the WPA’s Richard Ayer, who worked closely with Triest and Hiler, got his position through Rexroth, while artist John Sacco met leading New York muralist Arshile Gorky through friends at the Black Cat. Shirley Triest emphasized the cafe’s role in professional networks, stating that showing up at the cafe scene “was everything” for those seeking work in the local culture industry “because that’s where everything was happening.” Dong Kingman also noted that the Black Cat was “where all the characters hang out. If we had any discussion on art, we’d go around there and talk it over.”⁵³

Such bicoastal and transnational connections further developed in the late 1940s,

⁵² Squire Knowles, “San Francisco,” *Arts and Architecture* undated clipping (August, 1945) in Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1.

⁵³ Triest, “A Life on the First Waves of Radical Bohemianism in San Francisco,” 152; Oral history interview with Dong Kingman, 1965 Jan 12, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution ; Oral history interview with Richard Ayer, 1964 Sept. 26, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Oral history interview with John Saccaro, 1964 June 18, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

both through former WPA networks and anarchist circles that connected Rexroth with east-coast dissidents like Paul Goodman and Jackson Mac Low. While such ties were at times informal, their organic affinity changed the shape of American culture. New York WPA artist Riva Helfond provided a window onto this evolutionary process when she recalled her experiences during the Depression years:

I am sure the whole question of Abstract Expressionism all developed because of this momentum. The New York School and brave giants like Jackson Pollock, Rothko, Guston, De Kooning, and Franz Kline all came out of the Project. I can just visualize all of them sitting at an Artists' Union meeting, all huddled up, resolving our social and economic problems. But that was one of the most important factors of the whole Project: direction, and personal and emotional experiences with people I met and have loved all my life.⁵⁴

As Helfond's mention of Rothko and de Kooning suggests, émigré cultural producers, including the Surrealists poet Andre Breton and the artists Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp, were important to interwar nonconformist networks. And while it is essential not to see San Francisco-New York networks as fully-formed or unified—both the public and participants viewed the two cities as culturally distinct—the links between North Beach and Greenwich Village nonetheless deepened the pathways of a national subculture.⁵⁵

The San Francisco WPA artists helped cement these connections after World War II as Macchiarini, Lenoir, and another Black Car regular, Luke Gibney, formed a core around which socially-conscious painters and sculptors coalesced. Yet in the 1930s and

⁵⁴ Stephen Neil Greengard, Ellen Sragow, Gustave von Groschwitz, Jerry Roth, Riva Helfond, Harold Lehman, Minna Citron and Harry Gottlieb, "Ten Crucial Years: The Development of United States Government Sponsored Artists Programs 1933-1943 A Panel Discussion by Six WPA Artists," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 40-61.

⁵⁵ Mark Rothko and Willem De Kooning represented early arrivals (from Lithuania and Holland respectively) whose work, in conjunction with émigrés such as Hilaire Hiler (who developed his style in part while decorating a jazz club he owned in Paris), brought Continental sensibilities further into the American art scene and the WPA in particular. "Hilaire Hits Out" and "Why Abstract?" undated clippings, Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1.

early 1940s, even as artistic and political currents were flowing freely through North Beach, the stream between San Francisco and New York was just a trickle. Bay Area cultural producers struggled against the perception that their city was a backwater to New York's cosmopolitan center of publishing houses and galleries. Rexroth, in his typically bristly style, rejected this idea, asserting that "San Francisco stood to NYC about as Florence or Venice to Rome—that is - completely independent. It has its own writers, poets, painters, musicians, many of whom are far better known in Paris & London than in NYC." He added in a letter to *New Republic* editor Malcolm Cowley that future scholars would find "poetry in the US in the first half of the 20th century was of value in proportion to the distance of the point of production from the corner of 8th and MacDougal Sts, NYC." Shirley Triest concurred, writing to Rexroth during a 1936 trip to Gotham that "however pleasanter the general setup is here than in SF, I'm going to be at a hell of a pass to find any high-minded literary conversation."⁵⁶ These statements betrayed defensiveness about West Coast provincialism; in reality, San Francisco had yet to challenge New York for national cultural notoriety. Gotham's radical-bohemian culture was evolving along lines that paralleled the Bay Area's, but it still outshined its western counterpart. And like the Black Cat milieu, the East-Coast commingling of art and politics extended into the city's cabaret and nightclub culture.

AT THE VANGUARD!

Two Greenwich Village clubs in particular, the Village Vanguard and Cafe Society, demonstrated the confluence of bohemian and Left currents during the dark days of depression and looming war. Cafe Society became the more infamous of the pair,

⁵⁶ Kenneth Rexroth to Peirro Seghers Undated [c. 1953], Box 23, Folder 17, and Shirley Triest (unsigned) to Kenneth Rexroth, August 22, 1936, box 30, folder 12, Rexroth Papers, UCLA; Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 70.

closing due to Red Scare accusations of Communist infiltration in 1949. Yet the Vanguard actually played a more significant part in American culture, surviving up to the present day, largely because of its more circumspect politics. In fact, it was precisely its non-doctrinaire formula of socially-conscious entertainment and bohemianism that made it the most enduring prototypical Rebel Cafe.⁵⁷

Max Gordon, who later became known as the “dean of the Village operators,” opened the Village Vanguard on February 26, 1934. In the 1950s, it developed a reputation as an excellent jazz room, and through the 1970s hundreds of live albums were recorded there, making “Live at the Vanguard” a familiar phrase for jazz enthusiasts the world over.⁵⁸ From the beginning, the club was an extension of Gordon’s left-anarchist orientation, conceived as a site of public discourse. “I had dreamt of the kind of place I’d like to open in the Village,” Gordon wrote in his memoir. “You dropped in, met your friends, heard the news of the day, read the daily papers provided by the house. . . . [and] perhaps a resident poet would rise and declaim some verses he had composed for the entertainment and edification of the guests.” In addition to connotations of avant-gardism, the “Vanguard” moniker acted as a code that signaled a safe place for radical patrons, invoking the Marxist notion of a politically-conscious cadre whose leadership would spark proletarian revolt. Gordon himself coyly acknowledged these political leanings, saying that the name originated with his handyman, who “was always just coming off a job at the Federation of Teachers union hall . . . or the Communist Party headquarters—

⁵⁷ Cafe Society did soon reopen under new management, but closed again near the end of 1952. See Barney Josephson with Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Cafe Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 255 and 358-9, n. 1. The Vanguard is New York’s oldest operational nightclub.

⁵⁸ Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 24; Robert Sylvester, *Notes of a Guilty Bystander* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 61-2.

places seemingly in constant need of repairs.” Gordon initially attracted more poets than painters, so his handyman recommend a set of WPA muralists who soon adorned the club’s walls with “bold, defiant, marching faces of workers with placards.”⁵⁹ At the Vanguard indeed!

Like many in the nocturnal subculture, Gordon had artistic aspirations and was part of an interwar literary subculture that included Kenneth Rexroth; Rexroth later stated that “Max started out in life as an anarchist poet.” Both Gordon and Rexroth counted countercultural poet Maxwell Bodenheim as a close friend—Rexroth from his days in Chicago, where Bodenheim was part of the 1920s literary renaissance, and Gordon from the Village scene of the 1930s.⁶⁰ Gordon’s biography, in fact, is practically a checklist of Rebel Cafe credentials. Born in 1903 to Jewish parents in Svir, Lithuania, Gordon arrived in the US in 1908. The family settled in Providence, Rhode Island, where Gordon’s father ran a “dairy and delicatessen,” then moved to Portland, Oregon. Gordon spent his youth running the streets of Portland and selling newspapers with Mark Rothko, who was a distant relative, and eventually attended the progressive Reed College. After a sojourn in the Bay Area, Gordon moved to New York in 1926, briefly attending Columbia Law School. By his own account he found law to be a “predatory profession” and left after six weeks to begin a bohemian life in the Village.⁶¹

Gordon haunted all-night cafeterias, seeking like-minded intellectuals and artists,

⁵⁹ Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 16, 19, 22; Gordon’s widow, Lorraine, who is equally circumspect when discussing her leftist affiliations, notes that the Vanguard’s early clientele was “political” and “intellectual,” and that several of Gordon’s “friends” fought in the Spanish Civil War. See Lorraine Gordon, as told to Barry Singer, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 97.

⁶⁰ Interview, “Kenneth Rexroth (1969),” in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat*, 242; Lawrence Lipton to Kenneth Rexroth, April 9, 1954, Box 14, Folder 7, Rexroth Papers; Rexroth to Lipton, January 15, 1953, Box 2, Folder 5, Lipton Papers.

⁶¹ Whitney Balliett, *Barney, Bradley, and Max: Sixteen Portraits in Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 16-17; Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 7-8.

and found the kind of camaraderie that also distinguished North Beach. “If you were broke,” he reminisced, “the best place I knew of to be broke in was Greenwich Village. You could always bum a cigarette, a cup of coffee, even a bed for the night.” Gordon found a friendly landlord with a cheap room and had a series of short-term jobs, returning for late nights at Stewart’s Cafeteria, because “You could always find someone there who’d talk to you.” By 1930, he had found work writing ad copy and was living in the heart of the Village at 254 West 12th Street, just three blocks from the eventual site of the Vanguard.⁶²

Gordon’s first try at running a nightspot was short lived. After some half-hearted attempts to start his writing career, Gordon partnered with a friend who waited tables in neighborhood joints to open the Village Fair Coffee House in 1932. Acknowledging his naiveté, Gordon later noted that he avoided mob backing and neglected to make police payoffs; before the year was out, the Village Fair closed due to a Prohibition violation. After a brief venture managing a mob-owned venue, Gordon struck out on his own. He scraped together some funds and opened the Vanguard, first at a small location at 1 Charles Street, then moving in early 1935 to its permanent site in a former speakeasy, a triangular basement room at 178 Seventh Avenue.⁶³

The Vanguard coalesced out of an ethereal mix of European cultural romanticism and desire for bohemian authenticity. Gordon’s 1980 memoir is full of wistful passages about creating “the kind of place where Sam Johnson hung out in eighteenth-century London,” full of “Bohemian atmosphere,” where “the conversation soared and bristled

⁶² Balliett, *Barney, Bradley, and Max*, 17-18; Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 11-12; Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, District No. 31-252, Sheet 3-A.

⁶³ Gordon’s credits included a humorous story about a *schmorrer* (con man) in a Yiddish journal edited by Elliott Cohen of *Commentary*. Balliett, *Barney, Bradley, and Max*, 18-19; Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 16-18.

with wit and good feeling.” His partner had pressed him to open the Village Fair because their previous haunts—the Gypsy Tavern, the Black Cat, and the appropriately-named Sam Johnson’s coffeehouse—had sold out to “a fast, hard-drinking crowd of uptown tourists.” This left Village locals struggling for bar space and, more important, easy credit for their ever-mounting bar tabs. Gordon correctly assumed that the poets who had helped popularize these now-crowded joints, such as Bodenheim, John Rose Gildea, and Eli Siegel, would follow him to his new venue. The Vanguard promised free reign to expound their free verse, recompensed with free food and drink.⁶⁴ Although some uptown slummers came to the Vanguard to gawk at its poetic “freaks,” Gordon and his cohorts were satisfied that they had kept the integrity of their literary stomping grounds.

THE VILLAGE, THE VANGUARD, AND THE CULTURAL LEFT

Even from his vantage point in the 1980s, Gordon’s characterization of 1930s Greenwich Village rings true. Although his spouse, Lorraine, later stated that “Max wasn’t sure what he wanted in those days,” she also maintained that he was “simply an intellectual looking for a place to drop his intellect.”⁶⁵ And the Village was in transition. As described in Malcolm Cowley’s 1934 essay, “The Greenwich Village Idea,” proponents saw bohemia as an ideal rejection of capitalist alienation from work and bodily pleasures, and critics decried it for the same. Opponents declared that “the Village was the haunt of affectation; that it was inhabited by fools and fakers; that the fakers hid Moscow heresies under the disguise of cubism and free verse.” Yet, as Cowley astutely

⁶⁴ Balliett, *Barney, Bradley, and Max*, 21-2, 35; Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 14-16. His memoir is a semi-fictionalized account filled with composite characters and “dialogues” that he termed “life fiction.” Despite Gordon’s literary method it is worth noting the rather remarkable accuracy of his accounts. I checked relevant passages from both his memoir and the interview that makes up most of Balliett’s chapter on the Vanguard against independent sources and while I cannot claim this effort to be comprehensive, I found only one minor error of fact, that being a bit of fuzzy chronology. This suggests that Gordon both possessed a sharp memory and utilized the historical record to aid him.

⁶⁵ Lisa W. Foderaro, “Upstairs/Downstairs,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1987, p. SM-A-8.

pointed out, the ethos of liberty, self-expression, feminism, and psychological and sexual freedom that had made the Village controversial in the 1910s had largely been adopted by mainstream America in the 1920s. Businesses saw opportunity in rejecting the Protestant ethic of frugality and conservatism to sell cosmetics and cigarettes to liberated flappers, and to promote consumerism's immediate gratification to all.⁶⁶ Cowley suggested that many Village bohemians, nightclub owners included, busily sold their rebellion as entertainment for slummers and tourists.

Cowley's essay captured much of this phenomenon—despite its overly-simple characterization of the Protestant work-ethic and its complete erasure of racial or sexual exploitation as an element of slumming. But it betrayed a more overarching failure of analysis due to its limited historical vantage point. The middle years of the Depression, amid political realignment, the repeal of Prohibition, and ever-changing cultural styles, was not simply the end of Djuna Barnes's and Floyd Dell's Village bohemia, but the beginning of a new one: 1934 signaled, as well as any point can within a slow and gradual evolution, a generational shift, another turn in the bohemian cycle. In this respect, the Village Vanguard was both a sign of change and an active agent in the formation of a new American subculture.

Like the Black Cat, the Vanguard was a community gathering spot for artists who blended cultural expression with leftism of the anarchist variety. In addition to Bodenheim, Gildea, and Siegel, Gordon added the leftwing writer Ivan Black to his core of performers, which also included Village dancers and singers. Black acted as master of

⁶⁶ Malcolm Cowley, "The Greenwich Village Idea," in Cesar Grana and Marigay Grana, eds. *On Bohemia: The Code of the Self-Exiled* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 130-138. See also Heap, *Slumming*, 57-70, 82-97. See also Kathy Lee Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998) and Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

ceremonies, sometimes reciting his own verse, and also began his long-standing career as a publicity agent. Black's fledgling position yielded few results. Yet the early Village Vanguard's lack of press coverage only underscores Gordon's commitment to a neighborhood clientele. The club's scattered newspaper mentions included a lecture on "contemporary music" by a local academic, as well as the awarding of "the office of Poet Laureate of Greenwich Village" to a dramatic denizen "known as the 'Otto Kahn of Greenwich Village' and frequently characterized as the 'last of the Bohemians'." Harry Kemp, Eli Siegel, and Gordon himself bestowed the honors.⁶⁷

Siegel's prominence at the Vanguard further indicated the club's politics.

"Someone told me, a few days ago," wrote a Village insider in 1933, "that, to-date, Eli Siegel was the most popular man on what may be termed the left wing of the Village."

Gordon apparently eschewed formal Communist ties. Lorraine Gordon has asserted that

⁶⁷ "Music Notes," *New York Times*, November 1, 1934, p. 24; "Village Bohemian Now Its Laureate," *New York Times*, July 11, 1935, p. 23. Siegel, who gained wide attention when he garnered *The Nation's* prize for poetry in 1925, tied the Vanguard to a circle of poets including Rexroth and William Carlos Williams. Rexroth later hailed his collected volumes of poems, the first of which included a fulsome introduction by Williams, as a "reworking of certain of the more outstanding of the devices of the Whitman idiom," dubbing Siegel the "un-laureled laureate of below 23rd Street." Rexroth also hinted at his connection to the 1930s Vanguard, declaring, "Most of us who were there remember Eli Siegel as almost the sole survivor of the Golden Age of Greenwich Village. . . . [with] Harry Kemp, Maxwell Bodenheimer, John Rose Gildea, Little Joe Gould and all those wonderful girls who wrote poems about Italian truck drivers for Joe Kling's Pagan." Rexroth also declared Siegel "the only American poet who can write imitations of Japanese haiku without sounding like a lonely Middle Western housewife studying flower arrangement by mail." Holly Farrington has argued that Siegel is also linked to Rexroth and the Beats as an early performer of poetry and jazz, citing Bodenheimer's description of Siegel reciting at the Troubadour Tavern. Bodenheimer critiqued the primitivism of Siegel's rendition of the Vachel Lindsay poem, "The Congo," during which he "rolled his eyes, twitched his face, foamed at the mouth, banged on the table" and then "emitted unearthly, Paleozoic shrieks." But this description suggests that it bore as much resemblance to jazz as a school-kid in flippers and snorkel gear does to a blue whale. If anything, Siegel's performance demonstrates that Villagers still equated African-American forms with a kind of exoticism that was only marginally less demeaning than minstrelsy—a notion that would change drastically over the course of the 1930s. Kenneth Rexroth, "From the Past, Two Familiar Voices," *New York Times*, July 28, 1957, p. 178; Kenneth Rexroth, "Hail, American Development: By Eli Siegel," *New York Times* March 23, 1969, p. BR-37. See also P. B. and Judson Jerome, "What Is a Literary Hoax?" *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer, 1958), pp. 252-255; Holly Farrington, "'I Improvised behind Him...Ahead of Time': Charles Mingus, Kenneth Patchen and Jazz/Poetry Fusion Art," *Journal of American Studies*. Cambridge: Aug 2007. Vol. 41, No. 2: 365-375; Maxwell Bodenheimer, *My Life and Loves in Greenwich Village* (New York: Bridgehead Books, 1954), 199-200. See also Sascha Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1997), 16-21.

he did have a “point of view,” a term common among fellow travelers to indicate Left sympathies, but stated that “he advertised it through the club” rather than through political activism.⁶⁸ Lorraine herself was immersed in Left circles, although she insisted that “I was not in the party” because “it became too dogmatic.”⁶⁹ The Village Vanguard fostered anarchist principles of liberty, community, and anti-capitalism; Gordon, described by one employee as “a true egalitarian,” created “an atmosphere in which all were free to be themselves.”⁷⁰ The Vanguard’s physical space and decor also served as a blueprint for later Rebel Cafe venues. From the sidewalk on Seventh Avenue, patrons approached the basement club through a steep, narrow staircase—a hint of its former life as a Prohibition-era speakeasy. At the bottom, this corridor hooked sharply to the left, where audiences entered the smoky confines of the Vanguard’s triangular room, with a small, low bandstand at the narrow end and the bar behind and to their right. The tiny cocktail tables, seating two or three, could accommodate just under one-hundred patrons, with room for a few more at the wide end near the bar. The effect was precisely the sort created by European cabarets, with performers and audiences at close proximity, nearly eye level, allowing intimate interaction from the stage to listeners seated all the way to

⁶⁸ He should therefore not be confused with the CP organizer Max Gordon. It is perhaps telling that while we were discussing the subject of Max’s activism, she also alluded to his friendship with Mark Rothko and the fact that they “sold newspapers” together in Portland, which suggested to me that these were Communist publications. Max mentioned this detail in both his memoir and his 1971 interview with Balliett, his invocation of Rothko suggesting a characteristically subtle hint as to his political leanings. J. Dosbriora Irwin, “Village Portraits,” in *Greenwich Village Weekly News*, May 1933, No. 33, p. 3; Author interview with Lorraine Gordon, April 22, 2011, at the Village Vanguard, New York; Balliett, *Barney, Bradley, and Max*, 17 and Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 7.

⁶⁹ Michael Kimmelman, “Seeing Red: My Communist Childhood in Greenwich Village,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2006. p. E-34; Author interview with Lorraine Gordon, April 22, 2011. Lorraine Gordon counted as friends both Alger Hiss and the CP activist David Kimmelman, who hosted gatherings at his Village apartment that included Hiss and CP head Gus Hall. She also maintains a sense of humor about her supposedly subversive leanings. “Well, you meet a lot of people at the Vanguard,” she said during our interview, laughing. “Alger Hiss was a friend—too handsome to be a spy!”

⁷⁰ Jon Pareles, “In Music and Memories, a Tribute to Max Gordon,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1989, p. D-11.

the club's back wall. The Vanguard's murals completed an air of aesthetic rebellion, even subversion.

In addition to radicals such as the "National Maritime Union Poet" Jack Sellers, appearances by expatriates returned from Parisian sojourns, such as Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, Jr., confirmed the Vanguard's place in cosmopolitan New York—declared by Cowley in the 1930s to be an "international city." Cowley himself sometimes attended readings that included Gillespie's Dada poetry or Siegel's humorous quips and Yiddish antifascist declarations: "'A *fa-SHIST* / *Passt NISHT*' (Translation: A fascist is unbecoming, an embarrassment.)"⁷¹ Paying homage to Baudelaire and Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem about Sacco and Vanzetti, the teetotaler Siegel (who took over as MC from Ivan Black) called on the frequently drunk Bodenheim or Harry Kemp, "The King of Bohemia," to slur their way through some verses. Verbal sparring between hecklers and poets became part of the show, and crowds grew even more vocal during breaks, which featured dance tunes played on the club's radio or upright piano. Occasionally the more rowdy patrons ("Stags from New Jersey and the Bronx, dropouts from MacDougal Street, Irish kids from Hudson Street") had to be escorted out by the bouncer. But the Vanguard was primarily populated by Villagers, who paid just a dollar for a night's entertainment. Or, "if you were broke and a member of the Greenwich Village Cafeteria Society, you were in free," as a "promise not to go around with a glass in your hand,

⁷¹ Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 24-6; James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans* (New York: Wiley, 1968), 195; Cowley further solidified these ties by hiring Gould (alongside WPA writer and administrator Constance Rourke) to write book reviews or poems such as "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism" (which Gould later retracted after the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939) for the progressive *New Republic*. "Books in Brief," *The New Republic*, August 1, 1934, Vol. 79, Issue 1026: 327, September 7, 1938, Vol. 96, Issue 1240: 132, December 12, 1934, Vol. 81, Issue 1045: 144-145, and May 20, 1936, Vol. 87, Issue 1120: 52-53; Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 28. Gould also frequently published satirical short poems in *New Republic*, skewering subjects ranging from William Randolph Hearst to other Village poets. See *The New Republic*, May 13, 1936, p. 19 and October 4, 1939, p. 246. The latter also contains a letter from Rexroth denouncing the magazine's pro-war stance.

mooching drinks, was the price of admission,” Gordon recalled. “It all added up to a night at the Village Vanguard, a night of Greenwich Village high jinks, of poets, WPA writers, hustlers, insomniacs, college students from the Bronx and Brooklyn, tourists, broads on the make, musicians, moochers, all of them crowding the place every night to let off steam.”⁷²

Siegel’s and Bodenheim’s leftism tended toward the “philosophy of organism and holism in terms of Marxian dialectics”—a sort of unity-of-life-and-art-can-bring-the-bourgeoisie’s “dead soul of Puritan America back into life again” bohemian humanism. This differed from the proletarian activism of Rexroth’s North Beach circle.⁷³ Perhaps as a result, Siegel’s harangues against unconverted Vanguard patrons became increasingly moralistic and bitter as the years wore on. By 1939, Gordon decided on a change of format (and strategy), recognizing that “what ailed Eli . . . [was that he] was trying to straighten them out.” Gordon had realized the limits of a nightspot’s affective abilities: “You don’t try to straighten people out in a nightclub. You leave them alone and hope they’ll leave you alone.” Yet he continued to offer entertainment soaked in social critique, creating a public space for patrons to consider the roots of capitalism’s crisis, even as they sipped their tonic and gin. Much as he had welcomed his muralist’s portrayal of a “demonstration in Union Square,” Gordon now turned to a more orthodox expression of Popular Front culture: political cabaret.⁷⁴

. . . . AS THE TWILIGHT FADES

The Black Cat, Iron Pot, and Village Vanguard illustrate the changing role of

⁷² Ross Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams: Greenwich Village: The American Bohemia, 1910-1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 333-346; Balliett, *Barney, Bradley, and Max*, 18; Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 26-32.

⁷³ Bodenheim, *My Life and Loves*, 202, 199.

⁷⁴ Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 32, 22.

cabaret culture in the midcentury American public sphere, as they helped develop relations between the working class, front line leftists and cultural producers, bohemia, and the mainstream. They also served as key social nodes among dissidents themselves—forming some level of community among self-defined outsiders, and meshing involuntary outcasts into the urban fabric of San Francisco and New York. It would be facile to suggest that these connections and social functions could not have occurred without the bohemian nightspots of the 1930s: organizations like the WPA, John Reed Clubs, the California Labor School, TAC, and unions of all stripes were certainly more important in total. Yet the emerging Rebel Cafe provided a vital form of social lubrication, creating spaces in which the exchange of ideas became part of the lived experiences of radicals and bohemians. Moreover, by making this community public and attractive, it provided both a point of connection for the uninitiated and an identifiable cultural symbol of rebellion and sociopolitical opposition. The American cabaret eased down the sometimes difficult pill of dissent with a living, romantic, transnational aesthetic that blended European “sophistication” with artistic and personal avant-gardism. The scene was therefore set for the entrance of a new kind of nightclub onto the stage of American culture.

Chapter 3

“Hot Spots, Holidays, and Reds: Cabaret, Racial Politics, and (Culture) Wars—Hot and Cold”

In a Harlem cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
Lifts high a dress of silken gold
Oh, silver tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!
—Langston Hughes, “Jazzonia” (1925)

From basement bars, where reddish light
Obscenely sweated in the night
Where Neons called to passers-by
“Enter, drink, and dream a lie.
Escape the street’s reality
Drink gin and immortality.”
—Allen Ginsberg ,
“A Night in the Village,”
Columbia Jester-Review (May 1944)

On July 4, 1942, Irving Berlin’s presentation of *This Is the Army* opened at the Broadway Theater in New York, featuring a number of leftist producers and performers, including the Village Vanguard folksinger Burl Ives. The musical reflected the urgency of military mobilization, a deftly designed mix of propaganda and patriotic inspiration commonly found within the Cultural Front—with none other than Uncle Sam picking up the tab. “To all intents and purposes,” reported the *New York Times*, “the Army is producing the show.”¹

Meanwhile, on the famed jazz strip of 52nd Street, crowds of servicemen began to mix with local hipsters—young, male jazz fans with flamboyant zoot suits—sometimes with violent results as the alcohol flowed and the young toughs got going. The mingling of white servicemen, Black jazzmen, and women of all complexions raised thorny questions about the parameters of public propriety, as seen in reports by the city’s African-American newspaper, the *New York Amsterdam News*. “If quicksand could swallow up the infectious ratty element or sharp lines of demarcation could be drawn barring the hell-raisers from the jazz trailblazers, there would still be plenty of stink about

¹ “‘This Is the Army’ Now Incorporated,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1942, p. 18.

intermingling,” the *News* wrote. “Boy meets girl and girl meets boy is a special custom that has been happening since Adam met Eve in the Garden of Eden. On ‘Swing Lane,’ sometimes boy is black and girl is white or girl is black and boy is white. Such goings on make some folks want to fight. To them never shall the twain meet—never—never—not even on 52nd Street.” The columnist concluded by quoting a local hipster in language that evoked both wartime consciousness and jazz’s masculinist jargon (with its pig-Latin references to whites as “ofays”): “Nay, Nay Man—you didn’t have to flee with you fay. I’m strictly selective service—and your broad is solid 4-F!” This quip—poking fun at a comrade’s white paramour as a form of “playing the Dozens”—served the hipster’s macho status, with its boasts of his brigade-like capacity to conquer all comers, provided they met his “selective” criteria.² But it also hinted at the massive sociopolitical shifts that accompanied the war and its aftermath.

On the West Coast, as battles raged over control of the Pacific, Kenneth Rexroth recalled, San Francisco “woke up from a long, provincial sleep and became culturally a world capital,” attracting scores of “radical intellectuals charged with hope.” This included a generation of women who found that war wages offered independence. “The first time I ever saw any of my own books on the shelves of a private library in San Francisco was in the studio of a young WAVE officer,” Rexroth recounted. “She not only had all of mine but those of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound as well as a whole shelf of sex books . . . ‘What do you need with all these books, Peggy?’ I said,

² Abe Hill, “Swinging Trailblazers Suffer From Invasion of Hellraisers: For Whom the Bells Toll on 52nd St. Around Midnight,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 22, 1944, p. A-11; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. 30th Anniversary ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 346-9, 356-8. Levine defines the Dozens as a “speech act with clearly understood governing principles,” a form of play that created common rules of order. In the Black community this both was a kind of “substitute aggression” to express anger that had to be withheld from whites, but more importantly, a display of “verbal facility” that enriched self-discipline among verbal sparring partners, as wit was valued above physical confrontation.

pointing to Havelock Ellis, et al. ‘Well,’ she replied, ‘at the end of my freshman year at New Jersey State College for Women, I and two girl friends got an apartment in Greenwich Village for the summer and we thought they’d come in handy.’”³ Through the 1940s, the Village continued to be a beacon of personal, cultural, and political liberation. Increasingly, San Francisco nightlife acquired a similar reputation.

Shifts in nightclub culture from World War II to the early Cold War reflected the nation’s changing racial, gender, and sexual norms. The war itself brought massive transformation, ending the Depression and placing the US in an unrivaled position of affluence and global influence. The nation’s “jazz war,” ironically fought with a segregated military even as many found joy and solace in the strains of swing music, highlighted the promise and contradictions of American democracy. War production offered opportunity for African-Americans and women to transcend their previous positions in the social hierarchy. This was sometimes paired with an emerging queer culture that used bars and cafes as informal institutions, bolstering the strength and visibility of gay and lesbian communities. Coinciding with these trends, Harlem began a slow decline as the center of New York’s nightlife and jazz scene, marking a shift to Greenwich Village which entrenched jazz nightspots within left-bohemian circles. And the explosion of jazz meant that San Francisco audiences increasingly crossed the color line. While antiracism was slow to emerge as a crusade in North Beach bohemia, the growing number of jazz clubs laid a cultural foundation for the Bay Area’s later civil rights struggles. Yet these changes were quickly followed by a conservative backlash that undercut full citizenship rights and social equality, resulting in deep tensions as the 1940s came to a close.

³ Kenneth Rexroth, “The Fortunes of War,” *San Francisco*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (February 1975), 52.

The rise of political cabaret that began in the late 1930s continued through the 1940s, sometimes tied formally to the Left through the remnants of the Popular Front. Throughout, the Village Vanguard and Cafe Society were the nation's most notably progressive cabarets, courting interracial performances and audiences in a time when segregation in New York jazz clubs was common. If cabaret culture's ties to the political Left mostly flew under the radar, its challenges to racism were about as subtle as a skywriter. Jazz-folk cabaret attested to the ideological power of performance, as politically-conscious entertainers from Billie Holiday to Woody Guthrie focused the attentions of diverse audiences like the lens of a spotlight, shining an intense light on the underside of American life. Combined with the cabaret's Continental flair and transgressive atmosphere, this had a particularly acute effect on perceptions of difference, confronting the racist logic of spatial separation. Adding to the sociocultural significance of these nocturnal spaces, cabaret owners Barney Josephson and Max Gordon widely publicized their interracial policies, intensifying the wartime discourse of civil rights.

All of this and more informed the ethos of Greenwich Village and North Beach nightspots from the start of the war to the early 1950s. World War II expanded nightclub culture in New York and San Francisco as troops and war workers swelled the streets with disconnected patrons seeking entertainment. A postwar contraction followed, but wartime experiences of travel and exposure to new people and ideas shaped the content of the nightclub underground. Patrons often arrived with expectations of cosmopolitanism that cemented the Rebel Cafe's cabaret tradition. Along with this came the complex and intricate sound of bebop jazz, fitting for a postwar populace highly conscious of social and psychological transformations. Bebop modernism expressed both

a masculine existentialist individualism—much like the explosive imagery of abstract expressionist painting—and a demand for the recognition of Black equality. This ethos was fundamental to the early experiences of the Beat Generation writers, whose prose and poetry were soaked with the jargon and verve of jazz clubs.

Between 1947 and 1949, the seismic shifts in American society placed the Village Vanguard nightclub at the epicenter of a new underground cultural geography. The boom years of military mobilization came to an end, essentially killing off the last of the large swing jazz venues that survived the difficulties wartime rationing had placed on big bands. Without gas for buses or rubber for their tires, only the most renowned of the big bands, such as Duke Ellington's, could afford to travel; and restrictions on shellac, along with a Musicians Union strike, had practically ceased record production, leaving musicians without this important promotional tool. As a result, a new leaner style of nightclub, featuring small combos of four or five players, were most likely to survive the 1940s—another cornerstone in the Rebel Cafe foundation.

Recognizing the emerging Rebel Cafe's oppositional function, state and military authorities led fierce assaults against sites that they deemed subversive—particularly in the key naval hub of the Bay Area, where military policing sought to quash both racial mixing and the queer culture emerging in subterranean nightspots. The Rebel Cafe style stood in stark contrast to mainstream of American nightclubs which upheld traditional hierarchies, connecting elite social networks and maintaining the color line. But even as calls for civil rights became more focused, sometimes finding voice within the nightclub itself, postwar rivalry with the Soviet Union and the rising Red Scare forced left-leaning cabarets to become circumspect, moving underground and camouflaging their points of

view in more obscure modes of criticism and satire. Moreover, Left institutions and ideological commitment to doctrinaire communism eroded with the awareness of Stalinism's oppression, leaving the underground a rare friendly refuge and, frequently, a final redoubt for those who combined cultural endeavors with the politics of social and sexual liberation. Channeling these currents, America's underground nightclub culture embraced a liberationist ethos that mixed individual expression, Black culture, and cosmopolitanism, confronting at ground level (if unconsciously) the contradictions of global power and the nation's stated commitment to democracy and self-determination. This added up to the Rebel Cafe as a clear and attractive alternative to the mainstream. By the end of the 1940s, it was poised to redefine nightclub culture in the next decade.

REDS, BLACKS, AND BLUES: CABARET AND THE CULTURAL FRONT

As historian of the Popular Front Michael Denning has noted, the Village Vanguard was part of a genealogy of American political cabaret that directly linked German performers and composers to fellow-traveling New York nightclubs. The first in the line was Herbert Jacoby's *Le Ruban Bleu* (The Blue Ribbon). Jacoby's roots in French Popular Front politics and cabaret culture swayed New York nightlife, as he featured performers such as Marianne Oswald and Lotte Lenya (whose star had risen along with Dietrich's in *The Blue Angel*) with songs by Left composers Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler. Jacoby had served as an editor for Leon Blum's Left newspaper *Le Populaire* and as a publicity agent for the Dada-inflected Parisian cabaret, *Le Beuf sur le Toit* (The Steer on the Roof). Fleeing rising anti-Semitism after the fall of Blum's government, Jacoby opened *Le Ruban Bleu* in December 1937 and brought Lenya to New York for her first US appearance on April 7, 1938. The Popular Front's Theatre Arts

Committee (TAC) followed suit, offering a series of Cabaret Nights which featured satirical and radical songs, including Earl Robinson's ode to the IWW leader "Joe Hill," Lewis Allan's anti-lynching ballad "Strange Fruit," and Marc Blitzstein's "What's Left?" Jacoby later joined forces with Max Gordon when they became partners, opening The Blue Angel in 1943. While this uptown venture was more focused on "sophisticated" entertainment than the bohemian Vanguard, it nonetheless carried the tradition of cabaret satire for over twenty years. Gordon himself credited Jacoby as the progenitor of European cabaret in America, stating that he "had more to do than anyone else with establishing the supper club over here."⁴

Denning's study suggests that Cafe Society, opened by Barney Josephson in December 1938, was the heir apparent to the cabaret tradition of Le Ruban Bleu and TAC. Josephson explicitly stated that he modeled Cafe Society on Berlin cabaret, describing the influence of a 1931 visit there, as he took in the "socially satiric and political" revues of Friedrich Hollander—composer of *The Blue Angel*'s signature, "Falling in Love Again." It is easy to see why Denning and jazz scholar David Stowe have focused on Cafe Society as the prime example of what Irving Howe derisively called the "social-minded night club"—a symbol of the Popular Front's effort to wed Left politics with American culture that Denning has termed the "Cultural Front." Cafe Society was likely bankrolled by the Communist Party, through Barney Josephson's brother Leon, an active Communist who was the first to challenge HUAC in court, resulting in a year-long jail

⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 325-6; Theodore Strauss, "Notes on Night Clubs: The Center's Rainbow Room Gets a New Show—Also the Onyx Club," *New York Times*, March 12, 1939, p. 151; James Gavin, *Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 25-6, 29; Whitney Balliett, *Barney, Bradley, and Max: Sixteen Portraits in Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 24. See also Richard A. Reuss and JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 32-6.

term in 1947. Josephson also had close ties to Popular Front figures such as jazz producer John Hammond and musician Teddy Wilson, who was nicknamed the “Marxist Mozart.” Dedicated to social and racial justice, Josephson’s club put its point of view on display, with a satirical maitre d’ in a raggedy tuxedo and an antifascist spoof with a stuffed monkey dressed as Hitler at the front door. Descending the stairs into the smoky basement venue, patrons were greeted with the rare sight of both interracial bands and audiences, as well as murals lampooning Cafe Society’s wealthy namesakes—painted by Popular Front artists. The club’s motto directly summarized Josephson’s political stance: “The wrong place for the Right people!”⁵

Denning points to Cafe society as the site where Billie Holiday popularized “Strange Fruit,” and devotes an entire chapter to her style of “cabaret blues,” which she shared with other radical protest singers such as Josh White, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee. The drama of the club’s closing following Leon’s high-profile HUAC disaster makes Cafe Society understandably attractive copy. Moreover, the progressive stance that Josephson took in support of Black civil rights was significant, and the club did indeed play an important role in redefining the nation’s nightclub culture. However, scholarly emphasis on the club’s CP ties and its role as a “Popular Front institution” has obscured both its historical place within New York’s nightclub culture and its influence as a progenitor of the Rebel Cafe style of the postwar years. Denning was correct to argue that Howe’s “condescending” description of the “social-minded night club” as little more than liberal slumming—a “thrill over cocktails”—failed to see the significance of CP-tied

⁵ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 323-61; Barney Josephson with Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Cafe Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 8-12, 39-40, 86-7; Stowe, “Cafe Society”; Lewis Erenberg, “Greenwich Village Nightlife, 1910-1950,” in Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz, eds., *Greenwich Village* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 357-370.

efforts to racially integrate entertainment and urban spaces.⁶ Yet this effort, self-consciously and aggressively taken, was limited by its agitprop nature—because of the postwar Red Scare, but also because individual lived experiences and ideologies are not so easily manipulated.

The story of the Village Vanguard paralleled that of Cafe Society in almost every way, shy of the overt Communist ties. Yet Denning and Stowe ignore Gordon's venue almost entirely. This has resulted in scholarship that is both incomplete and misleading, suggesting that Cafe Society was unique, rather than part of a larger shift in the culture of American nightspots.⁷ In the same month Josephson's Cafe Society opened in late 1938, the Vanguard began to present a revue featuring "Skits and songs of satire and social significance." The Vanguard revue was hailed as part of a "mild renaissance" in the Village, in which "garrulous latter-day Bohemians who have seen the chestnut trees in Paris and may now die happy, and whose discussions for the most part revolve around those twin imponderables—what is art? and the pathology of sex" regained some of their "old spirit." The source of this revival was a troupe identified *as* the Village Vanguard, but who soon dubbed themselves The Revuers. The Revuers were Adolph Green, Betty Comden, Alvin Hammer, John Frank, and Judy Holliday (nee' Tuvim), who later suffered under the Red Scare blacklist. Critics lauded their skits as "sophisticated entertainment" that took "action against some of the more desperate phases of modern

⁶ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 324; Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 366.

⁷ Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 33; Reuss and Reuss, *American Folk Music*, 148-9. The historical record is unfortunately mute about the Vanguard's transition from a focus on poetry to political cabaret. Gordon's memoir (in one of its few errors of fact) states that the Popular Front group the Almanac Singers, which featured left-populist musicians Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, began to make regular appearances sometime before 1939. (The group, while indeed performing at the Vanguard in the coming years, did not form until 1941.) And while Almanac members may have performed there as solo acts prior to the 1940s, no available sources confirm this. Gordon apparently neglected advertising or seriously courting the press until 1939.

life and society,” including one that portrayed the sale of L-train scrap steel to fascist Japan and bombs falling on California marked “Made in N. Y.” The teenage troupe, the press crowed, skewered “any one from chairman Dies to Noel Coward.”⁸

Judy Holliday’s progressive bona fides ran in the family: her father, Abraham Tuvim, was a member of the city’s “Yiddish intelligentsia” and a Socialist organizer who had worked with labor leader Eugene V. Debs. (A *Life* magazine feature story on Holliday in 1951 discreetly referred to Tuvim as a “promoter and fund raiser.”) Moreover, her uncle Joseph Tuvim was a manager of the local ILGWU from 1933 to 1965 and secretary of American Labor Party in 1937, and her aunt Mary was a CP member who later worked at Gordon’s Blue Angel as a bookkeeper. Holliday’s introduction to show business was working as a switchboard operator at Orson Welles’s left-wing Mercury Theatre, a position procured through another socialist family friend. Despite later press accounts that tried to distance Holliday from these left-wing roots by suggesting that she first wandered into the Village Vanguard to escape a rainstorm, it is clear from Gordon’s version that she proposed bringing in her young troupe while visiting the club with her father and uncle, who were regulars. Given Holliday’s ties to socialist circles, including Cafe Society’s Barney Josephson (who first saw her perform at the communist Tamiment resort), the Village Vanguard was a suitable site for her satirical debut.⁹

⁸ Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 33; Theodore Strauss, “Notes on Nightclubs,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1939, p. 134 and June 18, 1939, p. 114; “News of Night Clubs: A New Bill at the Lofty Rainbow Room—The Russian Kretchma Reopens,” *New York Times*, September 17, 1939, p. 136; Gordon, *Live at the Vanguard*, 34-6. Strauss stated that the troupe had been performing at the Vanguard “for the past four months,” making their debut almost simultaneously with that of Cafe Society.

⁹ Winthrop Sargeant, “Judy Holliday,” *Life*, April 2, 1951, 107-18; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 295; John Martin, “The Dance: Pas de Deux: Some Thoughts on Patricia Bowman and Paul Haakon—Coming Events,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1939, p. X-8; Mary Shank Interview, Harry Shapiro Interview, and unidentified clipping of Joseph Tuvim obituary, Box 28,644, Folder 4, Barney Josephson Interview, Box 28,645, Folder 2, and Max Gordon Interview, Folder 1a, Lee Israel Research Notes, 8-MWEZ, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Performing Arts Library; Will Holtzman, *Judy Holliday* (New York: G.P.

The Revuers were quick to capitalize on their popularity, however, and moved to the uptown Rainbow Room in the fall of 1939, although they also participated in TAC's Midsummer Cabaret.¹⁰ Gordon, inspired by Popular Front productions such as the ILGWU's labor union musical *Pins and Needles*, which had opened in 1937 with an amateur cast of garment workers, continued to present political satire at the Vanguard. He began with a troupe called Six and Company, followed by the Bargain Basement Revue, with songs written by Popular Front figures Alfred Hayes, Elsie Peters, and Earl Robinson—the renowned songwriter of Paul Robeson's populist and antiracist "Ballad for Americans."¹¹ Only Communist Party funding could have embedded the Vanguard more deeply in the Cultural Front.

This policy of "social-minded" satire continued apace through the 1940s, including return performances by the Revuers (now promoted by Ivan Black) and "Professor" Irwin Corey, a comedian with CP roots, who started at the Vanguard in 1942. Popular Front folk singer Richard Dyer-Bennet, part of the new "city-billy" genre that included Woody Guthrie and promoted the Left notion of "people's songs," also made his Vanguard debut that year.¹² Corey's routines were similar to Zero Mostel's at Cafe Society, which satirized prominent figures with characters such as Professor Remorse

Putnam's Sons, 1982), 39, 48-55. See also Gary Carey, *Judy Holliday: An Intimate Life Story* (London: Robson Books, 1983).

¹⁰ "News of Night Clubs: Notes on One or Two Spots Locally as Well As on the Near-By Road," *New York Times*, September 10, 1939, p. X-2.

¹¹ Gordon, *Live at the Vanguard*, 33; Theodore Strauss, "Late Events in the Night Clubs: The Maestro of Swing, Mr. Goodman Himself, Enters the Waldorf—Miss Francine and the Coq Rouge," *New York Times*, October 15, 1939, p. 140; "News of the Stage: Jack Haley Changes His Mind and Decides to Cast His Lot With Wiman," *New York Times*, December 23, 1939, p. 8; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 115, 228.

¹² Louis Calta, "News of Night Clubs," *New York Times*, October 25, 1942, p. X-5; Buhle, Buhle, and Georgakas, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 344; Reuss and Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, 124; Louis Calta, "News of Night Clubs: Two Events Are Scheduled for This Week," *New York Times*, December 20, 1942, p. X-5. Irwin Corey performed in a string tie and baggy tails costume that was highly reminiscent of the Greenwich Village anarchist character in Clara Bow's *Call Her Savage*, perhaps in homage.

(modeled on the Nazi-appeasing Neville Chamberlain) and the segregationist Senator Polltax Pellagra (“they call me by my first disease”). “As to the most grievous problem facing Americuh today,” Mostel drawled, “that so-called attack on Hawaii, ah’d like to ask ya’ll, *What the hell was Hawaii doing in the Pacific anyway?*”¹³

In November 1941, just weeks before Pearl Harbor finally shocked the US into action against the Axis powers, the Vanguard featured a remarkable bill of performers that encapsulated its political slant. Sharing the stage on a single night were the Cultural Front blues legends Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter and Josh White, as well as Dyer-Bennet, Guthrie, and fellow folksinger Pete Seeger. The next day Guthrie wrote a lengthy letter to Gordon that offered critiques and praise in equal measure, detailing his thoughts about the show’s social import. “The opening . . . of your new show featuring Josh White and Leadbelly has got all that it takes to make real night club history in New York,” he wrote, “and to give the Negro people a real honest chance to bring their music and singing before the general public in such a way that will not only please your own customers, but will . . . open up a whole new field for entertainers of all colors, namely just plain common, everyday American Music.” Guthrie made a few suggestions for improving the singers’ stage placement, as well as the content of their material, declaring that the call for “Negro Rights, equal chance, equal pay, equal treatment” was important, but so was supporting the effort to “beat Hitler.” He concluded that publicizing the singers was as important as presenting them onstage: “It is a whole peoples [*sic*] affair, and stories and articles can be slanted from all sorts of angles—all very progressive, all political at heart.”¹⁴

¹³ Quoted in Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 353.

¹⁴ Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 43, 45, 49-50; “Josh

Gordon's satirical revues and Cultural Front folk-blues made him part of a circle of Gotham cabaretiers who sponsored Left performers and politics such as Cafe Society's Barney Josephson and Leo Shull, founder of Genius, Inc. The Vanguard, Cafe Society, and Genius, Inc. presented cabaret in the European tradition—the latter through theater productions reminiscent of the Left's TAC—and supported causes such as American Youth for Democracy and the fight against Jim Crow. Shull began Genius, Inc. as a showcase for Black talent, taking over the former Labor Stage on 39th Street in 1942. With roots in the American Negro Theatre, Shull featured performers such as Paul Robeson and often benefitted Left political campaigns. He planned to open nightclub at the site, with "Strange Fruit" composer Lewis Allan and Cultural Front figures such as Marc Blitzstein, Earl Robinson, and Elie Siegmeister, but lack of funding sank the project in 1943. As Josephson later asserted, echoing Gordon's intellectual-anarchist aims, New York cabaret created spaces in which "the writers, artists, cartoonists, composers, poets, left-wing intellectuals, the avant-garde were free to satirize social conditions."¹⁵

MORE THAN WINE, WOMEN, AND SONG: JAZZ AND THE VISIBILITY OF BLACK CULTURE

Cafe Society did move ahead of the Vanguard in one aspect of Popular Front progressivism: interracial jazz performances. From the start, Josephson was ideologically committed to an antiracist strategy that welcomed an interracial clientele. The Jewish son of Latvian immigrants, Josephson grew up sensitive to racism against African Americans

White Featured In New Movie Short," *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, December 13, 1941, p. 21; Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: There's a Man Going Around, Jack, Taking Names," *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, December 20, 1941, p. 14.

¹⁵ Leo Shull to Barney Josephson, May 27, 1944, Box 7, Folder 2, Black Papers, NYPL; "Group Plans Fall Program," *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, September 13, 1941, p. 20; "News of the Night Clubs," *New York Times*, February 14, 1943, p. X-2; Louis Calta, "News of the Night Clubs: Political Cabaret Planned for the Fall—Other Cafe and Hotel Items," *New York Times*, July 18, 1943, p. X-2; Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: Portrait of a Columnist Columning," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 30, 1943, p. B-8; Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: In Which Grand Central Station Moves to Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 25, 1943, p. 8-B; Sam Zolotow, "Premiere Tonight of 'Day Will Come': Brandon Peters Cast in Role of Hitler," *New York Times*, September 7, 1944, p. 20; Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 18-19.

and embraced jazz as “the only unique thing we possess culturally in this country . . . our only indigenous art form.” He began to go to Harlem nightclubs in the 1920s, visiting Small’s Paradise and the Cotton Club. But he found the latter’s plantation theme and segregationist policies to be a “travesty.” Josephson opened Cafe Society with a vow to overturn nightclub conventions of racial segregation, as well as what he saw as the corroding influence of mob ownership. “I wanted a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front,” he later recalled, “a club whose *stated advertised* policy would be just that.”¹⁶ The emphasis Josephson added to this statement is significant. Interracial “black and tan” nightclubs were nothing new; they were fundamental, in fact, to Negro Vogue slumming in the 1920s. But these venues were often illicit or at least secretive (even if the secret was an open one). What was new about Cafe Society was its propagandistic approach to breaking the color line, its open promotion of interracial policies to both Black and white patrons.

Yet, as Woody Guthrie’s juxtaposition of antifascism and antiracism in his critique of the Vanguard revealed, tensions existed within the emerging Rebel Cafe around the issue of the Black Freedom Struggle. Even as white progressives such as Guthrie and Gordon supported civil rights, they simultaneously approached their Black allies with a condescending paternalism, insisting on a color-blind universalism that often ignored Blacks’ fundamental concerns. African-American activists were happy to claim the CP as an ally in the fight for equality, even if they had no real interest in proletarian revolution and simply wanted their own fair slice of the economic pie. Black musicians welcomed performances for interracial audiences, for instance (the more the merrier), but the notion of an interracial jazz group *per se* held little allure. As with all musicians, they

¹⁶ Stowe, “Cafe Society”; Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 7, 8-9.

merely wanted to play with the best, which sometimes meant all-Black bands. Meanwhile, white progressives' promotion of universalism exploited Black performers for political gain, even as it genuinely advanced the cause of civil rights.

Cafe Society and the Village Vanguard also highlight the significance of lived experience to the growing Black Freedom Struggle. By the 1950s, when most of the formal institutions of the Left were crushed underfoot, it was precisely the use of public space—from the integrated jazz club to the Southern sit-in—that proved most successful in sparking change. The style and substance of the Village Vanguard, and similar venues that later constituted the Rebel Cafe, ultimately held far more importance for American culture than the brilliant but brief ascendancy of Cafe Society. While the evolution of America's nightclub culture followed no simple linear narrative of progress, it nonetheless suggests the ways subterranean venues offered platforms for dissident or progressive ideas, spaces for public discussion, dissident community cohesion, and venues for the development of new and often progressive cultural forms.

Cafe Society was the embodiment of these tensions. Josephson's Communist ties sometimes led him to overburden his performers with demands for controversial content or participation in political rallies. Further, his dual role as club owner and artist manager, mostly without written contracts, alternately strengthened and strained his relationships with performers. Famed jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, for example, fondly remembered Cafe Society in the 1940s as a place where she was "treated like a member of the boss's family" and enjoyed regular get-togethers with fellow musician Hazel Scott and Duke Ellington's arranger Billy Strayhorn. "The only drag in New York was the many benefit shows we were expected to do—late shows which prevented me from

running up on 52nd Street to see my favorite modernists,” she recalled. “Sometimes Johnny Gary (the valet) and I would dig a boogie character coming to take me on a benefit. We’d tear across the street to the 18th Hole and hide real quick under a table until the danger was past.”¹⁷ Billie Holiday also found Josephson’s managerial style overbearing, on one occasion breaking her engagement with the club in retaliation after he insisted on repeated encores during her performance at the Apollo Theater. And bandleader J.C. Heard was forced to take up a case with the local musicians union to be reinstated at Cafe Society after a benefit for the Harlem Needy interfered with his engagement at the club.¹⁸

Both Josephson and John Hammond, whose Spirituals to Swing concerts in 1938 and 1939 introduced overlooked Black performers to interracial audiences, actively brought African-American performers into previously segregated spaces. This effort was hampered, however, by their own sometimes condescending attachment to notions of Black authenticity, frequently rejecting Black performers’ musical and sartorial styles based on a curious mix of racial essentialism and progressivism—seeking both to welcome African Americans into the mainstream based on their “unique” racial traits, but also to erase the vestiges of minstrelsy. Josephson was well-known for guiding the content of his Black protégés’ performances, placing more importance on public perceptions than the artists’ preferences. For example, when the socially-conscious gospel group the Golden Gate Quartet began at Cafe Society in the early 1940s,

¹⁷ Mary Lou Williams, “Mary Lou Williams,” in Robert Gottlieb, ed., *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 115. Josephson later noted Williams’ statement and insisted that he often intervened on his artists’ behalf, demanding that they be paid at least a minimum fee for benefit performances. Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 150.

¹⁸ “‘Misunderstanding’ Is Blamed For Billie Holliday Walkout,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1939, p. 20; “Heard Wins His Job Back,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 4, 1947, p. 10.

Josephson objected to their purple, silk-lapelled suits, suggesting that they “looked like they belonged in a minstrel show.” He suggested new outfits to avoid reinforcing “white people’s concept of what Negroes wear.” He later extended this criticism to the group’s material, specifically a song that featured dice-playing and razor-wielding Black characters.¹⁹

In her 1956 autobiography, Billie Holiday suggested Josephson’s concern for racial justice was perhaps only skin deep, recounting the audition of pianist and singer Hazel Scott, whom Josephson initially refused to hire because “she wasn’t pretty—she was too dark.” While it seems unlikely that Josephson was so uncharacteristically callous, when viewed in a broader context Holiday’s account bears the ring of truth. Another troubling (if uncorroborated) report indicated that Cafe Society once refused to serve a Black female customer, which, if nothing else, counters Josephson’s claim that he put African-American patrons ahead of white ones, instructing his maitre d’ “to always give them the best tables.”²⁰ And whether or not Josephson *specifically* stated that he refused Scott due to her skin color, he did tend to focus on Blacks as *symbols* of social injustice, rather than recognizing their full humanity and race as a social fiction. This racial essentialism risked making his civil rights statement into an inverted form of distancing African Americans as the Other. Taken in sum, it is easy to conclude that Josephson was as concerned with the *appearance* of anti-racism as with its substance, maintaining racial

¹⁹ Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 66-8.

²⁰ Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 84; Holiday at Cafe Society: Boogie-Woogie Pianists Back In Village Ida Cox Arrival Delayed; Hazel Featured,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 18, 1939, p.20; Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, (New York: Grove Press, 1953), 71; Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 60, 72. It is also suggestive, although wholly circumstantial, that the photographs of Cafe Society in Josephson’s memoir feature almost no Black audience members. By contrast, Max and Lorraine Gordon’s memoirs, which make no particular point of the club’s interracial clientele, contain numerous photos of interracial crowds.

hierarchy and white paternalism when newsmen and their cameras were looking the other way.

David Stowe's work notes these tensions, citing Josephson's encouragement of Lena Horne to adopt a bluesy style, with which she had only a passing acquaintance during her middle-class upbringing, in order for the light-complexioned singer to be presented as "Negro talent," and Hammond's notion that Duke Ellington lacked the necessary "race-consciousness" for his Spirituals to Swing concerts, preferring instead "artists who, for the most part, have had no formal musical training." Stowe argues that this amounted to asking performers "to 'black up,' culturally if not in terms of grease paint" and that this essentialism "put authentic blackness and middle-class values at odds with one another."²¹ Yet Horne also credited Josephson with helping awake her Black consciousness, stating, "I got my first training about being socially oriented . . . at Cafe Society because I didn't remember that all before that time my ancestors had known about social orientation. . . . And I renewed a friendship with Paul Robeson. He and Barney taught me a great deal about what it is to be proud and to be black and how to work."²²

These examples only serve to show the uneven progress of the battle against racial caste in midcentury America. Josephson's scorn for minstrelsy was certainly well-intentioned, but it betrayed the reality that Cafe Society was still primarily a site for white audiences to display their enlightened views. Black entertainers performing for Black

²¹ Max Gordon was likely no less guilty of such racial objectification, although his less outspoken stance makes its evidence more sketchy; certainly he was vulnerable to critiques that suggested he used Black performers to benefit himself financially—a criticism that would be leveled by race-conscious supporters of Black Power in the 1960s who saw this as exploitation that drained resources from African-American communities in order to buoy those of white ethnics. Stowe, "Cafe Society," 1392-3; Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²² Lena Horne, in honor of Barney Josephson at the National Urban League Guild's Beaux Arts Ball, New York, February 26, 1982, quoted in Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 131.

audiences would have had little compunction about the use of gaudy costumes and vaudeville low comedy because within that community, such minstrel-show trappings had already been re-coded and re-appropriated by African Americans themselves. It was only in front of white or interracial audiences that these performative elements carried the taint of racism. Unless one is to apply the accusation of “false consciousness” to Black audiences who embraced these styles as late as 1949, as seen in African-American films such as Moms Mabley’s *Boarding House Blues*, then scholars have to accept the complexity of race and culture as inextricably tangled threads.

It would be overly simple to dismiss Cafe Society’s public stand for racial equality as ineffective, however, even if it was partly a product of partisanship and white paternalism. The club’s open invitations to interracial bands and audiences—augmented by the presence of African American luminaries such as Paul Robeson, Walter White, Langston Hughes, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.—had a wide influence, elevating socially-conscious nightspots within the public sphere.²³ Moreover, it is important to distinguish between Josephson’s private and public positions. As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has argued, racism is not simply an individual pathology, or even a historical constant, but a continually evolving part of the social structure, a manifestation of power relations from culture to economics.²⁴ Josephson, along with his publicist, former Vanguard MC Ivan Black, recognized that the lack of positive publicity for African Americans in the white press reinforced a structural discourse of Black invisibility and racial hierarchy. To provide a platform for interracial performances, in

²³ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 339-40.

²⁴ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Jun., 1997): pp. 465-480.

front of mixed audiences and widely publicized, undermined the dominant framework.

Josephson advertised in the African-American press, courting journalists from New York's *Amsterdam News* and the *Chicago Defender*. More important, he provided a working model of an interracial nightclub, a sharp contrast to even the famed jazz clubs of 52nd street where Black performers were prohibited from interacting with white patrons and Black patrons were discouraged from attending altogether. "The policy [on 52nd Street] was that they would serve a black person at the bar," recalled one Cafe Society supporter. "But when he finished his drink they would break the glass to let him know he wasn't welcome." In contrast, when customers in Cafe Society "objected to the integration of the club" Josephson had them ejected by the manager, who "was very effective in escorting them out." The Black press was quick to praise the club's racially integrated band and policies, stating that it was the only joint outside of Harlem where "a colored couple is as welcome as anybody else."²⁵

The nightclub's ability to affect political consciousness was powerfully illustrated by Cafe Society's signature contribution to American culture: Billie Holliday's popularization of the anti-lynching ballad, "Strange Fruit." Moreover, the song's evolution helps demonstrate that while African Americans may have formed alliances with white progressives, they ultimately determined the direction of the Black Freedom Struggle through the power of self-expression informed by lived experience. Although the song was written by a white schoolteacher, Lewis Allan, Holiday's autobiographical

²⁵ Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 8-9, 12-17; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 90-91; "Cafe Society Swings High," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 7, 1939, p. 16; "Billie Holiday Clicks In Village," *The Chicago Defender*, January 14, 1939, p. 18; "Mixed Band at 'Cafe Society': Joe Sullivan Organizes 1st Name Negro-White Orchestra," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 25, 1939, p. 1; Major Robinson, "Mixed Band At Cafe Society Proves A Hit: Patrons Pleased With Set-Up And Musicians Like It," *The Chicago Defender*, December 30, 1939, p. 17.

account of reinterpreting “Strange Fruit” insisted on the primacy of her own experiences. On first hearing its graphic lyrics, “Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black body swinging in the Southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees,” Holiday declared that she “dug it right off.” For her, the song was no abstract indictment of Jim Crow; it evoked the injustice of her own musician father’s death in Texas, where he was denied medical care in white hospitals while on tour. After “rehearsing it patiently” for three weeks, Holiday debuted the song at Cafe Society in 1939. “I worked like the devil on it,” she said, “because I was never sure . . . that I could get across to a plush night-club audience the things that it meant to me.”

The first time I sang it I thought it was a mistake. . . . There wasn’t even a patter of applause when I finished. Then a lone person began to clap nervously. Then suddenly everyone was clapping. . . . It still depresses me every time I sing it, though. It reminds me of how Pop died. But I have to keep singing it . . . because twenty years after Pop died the things that killed him are still happening in the South.²⁶

Holiday’s first concern was to present material that spoke to the African-American experience. Only when the song had been re-“worked” to her satisfaction could it properly serve the purpose of raising Euro-American consciousness about racial violence.

In this light, Holiday’s version of “Strange Fruit” was part of a cultural genealogy that spanned back to Ida B. Wells’ turn of the century anti-lynching journalism and W.E.B. Du Bois’ African-American folk studies. The song especially resonated with the public during the war as Black leaders promoted the “Double V” campaign, dedicated to combating racism at home and abroad. “When she recorded it, it was more than revolutionary,” the jazz drummer Max Roach proclaimed. “She made a statement that we all felt as black folks. No one was speaking out. She became one of the fighters, this beautiful lady who could sing and make you feel things. She became a voice of black

²⁶ Billie Holiday, with William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1956, 1984), 84.

people and they loved this woman.” Further, Holiday’s embrace of “Strange Fruit” as “my personal protest” demonstrated the social function of the artist as a source of meaning that balanced the formal demands represented by Josephson’s Popular Front leftism. And Holiday directly inspired a small circle of Black female performers, including Hazel Scott and Lena Horne, who followed in her path in the postwar years. Scott credited Holiday with getting her a long-running gig at Cafe Society and Scott’s outspoken independence owed at least some debt to “Strange Fruit’s” most inspiring chanteuse.²⁷

Throughout the 1940s, Josephson and Ivan Black promoted their artists in both the African-American and white press, tying the club to Left political causes and in the Black community. Scott and Holiday performed at rallies for African-American New York City councilman and civil rights advocate Benjamin Davis, whose election was one of the few Communist Party victories in the 1940s.²⁸ Other causes included the Vulcan Society (an African-American firefighters association), the CP-associated American Youth for Democracy, United China Relief, and Soviet war relief, as well as continual benefits for Harlem’s needy through the late 1940s. The *Amsterdam News* frequently

²⁷ Nikhil Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Roach quoted in Margolick, “Strange Fruit”; Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 84; “Hazel Scott Succeeds Billie Holiday at Cafe Society,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 18, 1939, p. 20; Karen Chilton, *Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist from Cafe Society to Hollywood to HUAC* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 54, 65, 73-85. As Farah Griffin has argued, Holiday’s ghostwritten autobiography was a “performative” extension of her public persona, a subjective expression by a person who struggled her way up from the bottom rung of the social ladder that capitalized on audience desires and expectations, even as deep feelings of hurt fueled its slow-burning intensity. Just as the young Eleanora Fagan renamed herself Billie Holiday to claim her father Clarence Holiday’s musical heritage, her autobiography’s “silences, gaps, and allusions” became a form of “truth telling,” mirroring her enigmatic singing style. Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 112-13, 133.

²⁸ “Josephson Wins Gamble on Racial Equality Experiment,” *Afro-American*, November 16, 1946, p. 8; Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 260; Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free*, 133; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 42-7; Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Praeger, 1957; Rev. ed. 1962), 419.

praised Josephson as a “crusader for racial equality.”²⁹ Holiday herself, having performed in venues around the country which she found stifling and degrading, recognized that the Cafe Society stage was “what I’d been waiting for.”³⁰ Only in a club like Cafe Society, consciously cultivated as a safe space for controversial performances, could her version of “Strange Fruit” have fully taken root.

In addition to material support, Josephson’s publicity efforts bolstered the prestige and celebrity of Black culture in white society.³¹ In a reversal of the slumming fad, association with Cafe Society offered African-American celebrities a public air of sophistication as they rubbed elbows with the upper-crust of white society, including

²⁹ Lindsay H. White (Vulcan Society) to Barney Josephson, April 17, 1945 and Leo Shull to Barney Josephson, May 27, 1944, Box 7, Folder 2, John A. Cashman (United China Relief) to Ivan Black, August 4, 1941, Box 7, Folder 1, Ivan Black Papers, JPB 06-20, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Billy Rowe, “Basie, Cafe Society Revue to Play at Carnegie: Gather Watches As Presents For Russian Officers,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 6, 1943, p. 20; “Hope Day Nursery Cocktail Party At Cafe Society Will Be Super!” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 1, 1947, p. 6. See also “Plans About Complete For Aid Society Show,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 20, 1939, p. 17 and “Night Club Is Weapon To Fight Discrimination,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 16, 1946, p. 13; Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 424.

³⁰ Holiday was once even forced to perform in blackface when a Detroit nightclub owner feared that she would be mistaken as white under the stage lights, giving the appearance of an integrated band. Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 111; Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 83, 61.

³¹ Ivan Black’s press releases are also revealing, as he commended the club’s interracial focus with references to its family-friendliness and refined entertainment alongside descriptions of its “satirical murals.” Cafe Society bandleader Joe Sullivan, Black crowed, “was first taught to play the piano by a nun” and remained “a true Christian, utterly free of race or religious prejudice, and as a result is not only willing to be the white leader of a Negro band but proud to be.” While this statement evaded the question of whether he would have been equally willing to play under a Black bandleader, Sullivan’s stance was nonetheless groundbreaking in an era that practically demanded segregated performances. Black was careful to always include leftist publications in his press lists, sending releases and complimentary tickets to *PM*, *People’s World*, and the *Daily Worker*, among others. Ivan Black to Frank Farrell (*New York World-Telegram*), October 4, 1940 and Black to Charles Payne, July 4, 1940, Box 7, Folder 1, Black Papers, NYPL. See also Ivan Black, “Man Bites Dog—Cafe Society Downtown to Have Complete New Show on October 1st Including Sister Tharpe and Art Tatum,” undated (1940), Box 7, Folder 3, Ivan Black, “Children’s Night at Cafe Society Uptown,” May 23, 1942, Box 7, Folder 5, Black Papers, NYPL. Ivan Black’s press releases are also revealing, as he commended the club’s interracial focus with references to its family-friendliness and refined entertainment alongside descriptions of its “satirical murals.” Cafe Society bandleader Joe Sullivan, Black crowed, “was first taught to play the piano by a nun” and remained “a true Christian, utterly free of race or religious prejudice, and as a result is not only willing to be the white leader of a Negro band but proud to be.” While this statement evaded the question of whether he would have been equally willing to play under a Black bandleader, Sullivan’s stance was nonetheless groundbreaking in an era that practically demanded segregated performances. Black was careful to always include leftist publications in his press lists, sending releases and complimentary tickets to *PM*, *People’s World*, and the *Daily Worker*, among others.

Eleanor Roosevelt and her son Franklin, Jr.³² Perhaps the most interesting example of this progressive nightclub status-building was the Hazel Scott's wedding to Adam Clayton Powell. Josephson was one of only ten people present for the service, placing him at the center of the politician's inner circle. The wedding's reception was a highly publicized event, held at Cafe Society's uptown location, which had opened in 1940. The event drew three-thousand attendees, only two-thirds of whom were invited, and was featured in a *Life* magazine photo spread. The nightclub reception cast an additional aura of glamour around Powell—and caused some controversy among his more conservative constituents. Portraying Powell as a “Rabble-rousing champion of Negro rights” with “Radical political friends” such as Eugene Connolly of the American Labor Party, *Life* nonetheless ran photos of the reception's interracial guests, helping expand the discourse of racial equality and democracy that Josephson and Ivan Black promoted.³³

Ironically, considering the Village Vanguard's later status as the nation's most revered jazz club, Gordon was slow to feature jazz performances, sticking instead to satirical revues through most of 1939. Yet Cafe Society's lead in adopting a racially-progressive stance was slim. That fall, he began to include African-American calypso performers, making the Vanguard one of the first nightclubs in the country to do so. And while calypso's popularity certainly relied on elements of exoticism—reviews in the white press tended toward cringe-inducing descriptions of “voodoo stuff” in which gaudily-clad Black performers “jerked at the knees” with eyes closed as their heads

³² Leonard Lyons, “The New Yorker,” *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1940, p. 16; “Mrs. Roosevelt Picks Golden Gate Singers,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 25, 1941, p. 20; Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 137. See also Dixie Tighe's column in the *New York World-Telegram*, December 14, 1940.

³³ Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 106, 188-92; Carl Dunbar Laurence, “Adam, Hazel Honeymoon On L. I.: Tire Blowout Delays Powell Nuptials,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 4, 1945, p. A-1; Earl Conrad, “Powell's Wedding To Hazel Scott Turns Into Political Demonstration,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 11, 1945, p. 11; *Life*, August 13, 1945, p. 31 and September 3, 1945, p. 13.

“rolled the rhythm”—the Black press also held high praise for the Vanguard’s new acts.³⁴

By 1940, the Vanguard featured jazz combos regularly. Equally important, the club began to partner with the Black community, hosting presentations honoring African-American musicians such as Duke Ellington’s famed drummer Zutty Singleton and supporting benefit concerts. The *Amsterdam News* singled out the Vanguard for its participation in one such event, alongside Small’s Paradise and Cafe Society, congratulating these venues for organizing talent and funds to “help to make some deserving folks happy” during that year’s Christmas season.³⁵

The African-American press heaped almost as much praise on the Vanguard’s interracial policies as they had on Josephson’s more vocal efforts. Through the 1940s and early 1950s, Gordon helped organize benefits for civil rights causes and organizations such as the NAACP.³⁶ Gordon’s Village Vanguard thus quickly followed in Cafe Society’s footsteps, becoming part of an interracial public sphere in which progressive places interacted with media in both Black and white communities. Both clubs featured African-American jazz alongside Popular Front blues and folk music, marking a new formula in American nightclub culture, as well as the start of a new era in New York’s bohemia. Jazz became integrated into the American cabaret, taking its place next to

³⁴ John Martin, “The Dance: A Document: Autobiography of Ruth St. Denis as a Source Book—Coming Events,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1939, p. 136; Meyer Berger, “About New York,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1940, p. 10; Dan Burley, “Back Door Stuff: Which Back Door Digs The World,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 7, 1940, p. 20.

³⁵ “Honor Zutty, Drum King,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 28, 1940, p. 17; St. Clair Bourne, “Top-Ranking Stars Slated for Program: Choicest Tickets Now On Sale For Best Show,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 7, 1940, p. 1.

³⁶ “Cabaret Fete For Art Sake: E. Simms Campbell There With Other Socialites,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 22, 1940, p. 14; Top Ranking Stars Slated for Program: Choicest Tickets Now On Sale For Best Show Bourne, St Clair,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 7, 1940, p. 1; “Pittsburgh Honors Maxine: She Flies Home For Frog Week Party,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 17, 1946, p. 10; Camera Highlights: Prizes in Camera Contest!” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 15, 1949, p. 5; “Photo Standalone 5—No Title,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 21, 1949, p. 5; Cafe Photography,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1950, p. 102.

protest singers and political satirists who consciously challenged the status quo. As a result, public expectations about nightclub culture began to change, laying the foundation for a postwar subterranean scene in which interracial performances and audiences would be the norm rather than the exception.

Of course, this process began with the musicians themselves, as “modernists” such as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, pianists Thelonious Monk and Mary Lou Williams, and saxophonist Charlie Parker developed the style known as bebop. Beboppers rejected big-band swing in favor of small combos, complex harmonies and rhythms, dissonance, and virtuosic solos played at breakneck speed. Bebop developed slowly between 1939 and 1945, mostly through nightclub jam sessions. The style is often associated with the nightclubs along New York’s famed 52nd Street. But the most important site in the development of the new style was Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem, where Monk and Gillespie drew the attention of likeminded players.

While 52nd Street clubs like the Onyx, the Three Deuces, the Famous Door, the Downbeat, and the Spotlight did indeed enjoy notoriety (and sometimes infamy) in the 1940s, their prominence in Gotham’s jazz scene was relatively brief, lasting only from 1938 until a steep decline a decade later.³⁷ These sometimes mob-owned venues were certainly significant, employing innovative jazz greats, introducing bebop to white audiences, and often offering taboo-busting interracial activity. But nightclubs in the cabaret tradition could boast of a much longer history—and a greater impact on American culture. Clubs like Minton’s and the Village Vanguard were more than mere sites of entertainment. They were jazz institutions that nurtured creative communities

³⁷ Patrick Burke, *Come in and Hear the Truth: Jazz and Race on 52nd Street* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

whose innovations surpassed simple changes in musical style.

Besides providing locations for jam sessions, nightclubs made progressive musical statements public, blurring the line between folk and commercial arts. The author Ralph Ellison later described Minton's in a 1959 *Esquire* article as a descendent of the Cabaret Voltaire, stating that "it is associated with those continental cafes in which great changes, political and artistic, have been plotted." This sentiment was echoed by Sidney Finkelstein in his seminal 1948 study, *Jazz: A People's Music*, which similarly placed jazz within the Dadaist tradition.³⁸ But Finkelstein also challenged the primitivism that weighted African-American music with notions of "automatic" expression and racial essentialism, establishing a line of thought that continued through radical scholars like Eric Hobsbawm and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones).³⁹ All three placed jazz in a social context of protest against racism, often with ties to the Left and New Deal liberalism, as a form of folk music that had a complex relationship with the public through commercialization, yet resisted cooption by remaining rooted in Black cultural traditions.

The nightclub's function as a community institution further highlights the artificial distinction often made between folk and commercial art. Musicians described clubs as "schools"—and jam sessions themselves as intellectual exercises. Ralph

³⁸ Ralph Ellison, "Minton's," in Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 550; Sidney Finkelstein, *Jazz: A People's Music* (New York: International Publishers, 1948, 1988), 4.

³⁹ Ibid, 5-6, 139, 145-53; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 229-37 and *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 242, 263; LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1963), 82-6, 145. Baraka further argued that the arrival of modern jazz rejected the pretensions found at Cafe Society and signaled a "separation" between Black folk culture and assimilationism. Bebop claimed the blues tradition of authentic blackness, but also had to contend with its role as "art" due to white acceptance of jazz. Bebop, Baraka argued, therefore represented a new "stance" and "attitude" and served the dual social function of both Black self-determination and white rebellion. More recently, Ingrid Monson has critiqued this view, noting the gender and racial assumptions in a notion of Black authenticity that was coded as male and anti-bourgeois. Ibid, 176-91, 193, 200-2; Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3, Music Anthropologies and Music Histories (Autumn, 1995): 396-422.

Ellison's *Esquire* article cited Minton's aura of jazz authenticity, which drew European fans in pilgrimage in the 1950s and 1960s, much like Americans flocked to the Cafe Floré in Paris. But Ellison suggested that in the 1940s, this model for later Rebel Cafes in the Village served a more direct purpose. It was an "academy" where individualism, democracy, folklore, Black consciousness, rebellion, community, interracial exchange, and musical meritocracy were the curriculum. Ellison asserted that it was "more meaningful to speak, not of course of study, of grades and degrees, but more of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation ceremonies, of rebirth." Through the trials of the jam session, Minton's was where young musicians, Black and white, learned from "the acknowledged masters." An *Esquire* piece in 1947 likened it to a "bebop salon," where musicians traded licks in the grand tradition of European intellectuals trading quips.⁴⁰

Jazzmen themselves tended to be more straightforward. Drummer Kenny Clarke, responding to an interviewer's question about the relationship between Black social consciousness and bebop, suggested the music was about "teaching." "There was a message in our music," he said. "Whatever you go into, go into it *intelligently*." Saxophonist Illinois Jacquet noted that the "bands were your college," and that the older players' methods for teaching the complex aspects of modern jazz grew in part from their own university experiences. He also cited Minton's as a place to find a unique voice within a collective effort, with solos as individual statements made with the support of the group.⁴¹ Moreover, women instrumentalists, who were at a disadvantage in the masculine world of jazz, often remarked on the role of nightclubs like Minton's and the

⁴⁰ Ellison, "Minton's," in Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 549-54; Gilbert S. McKean, "The Diz and the Bebop," *Esquire*, October 1947, in Ralph Gleason, ed., *Jam Session: An Anthology of Jazz* (London: The Jazz Book Club, 1961), 122.

⁴¹ Dizzy Gillespie, with Al Fraser, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979), 142, 144-8.

Vanguard within their community. Guitarist Mary Osborne went to jam sessions at the Vanguard and 52nd Street in the 1940s, and later suggested they were the places she felt most “at home.” Similarly, Mary Lou Williams described the Minton’s circle as being “like one big family.”⁴² While bebop continued to be predominantly the domain of Black men, nightclubs nonetheless were social spaces that cracked preconceptions of race and gender, providing small openings for changing social norms.

While important jam sessions did take place on 52nd Street, most midtown clubs avoided such experimentation, insisting on more polished performances. Minton’s and the Greenwich Village clubs were therefore more significant within this medley of cultural production, protest, and community. As Harlem diminished as a draw for white patrons during World War II, the center of the jazz scene migrated southward down Manhattan. Lucien Carr, an early member of the Beat Generation, remembered the war as a turning point for young jazz fans who frequented Harlem clubs in the 1940s. Carr suggested that changing attitudes in African-American clubs were sparked by the influx of white servicemen and southern war workers, both Black and white, who “brought their little prejudices with them.” Whereas previously the “Harlem clubs were delighted” to welcome white patrons, their warmth now cooled, leading white jazz fans such as the Beats to revel at 52nd Street clubs like the Three Deuces.⁴³ As these Midtown clubs went out of business in the late 1940s, amid racial violence, commercial real estate development, and oppressive policing, Village clubs picked up the slack.

⁴² Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 262; Williams, “Mary Lou Williams,” in Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 112-13.

⁴³ “Interview: Lucien Carr,” March 9, 1986, p. 16, Box 23, Folder 6, Barry Miles Papers, Bib ID: 4078472, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts. See also Holmes, *Go*, 136-41.

Few jazz scholars have examined the New York scene's shift from 52nd Street to the Village, instead offering formalist narratives that follow artists and their stylistic changes, largely taking the venues and their social significance for granted. The rise of Cafe Society and the Village Vanguard meant more than just employment opportunities for Gotham musicians. Their jam sessions brought modern jazz to the Village, but also furthered bebop's political valence. Cafe Society's politics were more open, but its jam sessions were more formal and less musically influential than those at the Vanguard, featuring traditional "hot jazz" players, like Mugsy Spanier, Woody Herman, Jimmy Dorsey, and members Fletcher Henderson's Savoy band.⁴⁴ The Vanguard sessions were looser. Hosted by Cultural Front music critic Harry Lim starting in 1940, they invited musicians simply to drop by on Sunday afternoons. "Every cat that's a cat was there," declared the *Amsterdam News*, as the Vanguard became part of the patchwork from which experimental jazzmen like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Christian pieced together a living. "There were sessions going on all night in the Village and at Kelley's Stables [on 52nd Street]," Gillespie remembered, "and you could always pick up a little change from them."⁴⁵ These sessions were also part of beboppers' flirtations with the Left. Gillespie performed at the communist Camp Unity, where he actually joined the Party. Charlie Parker, like most jazz musicians, shied away from formal politics, but reportedly attended CP-sponsored cocktail parties with comedian Richard "Lord" Buckley, who later became a Rebel Cafe stalwart. Parker, well-known among musicians as a socially-conscious

⁴⁴ See press releases in "Jam Sessions," Box 6, Folder 16, Black Papers, NYPL.

⁴⁵ John Ferris, "Javanese Jitterbug: Harry Lim," *The Hartford Courant*, September 28, 1941, p. D-1; Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: There's a Man Going Around, Jack, Taking Names," *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, December 20, 1941, p. 14; Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: And a Very Merry Christmas To You All! Like the Cheese," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 28, 1940, p. 16; Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 213. See also Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 338.

intellectual, likely enjoyed the discussions at such soirees, even if he did eschew formal membership.⁴⁶

Even Gillespie's CP ties were admittedly loose. Most beboppers promoted the Black Freedom Struggle through cultural, rather than political, channels, backing their aggressive musical style with a public image that rebuked shuffling racial stereotypes with cosmopolitan flair. Likewise, Max Gordon kept the Vanguard's politics out of the spotlight, letting its jazz-cabaret style do the proverbial talking. But along with the interracial jam sessions promoted by Genius, Inc., Cafe Society and the Vanguard blended the Cultural Front with bebop's demand for Black visibility and claims on cultural legitimacy. This was emblematic of a new jazz discourse, as intellectuals embraced it and bebop innovators established it within the American avant-garde. Ironically, Gordon himself was slow to appreciate bebop musically, but he knew his audiences. As modern jazz grew popular with left-liberals in the mid-1940s, he presented it more often. Village Vanguard performers offered courses at New York's leftist New School, and in 1945 the club hosted a panel on the relation between jazz and abstract expressionist painting—an indication of Gordon's continued penchant for intellectual public discussion.⁴⁷

Record producer and journalist Orin Keepnews, who spiced his widely-read criticism in the 1950s and 1960s with political commentary, remembered his early experiences at the Vanguard in the 1940s as foundational. He began his career writing reviews for the Columbia University newspaper, which got him free drinks at the club,

⁴⁶ Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: And a Very Merry Christmas To You All! Like the Cheese, All Rat—Like the Road, All Rut," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 28, 1940, p. 16; Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 80, 402; Stanley Crouch, "Birdland," in Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 1026.

⁴⁷ "Music Notes," *New York Times*, May 6, 1942, p. 23; *Down Beat* 12 (July 15, 1945): 7.

despite the fact that Gordon was “surely never so naive as to believe my reviews in that college paper were really helpful to his performers,” who spanned from singers like Pearl Bailey and Carol Channing to the “authentically tough” Leadbelly. “But Gordon was always a gentleman,” Keepnews continued, “it pleased him to befriend a teen-age journalist, which helped to make a big impression on several young women, and probably means that Max has to take a share of the blame for my life-long involvement in hanging out at bars and paying attention to jazz.”⁴⁸

In September 1948, Minton’s pioneer Thelonious Monk began a two-week run at the Vanguard, which was a key moment in the club’s history. But when Monk stepped onto the stage and announced, “Now, human beings, I’m going to play,” he also unwittingly signaled bebop’s fully-established presence in Greenwich Village.⁴⁹ Monk’s weird, angular and dissonant piano style had been at the center of the modern movement, and his sartorial style defined hipness, with his goatee, stylish dark sunglasses (he was a night person), and beret (an anti-fascist symbol of solidarity with the French Resistance and Surrealists). Monk also had a reputation for erratic behavior. He often showed up late for performances, sometimes drunk or high, and just months before his Vanguard stint he was arrested for marijuana possession. The “High Priest of Bop” therefore carried an air

⁴⁸ Orrin Keepnews, *The View from Within: Jazz Writings, 1948-1987* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

⁴⁹ There is some debate about the exact date of Monk’s Village Vanguard debut. Lorraine Gordon reports the date as September 14, 1948 in her memoir, but Robin D.G. Kelley’s exhaustively researched biography of Monk asserts October 14. Kelley supports this conclusion with Monk’s sentence of thirty days in jail for the drug arrest, handed down on August 31, and musician Billy Taylor’s recollection that he shared the bill with Monk sometime after his own booking which began on October 1. However, Kelley does not document Monk’s release date and the *Chicago Defender* reported on September 25 that Monk had appeared on the Vanguard’s “kickoff fall show,” implying a date sometime prior. Further, there is a lack of documentation of Monk’s marriage, yet Kelley suggests that it was in September 1948, which would also be precluded if the full thirty-day sentence had been carried out. Therefore it seems likely that Monk somehow secured an early release and that Gordon’s date of September 14 is correct. See Lorraine Gordon, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, 96; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 144, 493 n.10; and Lillian Scott, “Along Celebrity Row: Our Own Bird Book,” *The Chicago Defender*, September 25, 1948, p. 16.

of mysterious anti-commercialism that made the neon-lit clubs of 52nd Street leery, especially given the area's increased policing, but it made him a perfect fit for the Vanguard's left-bohemian atmosphere. Bebop's anti-commercialism was always more myth than reality, of course. Gillespie and Charlie Parker openly sought mass audiences, each appearing in Hollywood films and making records with big-band or string arrangements. Yet they always maintained the core bebop sound, insisting that the mainstream would have to meet them more than halfway. Monk also sought commercial success, but conceded even less to popular tastes, thereby earning a smaller but dedicated following of nonconformists.⁵⁰

Monk's key ally was Lorraine Lion, who ardently promoted him for the Blue Note label. Lion booked him at Gordon's club for both practical and ideological reasons. Monk's arrest had resulted in the suspension of his New York cabaret card, the license required by the Police Department for live performances in any venue serving liquor (and a controversial source of corruption).⁵¹ The Vanguard's low profile allowed Gordon to bypass police oversight, providing Monk with much-needed income. Equally important, Lion recognized that the Vanguard's bohemian tastes could give Monk's eccentric style a firm footing, an insight that proved pivotal for his career. Monk continued to use the Vanguard as a home base as he wound a serpentine path through the jumble of jazz nightclubs, record labels, press, and festivals in the 1950s.⁵²

The Village Vanguard therefore set a precedent by regularly headlining beboppers.

⁵⁰ Kelley, *Thelonious Monk*, 82, 139-42; Orrin Keepnews, *The View from Within: Jazz Writings, 1948-1987* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 123; Nat Hentoff, *The Jazz Life* (New York: The Dial Press, 1961), 181-6.

⁵¹ Gordon, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, 96; Cohen, *Police Card Discard*, 19-20; Paul Chevigny, *Gigs: Jazz and the Cabaret Laws in New York City* (New York: Routledge, 1991, 2005, second edition), 59.

⁵² Kelley, *Thelonious Monk*, 145.

Clubs like Cafe Society and George's had welcomed African-American jazz to the Village—the latter, like the Vanguard, even featured bebop jam sessions.⁵³ But Popular Front venues relied on more respectable styles, often with classical influences such as Hazel Scott's "Bach to Boogie-Woogie" routine. Other Village Clubs such as Nick's and Condon's tended toward Dixieland jazz, which held little interest for Black audiences.⁵⁴ Once again, the Vanguard had earned its moniker.

This was significant in the context of rising Black consciousness and individualist bohemianism. In 1947, the same year that 52nd Street began its decline, the NAACP delivered a report to the newly-formed United Nations calling for the treatment of African Americans to be declared a human-rights violation. And Beat writer Jack Kerouac proclaimed 1947 as the year "bop was going like mad all over America," beginning his famous westward journey "on the road" while "listening to that sound of the night which bop has come to represent for all of us." Saxophonist Pony Poindexter recalled that while serving in the navy during World War II, listening to bop records was a statement that challenged white authority. Confronted by white sailors complaining that the music disturbed their morning church services, Poindexter retorted:

Look, man! We'll turn the music down, but not off. And as far as praying, you pray, but I'm going to listen to this music and play it on my saxophone laying there. Just a day or so ago, we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, just off the African coast. Me and these other cats, we felt it—the pull, the mental pull. So now we're celebrating. You should be able to understand this. You celebrate St. Patrick's Day, let's say, paint a green line down the street and have bands and lots of gaiety. You feel something beyond the festivities. And in the same way, we Africans, feel something beyond the merriment.⁵⁵

While Poindexter's 1985 memoir was certainly filtered through a post-Black Power lens,

⁵³ Gillespie, *To Be or Not . . . to Bop*, 64; Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: Lawsy: Why Don'tcha Do Right?" *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, February 21, 1942, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Carter Harman, "New Jazz Trends in Night Clubs," *New York Times*, August 24, 1947, p. X-5.

⁵⁵ Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 114-15; Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking Press, 1957, Fourteenth printing, 1971), 14; Norwood "Pony" Poindexter, *The Pony Express: Memoirs of a Jazz Musician* (Frankfurt: JAS Publikationen, 1985), 48-9.

it nonetheless captured bebop's part in postwar Black consciousness. "This white dude was staring at me," he continued. "He was shocked by the word *African* being subversively introduced at a point where he'd always heard the word *Negro* before."

Yet, while Black beboppers maintained claims on their style—its very origin being an attempt to create music that whites "can't steal, because they can't play it"—they seldom complained of white audiences' enthusiasm.⁵⁶ The Vanguard became the very symbol of such musical interactions, with its V-shaped room offering excellent sight-lines and acoustics between the narrow stage and fanned-out audience seating. Orrin Keepnews has described its significance in the New York jazz underground and the "justly famous interaction between audience and performer that is generated down there."⁵⁷ But the Vanguard was also part of a larger national discourse around racial integration and jazz that made Greenwich Village a renewed symbol of postwar progressivism. As early as 1946, Langston Hughes wrote of the Village as an historic nineteenth-century African-American neighborhood that was being reclaimed by Black artists and writers. Citing the Village Vanguard and Cafe Society as part of this process, Hughes stated that "now a number of our folks till the fields of the arts or live the life of Bohemia in or near the Village." Make no mistake, the Village was no racial utopia. That same year several racially-motivated attacks occurred, some specifically targeting entertainers from Cafe Society, and the Black press continued to call for more police protection in the area through 1947.⁵⁸ But such violence also attests to the determination of African Americans to claim their full rights to urban spaces—an effort that was often

⁵⁶ Kelley, *Thelonious Monk*, 118.

⁵⁷ Keepnews, *The View from Within*, 187.

⁵⁸ Langston Hughes, "Greenwich Village Negroes," *The Chicago Defender*, October 19, 1946, p. 14; "Better Protection Promised in Village," *Afro-American*, November 2, 1946, p. 14; Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: Long Skirts To Thin Out Wolfpacks!" *New York Amsterdam News*, September 20, 1947, p. 21.

backed by notions of jazz universalism.

POSTWAR SOCIAL CONCIIOUSNESS AND JAZZ-CABARET

After World War II, a new consciousness that encompassed American left-bohemianism and French existentialism embraced bebop as its prime form of musical expression. During a 1947 visit to the US, existentialist philosopher and jazz proponent Jean-Paul Sartre wrote of his disappointment with Dixieland jazz at Nick's, describing it as the "dry, violent, pitiless" and "inhuman" sound of "sterile frenzy." Meanwhile his feminist interlocutor Simone de Beauvoir, also on a stateside trip that she documented as *America Day by Day*, sought nightclub jazz as a way to be "one with the night," as "it promised me something else, a more complete reality, of which it was merely a vague reflection." "From time to time in New York," she concluded, "I've known this fullness that allows the surrendered soul to contemplate a pure Idea."⁵⁹ Similarly, Anais Nin, the radical, sexually liberated French expatriate and friend of Henry Miller and Kenneth Rexroth, sometimes trekked from the Village to Canada Lee's nightclub in Harlem, where her love of jazz intertwined with cross-racial allure: "Some jazz flamboyant, some creating tensions not by increased loudness but by the subtlety of its gradations. Some jazz is like velvet, some like silk, some like electric shocks, some like seduction, some like a drug." Nin also frequented the Village clubs on MacDougal Street, "where they play a subtle, low-keyed jazz which occasionally explodes."⁶⁰

The embrace of bebop was part of an intellectual sensibility found most notably among the Beats and radical writers such as Norman Mailer. Intellectuals saw in the

⁵⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Jazz in America," in Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 710-12; de Beauvoir, *American Day by Day*, 39, 139. See also Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 286. Sartre suggested that jazz was perhaps the ultimate expression of existentialism's call for action and experience as the method of establishing the Self.

⁶⁰ Anais Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin: 1939-1944*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), 47, 106.

music an authentic expression of alienation appropriate to the start of the atomic age and the Cold War. While this view certainly stumbled on its own kind of racist essentialism—the figure of the Black jazzman as a “natural” representative of free creative and sexual expression—it also demonstrated a white desire to participate *in* Black culture, not simply exploit it as entertainment. John Clellon Holmes’s *Go*, the first published work by the Beat Generation, offered a fictional account of New York nightclubs that captured the experiences of young jazz fans in the 1940s. “When the music began,” wrote Holmes, “silence swept the room as if by command.”

As the sound built slowly from an eerie, hesitant geometry of ensemble phrases to the wild tumult of some tenor sax solo, the hushed attention of the audience would be split by the thud-thud-thud of stamping feet, an occasional “go!” would signify approval, and finally . . . two enthusiasts in the rear would become totally “gone” and start to babble and laugh.

These restless youngsters, finding a passion in this music that belonged defiantly to them, were part of a spectacle that was offered for curious outsiders, come to experience a new diversion. The faithful themselves, jammed like immigrants into a cattle car, closely watched by the angry bouncers, laughed at by those who could afford drinks and tables, were oblivious of this, however, and they became willingly transported when cued by the musicians, who played only to them and remained bitterly indifferent to the noisy parties at the tables in between.

The Go Hole was where all the high schools . . . and the roadhouses of their lives had led these young people; and above it all was the result of their vision of a wartime America as a monstrous danceland, extending from coast to coast . . . with hot bands propelling thousands of lonely couples with an accelerating, Saturday-night intensity. In this modern jazz, they heard something rebel and nameless that spoke for them, and their lives knew a gospel for the first time.

“It was more than a music,” Holmes wrote, “it became . . . a way of walking, a language and a costume; and these introverted kids (emotional outcasts of a war they had been too young to join, or in which they had lost their innocence), who had never belonged anywhere before, now felt somewhere at last.”⁶¹ Holmes’s novel not only evoked the ecstatic American lament that jazz represented, it illuminated how the nightclub manifested this zeitgeist, allowing subterranean sensibilities to become publicly visible.

⁶¹ John Clellon Holmes, *Go* (Mamaroneck, NY: Paul P. Appel, Publisher, 1952; Reprint, 1977), 161.

These subterranean connotations were attractive to those who questioned the American mainstream, giving impetus to their own kind of belonging that took shape as bohemia or “hip” jazz culture. Bohemia, with its stated resistance to the modern bourgeois, its decadent aesthetic purity a bulwark against crass commercialism, was also entwined with nostalgia. This longing found literal expression in “Gay ‘90s” clubs, in both San Francisco and New York, featuring “naughty” fin de siècle sing-alongs and “florid” decor. This kind of wistful American hedonism increasingly concretized within the oppositional psychogeography of the Beats in the late 1940s. In New York, poet Allen Ginsberg noted in his journal that he was visited by his friends from the criminal underworld, Little Jack and Vicky, and that they “got high several times and got in long conversations about Cezanne, Spengler.” His streetwise friends “brought along a lot of fine jazz records. Particularly a set of songs by a negro blues singer—a very profound and subtle woman named Billie Holliday [sic].” Jack and Vicky claimed to know her and promised to introduce him. “She is at present barred from singing in N.Y. and in trouble with the law because she is a Heroin addict,” Ginsberg mused. “All this I suppose is more atmosphere.” Entangled with his ambitions “to be the immortal bop poet,” this mental map of the demimonde led him to juxtapose the comment that Dizzy Gillespie was coming to the jazz club Bop City with a quote by Walter Winchell declaring, “Dope Vice & Bop go together. Ask anyone in the know.”⁶²

⁶² See, for example, “Gomans Bring Back the Good Old Days,” *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*, August 7, 1954, p. 8; “Goman’s Gay 90s,” in Jack Lord and Lloyd Hoff, *Where to Sin in San Francisco* (San Francisco: n.p., 1953), 143; “Bill’s Gay Nineties,” in H.D. Copp, ed., *Copp’s Guide to New York City* (New York: Visitor’s Guide Books, 1957), 53J; ournals, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 6, pp. 21-3, Folder 10, pp. 11-12, and Folder 5, p. 118, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

Finally, race as an idea, and this idea's manifestation as a material reality, affected the meaning of jazz. It is impossible to remove an art from its context in a particular time and place. In a 1950 radio interview, pianist Teddy Wilson predicted that jazz's future would include the "combining of European influences" into a new form of "concert music."⁶³ That this statement dividing jazz from classical was easily understood by audiences demonstrates how clear this distinction remained. The reality of the color line in classical concert halls—perhaps most strikingly symbolized in the Daughters of the American Revolution's 1939 refusal to allow the Black opera singer Marian Anderson to perform in Washington, DC's Constitution Hall—had to be contrasted in the public's mind with racial mixing in jazz clubs. While the reality of this was tangled and anything but straightforwardly liberating, it nonetheless included the African American Wilson onstage with the Jewish Benny Goodman, the interracial audiences of Cafe Society and the Vanguard, and the fact that—despite Jim Crow's insistence otherwise—Black and white audiences danced, sweated, and drank together in roadhouses throughout the South. This solidified the *idea* of jazz as challenging the status quo so fully in the minds of its fans that it would have been impossible for them to hear the distinctly dissonant and staccato sounds of bebop without associating it with some level of rebellion.

Of course, rebellion is not the same as revolution; jazz was not the sound of a widespread, fundamental reversal of the social order. As the radical historian Eric Hobsbawm once said in reference to jazz as a kind of social protest, "The voice of men shouting 'We do not like this' must not be misunderstood for the cry of 'This cannot last,'

⁶³ "Teddy Wilson," WNYC: Radio, Film, and TV, MUNI-AMFV-1950-02-18 -72633.2 LT3831, New York Department of Records.

let alone for the slogan ‘This must be revolutionized’.”⁶⁴ In the context of its times, however, jazz’s distinctive sound offered a denunciation of mainstream American views that created the color line. To hear this criticism was, at the very least, to recognize the demand for “freedom” that echoed through the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, as jazz historian Ingrid Monson has argued, borrowing Paul Gilroy’s concept of African-American culture as the “counterculture of modernity,” the utopian aspects of jazz are inherent in its intellectualism and existentialism. Its socially-grounded interactive practices rely on both mind and body, underpinning a drive for “self-determination” that simultaneously “offers a path of redemption and enactment—for imagining and creating a freer, more ideal community.”⁶⁵ And just as theorists such as Freud and Herbert Marcuse suggested that psychological “liberation” from Victorian patriarchy or the constraints of a bureaucratic society was the real meaning of modern freedom, jazz’s audible rebellion suggested a similar effect for its performers and fans alike. (It was no coincidence that both jazz and Freud were banned in Nazi Germany.) Jazz opened the possibility of psychic liberation that, over time, manifested in observable social and political change.

SOLDIERS, SAILORS, B-GIRLS, AND OUT-OF-BOUNDERS

“From coast to coast, U.S. night clubs are having their biggest season in history,” crowed *Life* magazine in May 1943. “The Latin Quarter in Boston, the Chez Paree in Chicago and the Bal Tabarin in San Francisco report capacity business seven nights a

⁶⁴ And much like classical audiences, jazz audiences following the demise of swing music’s popularity after World War II were relatively small: at various points in the 1950s jazz made up between 7% and 22% of record sales, while popular music hovered around 35-50% and country-western around 15%. Even classical music regularly outsold jazz, making up roughly 20-35% of record sales. But for its dedicated listeners, jazz functioned as a rebellious form of elite culture. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989, 1993), 202-8, 241.

⁶⁵ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 286, 305-6.

week.” With the boom in wages from wartime production, combined with pent-up supplies of consumer goods due to rationing and a highly mobile military and civilian population, *Life* concluded that “spending is far beyond that of the lushest 1920’s.” Nightclub patrons easily blew ten percent of their monthly wages for a single night on the town. New York’s top fifty clubs grossed over \$85 million in 1942; one Gotham headwaiter reported \$40,000 in tips that year alone (against a national average wage of \$1,992). Even smaller Greenwich Village nightclubs like Nick’s and the Village Vanguard reported record earnings during the war years.⁶⁶ But with this boom came a conservative counteraction against the socially-transgressive aspects of the nightclub underground, which challenged the norms of mainstream nightlife.

Scholars of American nightclub culture such as Lewis Erenberg and James Gavin have highlighted the boom years during World War II as a “Golden Age,” in which the Prohibition-era connotations of slumming and illicit activity gave way to swing music and elaborate floor shows as popular entertainment. Impresarios in the late 1930s such as Billy Rose had developed family-friendly productions with entertainers like Jimmy Durante and lines of chorus girls. Nightclubs generally did not charge a door cover, but rather food and drink minimums, maintaining the link between alcohol, socializing, and entertainment, as club owners like Rose offered affordable (if not always palatable) fare to cash-strapped patrons. Moreover, Hollywood introduced sanitized or ennobled versions of nightclubs in such films as Bing Crosby’s *Holiday Inn* and Humphrey Bogart’s *Casablanca* (a propaganda vehicle sponsored in part by the Office of War

⁶⁶ “Night Clubs: They Are Enjoying the Greatest Boom in History,” *Life*, May 10, 1943, 68-73; David W. Stowe, “The Politics of Cafe Society,” *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (March, 1998): 1384-1406 (see especially pp. 1401-2); “Night Club Business Back at Peak, With Spenders Less Aware of Tax: Better Entertainment Regarded,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1944, p. 36.

Information). Such films raised expectations among patrons that nightclubs offered scintillating but safe diversions for all. Noting the diversity of ethnicity and class found in a list of 486 patrons killed in a tragic nightclub fire, Erenberg concludes that “by 1942, the nightclub had become part of the promise of American life,” part of what historian Timothy Gilfoyle has called the midcentury rise of “democratized urban leisure.”⁶⁷ With nocturnal entertainment within easy reach, deciding *what kind* of nightclub to attend became basic to many American lives.

Yet Erenberg also hints at American nightlife’s disconnection from true democracy when he admits that only one African American could be identified on the casualty list: the club’s janitor. Further, he fails to spotlight the fact that, alongside *Holiday Inn*’s patriotic program and Crosby’s crooning of Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas,” the film featured Crosby and costar Marjorie Reynolds performing the song, “Abraham,” in blackface, celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation accompanied by an African-American chorus in Southern plantation garb.⁶⁸ While the movie did include Black musicians in the orchestra, demonstrating Hollywood’s begrudging acceptance of African-American performers, the film’s brazen use of minstrelsy indicates the national culture’s slow and tentative move away from racial stereotypes. Such attitudes were common in New York, where the Cotton Club continued its exoticized African jungle themes and the mob-tied Stork Club refused Black customers, as well as in San Francisco,

⁶⁷ Charles G. Shaw, *Nightlife: Vanity Fair’s Intimate Guide to New York After Dark* (New York: The John Day Company, 1931), 55 and *Copp’s Guide to New York City* (New York: Visitor’s Guide Books, 1957), 52-6; Lewis A. Erenberg, “From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (Winter, 1986): 761-778; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History,” *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 26, No. 1, *The Challenge of American History* (Mar., 1998): 175-204. See also David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁶⁸ Erenberg, “From New York to Middletown,” 774; *Holiday Inn*, dir. Mark Sandrich, (Paramount Pictures, 1942).

where the “exotic splendor” of Forbidden City featured female performers from the “primitive land” of China in “eye-compelling costumes” that revealed more than they concealed. Both the Stork Club and Forbidden City were well-known for attracting politicians and celebrities, from J. Edgar Hoover to Bob Hope and Ronald Reagan.⁶⁹

These glittery goings-on were reported in *Life* and *Look* magazines, and in nationally syndicated gossip columns by Dorothy Kilgallen and Walter Winchell. The latter had close ties with Hoover who, with the start of the Red Scare in 1947, fed the columnist information for anticommunist smear campaigns at his favorite Stork Club table. Such relations later led the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills to decry mainstream nightclubs’ “cafe society” as part of a larger “power elite” that subverted the promise of American democracy. Mills cited the Stork Club as a prime example, a place where elite status was made “public” through celebrity appearances and national press coverage. As traditional social displays such as the “debutante system” died out, he argued, status became conferred on the “expense account” crowd. And although Mills recognized the ephemeral nature of celebrity, he nonetheless noted that power was conferred to elites through public associations with star performers, and that cafe society status also hid such relations through show business “distraction.”⁷⁰ The white tablecloths, intricate brocades, candelabras, chandeliers, and exotic (or erotic) entertainment of American nightclubs

⁶⁹ Stowe, “Cafe Society,” 1401-3; Forbidden City Program, undated c. 1941, Nightclub Files, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library; Tina Robbins, *Forbidden City: The Golden Age of Chinese Nightclubs* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2010), 38-85. Robbins focuses on interviews with former Forbidden City dancers, whose accounts emphasize both the racism they faced as Chinese Americans, but also the community that formed around the club and the opportunities for assimilation offered by show business, showing once again the contradictory nature of exoticized entertainment.

⁷⁰ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1956), 19, 71-93, 147-70, 198-224. No conspiracy theorist, Mills carefully documented the social networks which controlled the reins of power through economic, social, and military apparatuses. Even as individuals cycled in and out of positions of influence, Mills argued, this web of social networks maintained an elite system that concentrated power away from the mass citizenry. The culture industry was crucial to this process, as it used formal and informal networks to maintain elite “status” through media-created celebrity and interactions among corporate, political, and military leaders.

were part of a larger national social space where the inner machinery of elite society was transformed into the public power of status and the private power of elite social networks.

Life all but said as much when it cooed that “Common guests do not get into the Cub Room” at the Stork Club, “where Hollywood stars and other notables” drank and cavorted among army officers with dapper uniforms and pencil mustaches. But this classy clientele was simply the most visible form of nightclub audiences who underwrote the sparkling environs of the Stork or Forbidden City. Tourists accounted for around half of their customers. Guided to prominent nightspots by the national press, travelers sought the “sophistication” of coastal urban entertainment, with its ritualized sexual displays guaranteed to titillate while keeping physical contact out of reach. But as nightclubs swelled with military personnel, the Army and Navy grew concerned that less elite places lacked the necessary moral oversight to prevent dissolution among enlisted men. “While the war was going on, every night in the Village was Saturday night,” recalled journalist Milton Klonsky in 1948. “Soldiers and sailors of all the Allied armies jammed the bars and the main streets of Greenwich Village hunting for a wild time.”⁷¹ The military therefore enacted restrictions on both personnel and nightspots, particularly in San Francisco where many niteries were declared out-of-bounds for enlisted men.

Because of the relatively minimal materiel production or bases in New York, military restrictions there were less stringent: a midnight curfew was enacted in New Jersey in 1943 and only a single military case against a bar and grill was brought by the ironically named Col. B.W. Beers in 1944.¹ Civilian policing of Harlem was common, however, as both the military and municipal authorities sought to restrict racial mixing

⁷¹ “Night Clubs,” *Life*, May 10, 1943, 7; Milton Klonsky, “Greenwich Village: Decline and Fall,” in Chandler Brossard, ed., *The Scene Before You: A New Approach to American Culture* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), 21-2.

among enlisted men. In April 1943, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia ordered the famed Savoy Ballroom closed—a symbolic strike against relations that crossed the color line. The move also threw ninety people out of work and withdrew \$150,000 of annual income from the Black community. This led to deep tensions between Harlem residents and New York police, which exploded into a riot on August 1, 1943, after a white officer shot and wounded a Black enlisted man in uniform during an altercation at the Hotel Braddock. The incident sounded the final knell for Harlem’s interracial nightlife as the combination of surveillance and fears of violence reduced white revelers to a trickle. Yet this policing was part of a general segregationist approach, focused more on the city’s geography than its nightlife in particular, and was never officially acknowledged by the military (despite the protestations of African-American leaders). Only in March 1945 did the military enact a citywide midnight curfew and even that was ill-enforced.⁷²

In San Francisco, on the other hand, where the Presidio and Fort Mason military bases sat beside Bay Area shipbuilding centers, more than one million troops passed through on their way to the Pacific theater—in addition to the tens of thousands of newly arrived war workers. Efforts to control the public behavior of troops and residents alike led to the organization of a military-civilian surveillance network that policed the city’s nightlife from 1942 until well after the war’s end, continuing during the Cold War through 1955.⁷³ The military records on restricted nightspots reveal significant patterns in military and civilian methods of social control, as well as the desires of nightlife

⁷² Alfred Duckett, “Harlem Out of Bounds for Army: Savoy Closed; Other Spots to Follow,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 1, 1943, p. 1; Grant O’Neal, “Vice Charges Against Savoy ‘Lies,’ Walter White Tells LaGuardia: Others Term Closing as Crime Smear,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 1, 1943, p. 8; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 85-6; “Curfew Violation Is Laid to 19 Here: WMC Reveals Cases Have Been Certified by Police,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1945, p. 21.

⁷³ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 110.

revelers.⁷⁴ Almost 150 bars, clubs, and cafes were either labeled “Off Limits and Out of Bounds” or were cited and warned that “unless conditions are promptly corrected” military personnel would be banned from the premises. The Army and Navy, who combined their policing forces in 1943 as the Armed Forces Disciplinary Control Board (AFDCB), worked in tandem with California’s alcohol regulation bureau, the State Board of Equalization (SBE), and local police to investigate nightspots and enforce restrictions. Several Rebel Cafe nightspots were among the prohibited sites, including the Black Cat, the Paper Doll, and Ann’s 440; others, such as Club Alabam, the New Orleans Swing Club, the Barbary Coast, and the Diamond Knee, were on the periphery of the jazz-bohemian scene.⁷⁵

The military made these niteries off limits ostensibly to maintain a disciplined and healthy fighting force. Authorities cited underage drinking, intoxication, prostitution, and venereal disease as causes for a ban—which was marked by a mandatory out-of-bounds sign. “B-girls,” a common target of reformers since the 1930s who earned a percentage of bar sales by inviting male patrons to buy them high-priced drinks (which were usually just watered-down white wine), were also a concern. Despite the presumed disciplinary advantages, these charges clearly betrayed a moral code that went beyond the exigencies of war. The military regularly supplied servicemen with beer during tours of duty, with little or no effort to restrict drinking by those under twenty-one. And officers clubs

⁷⁴ According to military records and press accounts, most restrictions on San Francisco nightspots occurred in 1942 and 1944 (corresponding with the Pacific campaign), 1950-1951 (following the start of the Korean conflict), and 1954-1955 (apparently in response to a local “cleanup” campaign by the newly elected mayor). See below.

⁷⁵ Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 114-15; Alcohol Beverage Controls Board Files, F3718:279-374, Series 5, Subject Files, Box 2, Folders 341a-342, California State Archives, Sacramento, CA [Hereafter ABC Files]; “Army, Navy Ban 4 Bay Area Hotels,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 12, 1944, p. 2-D; “Police Seize ‘Dope King’ in S.F. Club Raid,” *Oakland Tribune*, May 25, 1950, p. 1; Jack Lord and Lloyd Hoff, *Where to Sin in San Francisco* (San Francisco: Richard Guggenheim and Jorgenson & Co., 1953), 146-7; “Diamond Knee Curb: Off Limits to Military,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 26, 1954, n.p. Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

maintained a steady supply of liquor, sometimes to the displeasure of local businessmen, who were barred by federal law from setting up shop near bases, leading to complaints of unfair competition.⁷⁶ While the control of venereal disease was certainly pertinent to troop health, the military had a long history of going beyond practical policies to enforce social norms—as most blatantly illustrated in the racial and gender segregation of the military throughout World War II and its ban on gays and lesbians until 2011. Efforts against B-girls fit squarely within a military tradition that discouraged sexual activity due to concerns about propriety rather than public health.⁷⁷

During the war, the troika of AFDCB, SBE, and police cited over fifty nightspots, placing approximately six of them off limits, including two gay bars and a burlesque house called the Chez Patee, and carried out raids or arrests at several more, such as the bohemian Black Cat. Restrictions against homosexuality were an afterthought, however, as wartime AFDCB inquiries focused on prostitution and underage drinking.⁷⁸ Most of the inspections centered on North Beach or the Tenderloin area around Mason and Eddy streets, which was known for prostitution.

Following the war, however, patterns of enforcement began to change. Starting

⁷⁶ “Vice Raids Catch 10; Ousted B-Girls Helped,” p. 1 and “B-Girl or Hostess?” p.14, *San Francisco News*, February 5, 1938; “B Girl Wearies of ‘Urging Men to Make Monkeys of Selves,’” *San Francisco News*, February 18, 1938, p. 3; Don Marshall to George M. Stout, April 26, 1944, Dixwell Pierce to Jerome Norwitt, October 23, 1950 and Jerry M. O’Brien, 7th District Liquor Control Administrator to George M. Stout, August 18, 1950, ABC Files, 341a.

⁷⁷ While sexual surveillance primarily focused on military men and women, alliances with moral reformers revealed concerns about proper female behavior and class-based notions of impropriety. Christopher Capozzola, “The Only Badge Needed Is Your Patriotic Fervor: Vigilance, Coercion, and the Law in World War I America,” *The Journal of American History*, 88, no. 4 (March, 2002): 1354-1382; Leisa D. Meyer, “Creating G.I. Jane: The Regulation of Sexuality and Sexual Behavior in the Women’s Army Corps during World War II,” *Feminist Studies*, 18, no. 3, The Lesbian Issue (Autumn, 1992): 581-601.

⁷⁸ The unit’s 1944 military investigation form, for example, included no categories concerning sexual orientation, except perhaps the open-ended, “Any irregularities?” Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 114-16; “Two Taverns Placed ‘Out of Bounds,’” March 13, 1942, n.p., “U.S. Puts Cafe Out of Bounds,” October 22, 1944, n.p., and “Three Arrested for Indecent Show,” April 26, 1945, *San Francisco Examiner*, in Examiner Clippings Morgue, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library; “Tavern Inspection Report,” December 19, 1944, ABC Files, F3718:341.

with a series of SBE and police raids in 1949, authorities targeted nightspots suspected of having “lascivious and ‘unusual’ entertainment,” along with “dope peddlers” and other “undesirables.” A crackdown on the North Beach and Fillmore districts resulted in actions against homosexual or “abnormal” behavior at sites such as Finocchio’s and the Black Cat—which had increasingly become a gay hangout since war’s end.⁷⁹ By this time, the Fillmore district and other areas such as Oakland, Port Chicago, and North Richmond, had become African American neighborhoods, as war production attracted masses of southern Black workers to the bustling shipyards. When the Cold War became hot with the start of the Korean conflict 1950, the AFDCB rapidly levied out-of-bounds verdicts against African-American bars and jazz clubs. Significantly, these restrictions began only after military desegregation in 1948, suggesting that military officials wished to signal the social limits of an interracial fighting force. While Black and white troops may have been ready to fight and die together, fraternization in the Fillmore, the “Harlem of the West,” was beyond the pale.⁸⁰

Between 1950 and 1955, nearly one-hundred nightspots received warnings and restrictions. Military reports noted underage drinking, B-girls, and prostitution in dozens of nightspots, but reserved out-of-bounds verdicts and criminal prosecutions almost

⁷⁹ “Cleanup Begun at Night Spots; Cafes Warned,” June 15, 1949, “3 in Cafe Raid Convicted,” June 16, 1949, and “War on Dope Gaining,” October 7, 1949, *San Francisco Examiner*, n.p. Examiner Morgue, SFHC.

⁸⁰ AFDCB files and press accounts are silent about the racial makeup of troops who frequented off limits places, so it is possible that these restrictions mainly affected Black servicemen. However, that is unlikely, since Blacks still made up only around 8% of the Armed Forces and AFDCB documents, which tended to note race when discussing nightspots, made no mention of it when discussing servicemen. Even if discipline against Black sites also specifically targeted Black troops, this would still force a similar conclusion: the military disproportionately sought to control the public behavior of African Americans and their access to social spaces. For a full examination of the “polite racism” that defined San Francisco’s assimilation of newly-arrived African Americans, see Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West 1900-1954* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 1-7 and 220. On the Fillmore district see Elizabeth Pepin and Lewis Watts, *Harlem of the West: The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006).

entirely for those frequented by “homosexual elements” or “mostly colored trade.”⁸¹ Upscale nightclubs such as Forbidden City and Bal Tabarin, which featured erotic entertainment for the well-heeled “smart set,” were never cited. These examples paint a picture of subterranean nightspots as spaces in which patrons contested dominant notions of race, sexuality, and gender: authorities clearly targeted gay and African American sites disproportionately, while attacks on B-girl activity underpinned social control of single and working women’s behavior in public spaces.⁸²

The heterosexual exploits of soldiers and sailors during wartime are so ubiquitous in American culture that they hardly warrant special notice; and the hidden history of homosexual networks during World War II, in both the all-male military and the women of the WACs and WAVEs, have been ably revealed by historians such as John D’Emilio, Allan Bérubé, Leisa D. Meyer, and Nan Alamilla Boyd.⁸³ But rarely are these sexual histories fully linked to the social streams of bohemianism and nightclub culture, much

⁸¹ ABC Files F3718:341-2; See especially AFDCB Supplemental Report, Case B-5400, ABC Files F3718:341a and AFDCB Meeting Minutes, January 25, 1951, ABC Files F3718:342; “Military in Crackdown on Taverns Here,” *Oakland Tribune*, July 29, 1954, p. A-E; “Five Taverns Get Warning,” *San Francisco Examiner*, September 1, 1954, n.p. in Examiner Morgue, SFPL. In all, between 1942 and 1955, approximately 144 nightspots were warned or placed off limits by the military. Of those, 40% were cited as gay or lesbian, 36% were in predominantly Black areas, and 23% were straight, white sites. Conversely, 89% of nightspots that were warned but not subsequently restricted were straight sites in white neighborhoods and only 11% were in African American neighborhoods. Every gay or lesbian place cited was declared out of bounds.

⁸² “Sailor Sues Cop, City in Row Over B-Girls,” January 14, 1953, n.p., “Market St. Bar Raid: 4 Girls, 2 Men Arrested,” January 29, 1954, n.p., “Bars Raided for B-Girls Facing License Hearings,” January 30, 1954, n.p., “Owner of Tavern Booked on B-Girls,” January 31, 1954, n.p., “New Military Squad Cracks Down on Bars,” July 24, 1954, n.p., “Military Acts Against Bars,” July 29, 1954, n.p., “B-Girl Shuttle Jails 3 at 2 Night Spots,” February 28, 1955, n.p., and “Bar Here Faces B-Girl Charge,” July 13, 1955, n.p., *San Francisco Examiner*, Examiner Morgue, SFPL; “Bar Operator Free in Hiring Girl, 17,” *San Francisco News*, February 20, 1954.

⁸³ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

less to the wider currents of US culture as a whole.⁸⁴ The sites targeted by Bay Area authorities were not synonymous with the Rebel Cafe, in which B-girls, for instance, were rare. Yet racial mixing and free sexuality *was* shared by a variety of jazz clubs, smoky urban bars, and cafes.

The AFDCB files therefore reveal that the policing of gays, lesbians, Blacks, and women was partly a reaction to the early Cold War nightclub underground's oppositional role and its flouting of social norms. Although the lines between Rebel Cafe sites and the mainstream were sometimes still blurry, authorities recognized nightspots as potentially powerful sites of transgression and transformation. In the context of competition with the Soviet Union and debates around universal military training and a continued draft, their concerns reflected the dialectic between broad social liberation and activities within the nightclubs of San Francisco.

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES IN GOTHAM'S NIGHTLIFE

In New York as well, nightspots like the Village Vanguard were crucial sites of cultural interaction for those seeking to transcend social boundaries. While jazz was not yet the Vanguard's only entertainment—a booking policy that would not come until the late 1950s—it was part of a cabaret culture that shaded its folk, calypso, and satirical

⁸⁴ Nan Alamilla Boyd has focused specifically on the military's sexual regulation of San Francisco niteries, arguing that it represented a concerted effort between the AFDCB, local police, and state alcohol regulators to police gay and lesbian communities. Her work persuasively shows how this regulation politicized queer bars and taverns, making them key sites of organizing and resistance among queer activists in the late 1940s and 1950s. But her analysis is too narrow. While her focus on sexual and social history perhaps made this problem unavoidable, it is compounded by some fundamental misstatements of fact. Despite military records that show continued prohibitions for multiple causes, Boyd argues that as a result of the Cold War witch hunt against gays in the federal government and the military, "by 1951, all of the bars and taverns off-limits to military personnel were places 'patronized by persons considered to be homosexuals'." While she quickly backs away from this misleading statement, describing continued concerns about heterosexual prostitution and another list including non-homosexual banned bars, the general tenor of her analysis suggests that homosexuality was the military's prime (if not lone) concern. The result is not only a skewed view of the historical record, but a diminishment of her argument about the significance of nightspots as crucial liberatory sites in the public sphere, due to the failure to fully examine race and gender in contestations over claims to public space. See Boyd, 118-19.

comedy performances with a scintilla of sociopolitical subversion. Pete Seeger's group, The Weavers, made their nightclub debut there in 1949, beginning the indomitable leftist's acquiescence to the commercial market after years of making his living playing union halls and partisan rallies. While the blacklist ultimately limited The Weavers' exposure, leading the original lineup to disband in 1952, they nevertheless helped maintain the Vanguard's progressive bent.⁸⁵

This underlying progressivism extended to the Blue Angel, which Gordon had opened with Herbert Jacoby in 1943. A more upscale nightclub designed to compete with the Stork Club or El Morocco, the Blue Angel also pushed racial boundaries, featuring Black performers in the otherwise lily-white Upper Eastside.⁸⁶ Simone de Beauvoir disliked the club, declaring that it "does not (as they claim) combine the charms of Europe with those of America," and found it "merely pretentious and bland with its mirrors, carpets, candelabra, crystal, funereal lighting, and respectable shows" (a sentiment later echoed by comedian Lenny Bruce, who quipped that it looked like "the inside of a coffin"). Yet the Blue Angel was precisely the kind of "sophisticated cabaret" that allowed patrons to display their cosmopolitanism.⁸⁷ The club also drew gay men, making it part of an underground community that included Village sites like the MacDougal Street Bar and the San Remo Cafe. Allen Ginsberg, as a student at Columbia University just discovering his sexuality, was part of this circle, which connected him

⁸⁵ Reuss and Reuss, *American Folk Music*, 159-87, 233-5; Lillian Scott, "Broadway Is Awed By the Arrival of Religious Fervored Song Style," *The Chicago Defender*, July 12, 1947, p. 18; Robert Shelton, "Six Thread Rewoven," *New York Times*, April 28, 1963, p. 135; "Weavers to Sing Their Final Song: Folk-Music Quartet Plans to Disband at End of Year," *New York Times*, November 9, 1963, p. 14.

⁸⁶ Arnold de Mille, "On the Spot," *The Chicago Defender*, June 14, 1952, p. 15; Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 64-9.

⁸⁷ De Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 71; Louis Calta, "News of Night Clubs: A New Club, The Blue Angel, Will Make Its Broadway Debut on April 14," *New York Times*, April 4, 1943, p. X-5; Arthur Gelb, "Barbs Salute the Blue Angel, 20," *New York Times*, April 16, 1963, p. 31.

with a previous generation of gay poets such as W. H. Auden. Ginsberg linked his early explorations to the nightclub scene, where he was “hanging around with a group of Columbia students that were out of the closet among each other . . . [and] going downtown [to] visit the Blue Angel Club.” In the 1950s, a San Francisco nightclub also took the Blue Angel moniker and played a similar part in that city’s gay culture. A letter to Ginsberg from Jack Kerouac in 1950 captured cabaret culture’s role within their social milieu and the bohemian imaginary. “I hope everything is well,” he wrote, “and did you make it to the Blue Angel? Isn’t Dusty great? But beware of the blue angels in the night.”⁸⁸

Jacoby knew what he was doing. By the time he opened the Blue Angel, he had already run the successful Parisian-styled club Le Ruban Bleu for five years. Jewish, with ties to the political Left, Jacoby had the prescience to flee France in 1937, ahead of the full Nazi onslaught, and put his cabaret experience to work. Taking the name of his newest venture from the title of Marlene Dietrich’s popular first film (his personal favorite) was surely a shrewd business calculation. But invoking Dietrich’s image, with her outspoken opposition to Hitler and Goebbels, who had labeled her movies subversive after coming to power in 1933, also carried undercurrents of political commentary, coming in the middle of the global war against fascism.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Lorraine Gordon, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, 108, 112; “Interview: Allen Ginsberg,” June 1, 1985, p. 8, Box 23, Folder 7, Barry Miles Papers and Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, undated (c. 1950), Box 11, Folder 18, Allen Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts; Irving Rosenthal to Richard Edelstein, July 6, 1952, Box 8, Folder 11, Irving Rosenthal Papers, M1550, Green Library Special Collections, Stanford University; Hy Porter, “Blue Angel Opening Brightens the ‘Bay White Way’,” *San Francisco News*, July 1, 1950, p. 16. The San Francisco Blue Angel was similarly known supper club with a “higher class” of clientele, that also welcomed “characters” and featured performers like Dwight Fiske singing risqué songs “his mother never taught him.”

⁸⁹ James Gavin, *Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 25-6, 58; Louis Calta, “News of the Night Clubs: A New Club, The Blue Angel, Will Make Its Broadway Debut on April 14,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1943, p. X-5; Saverio Giovacchini, *Hollywood*

Equally important as Dietrich's Popular Front ties or Jacoby's socialist past, however, was the role of her film in the idea of the American cabaret. Why was *The Blue Angel* so often associated with the nightclub underground? The answer lies not simply with the movie's subject matter, which focused on a respected man's fall from grace as he is seduced into the wine, women, and song of the German *tingel-tangel*. American audiences also sought exotic models of sexual Others on which to cast their desires. Patrons never entered a nightclub as *tabulae rasa*. Rather, they came with a host of expectations, social, sexual, and political. Dietrich's Lola Lola character in *The Blue Angel* was a mysterious siren-singer, luring the cautious but curious Professor Rath into the sumptuous and seedy world of cabaret with promises of sex and the excitement of life onstage. Viewers were treated to scantily-clad dancers, moody lighting, grotesque sets, and the dissolution of drunken revelers. Dietrich, posed suggestively on a barrel in stockings and a shimmering top hat, conjured a multitude of desires with connotations of working-class prostitution, highbrow mockery, and transvestitism. Similarly, the nightclubs like the Blue Angel offered the titillations of forbidden fruit, the temptations of subterranean secrets that allowed patrons to process novel or alien performative codes, even if their mystical and carnal climaxes evaporated into the mundane once the house lights came up.

Thelonious Monk's young publicity agent Lorraine Lion (née Stein) had started her own nocturnal excursions at one of Max Gordon's clubs in the late 1930s. Part of a Jewish immigrant family with ties to the artistic Left,⁹⁰ Lion came to the Village

Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 27-8, 52, 79, 95; Ean Wood, *Dietrich: A Biography* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2002), 94-5, 119, 139-40, 177, 181, 226-7.

⁹⁰ Lorraine Gordon's brother was the artist Philip Stein, who painted under the name "Estano." Widely

Vanguard to hear Leadbelly's protest blues and Irwin Corey's "political mumbo-jumbo routines." But she later remembered that the greatest attractions were Lim's Sunday afternoon jam sessions. Max must have held some attraction as well: in 1950 she became Lorraine Gordon when the pair married. Folksinger Richard Dyer-Bennet was best man at the wedding.⁹¹

FALLOUT: THE RED SCARE AND THE REBEL CAFE

Richard Dyer-Bennet was part of a loosely-knit movement that folk scholar Richard Reuss has labeled the "Alan Lomax school" of Popular Front music. As a folklorist, Alan Lomax traveled the country during the 1930s with his father, John A. Lomax, documenting "people's songs" for the Library of Congress and WPA. Their project captured the Depression's aural sensibilities in a way that paralleled Dorothea Lange's famed social-realist photographs. Moreover, the Lomaxes' discovery of Leadbelly exemplified their role in bringing southern folk and African-American blues from populist institutions like the Highlander Folk School to New York cabarets. With John Hammond, they made the city-billy protest songs of Woody Guthrie, Josh White, and the Golden Gate Quartet into staples of the Vanguard and Cafe Society.⁹²

The story of Cafe Society's closing was therefore a prime example of the Red Scare's effect on Left musical culture. In March 1947, Leon Josephson, the brother of

known as an "ardent leftist," Stein studied at the New School in New York and participated in the Hollywood studio strike of 1946. Soon after, he traveled to Mexico to study with the Communist muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, a political ally of Diego Rivera with whom Stein also worked. In 1958, Stein painted a social realist mural on the back wall of the Village Vanguard. See William Grimes, "Philip Stein, Muralist Who Adorned Village Vanguard Jazz Club, Dies at 90," *New York Times*, May 18, 2009 and Mark Vallen, "An Interview with American Artist, Philip Stein . . . aka Estano," February 2004 in <http://www.xispas.com/art/siqueiros/stein.htm> (accessed December 10, 2012).

⁹¹ Lorraine Gordon, as told to Barry Singer, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 98-103; Earl Wilson, "It Happened Last Night . . .," *The Sandusky Register-Star-News*, June 16, 1950, p. 10; Ed Sullivan, "Little Old New York," *The Morning Herald* (Uniontown, PA), June 20, 1950, p. 4.

⁹² Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, 99-100, 116-17, 124, 128, 136-40.

Cafe Society's owner, was summoned before House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), the federal body most responsible for anticommunist investigation (and the ruin of many careers in the late 1940s and early 1950s). He was called to testify about his role in acquiring a fake passport for Communist leader Gerhart Eisler, the nation's "No. 1 Red." The Eisler case was an outgrowth of Josephson's longtime involvement in CP activism and espionage, which included everything from projects to establish fair housing for African Americans to his arrest in Denmark after a failed attempt to infiltrate Nazi Germany and assassinate Hitler in 1935. Josephson refused to testify, instead offering a written statement that denounced HUAC for perpetrating a "well-planned program to create a national psychological basis for a domestic brand of Fascism" and asserted that the hearings were "repugnant to the provisions of our Constitution." "I am an American," he stated. "I believe in democracy, in government of the people, by the people and for the people. . . . I am a Communist. Like all Communists, and like most Americans, I am also anti-Fascist." In October, Josephson was convicted for contempt of Congress and sentenced to one year in jail. America's "No. 2 Red," the press reported, "showed no emotion."⁹³

From late 1947 through 1948, conservative columnists such as Westbrook Pegler

⁹³ The African-American reaction to the case was tellingly mixed. Adam Clayton Powell was one of only two congressmen to vote against Josephson's conviction. Some in the Black press supported HUAC, however, suggesting that the CP was exploitative and declaring that Cafe Society had "won Negro 'artists' to the party line by giving them employment." Others supported Leon's insistence that HUAC was unconstitutional, echoing a statement by the Civil Rights Congress that "the House has widened its attack into the 'rights of labor, the academic freedom of our youth, freedom of speech and thought'." The mainstream white press uniformly condemned Josephson, proclaiming that CP alliances with African Americans sought the "overthrow of the United States" and the establishment of a "Negro republic in the South." "No. 2 Red' Gets One Year in Jail for Contempt: Fined \$1,000; He Defied House Group," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 16, 1947, p. 9; "Josephson Gets Year, \$1000 Fine," *The Washington Post*, October 16, 1947, p. 7; Stowe, "The Politics of Cafe Society," 1396-7; Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 229-31, 249-51, 355-6, n. 5; "George S. Schuyler, 'Views and Reviews,'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 10, 1947, p. 7; "Civil Rights Congress Defending All-Comers," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 31, 1947, p. 4; "Ex-Red Tells Of Subversive Talk by Eisler," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1947, p. B-2.

and Walter Winchell waged a campaign of “innuendo” against Barney Josephson’s nightclub, highlighting Leon’s arrest and Communist ties. In response, Josephson ran advertisements in the press defiantly declaring that he would struggle on, stating, “My head is bloody but not bowed.” But in the Cold War’s atmosphere of suspicion, this proved to be a last-ditch effort to keep his customers. Winchell’s syndicated society column brought a backlash that cascaded through New York’s nightclub underground. Business at both Cafe Societies dropped precipitously: the Uptown location closed on December 13, 1947, followed by the Downtown club on March 2, 1949. Throughout the 1950s, Josephson wrote, he was “out of the nightclub business and flat broke.” He was even denied a passport, scuttling his plans to open a new club in Paris.⁹⁴

PERFORMERS IN THE RED-SCARE SPOTLIGHT

Within a few years of Leon Josephson’s imprisonment and the club’s closing, Cafe Society and Village Vanguard performers Zero Mostel, Judy Holliday, Pete Seeger, Josh White, and Hazel Scott were subpoenaed by congressional committees, as was publicity agent Ivan Black. The various strategies these nightclub leftists adopted represent the paths taken by hundreds of others during the blacklist era. McCarthyism was not a monolithic phenomenon led by its namesake, but rather a patchwork of anticommunist efforts. Some had official ties to the government, such as the HUAC hearings in the House of Representatives and Joseph McCarthy’s investigations in the Senate. Each of these carried the threat of jail time for uncooperative witnesses or prosecutions under the Smith Act, which effectively outlawed the CP as a treasonous organization. But McCarthy’s tactics also included smear campaigns in the press, aided by Hearst newspaper columnists and the newsletters *Counterattack* and *Red Channels*.

⁹⁴ Stowe, “Cafe Society,” 1403-4; Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 238, 241, 255.

Simply being called to testify before HUAC could be enough to taint one's name in the culture industry, making the blacklist an elusively threatening phenomenon.⁹⁵ The entertainment field is enormously fickle and many a performer's career has tanked quickly enough without such sabotage. Yet the career trajectories of blacklisted Rebel Cafe performers suggests that the Red Scare had rapid and noticeable impacts on their success.

Both Zero Mostel and Judy Holliday were significantly successful in Hollywood by 1950; Holliday won the best actress Academy Award for her role that year in *Born Yesterday* and Mostel starred in six films in 1950 and 1951 alone. This period marked success for Rebel Cafe musicians as well. White and Scott drew large nightclub and concert audiences, augmented by film appearances, while The Weavers scored a huge hit with a version of Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene." When Seeger and Mostel each were listed in *Red Channels* in 1951, it effectively put an end to their popularity. As Seeger recalled of The Weavers blacklisting, "instead of singing in the Waldorf Astoria or Ciro's in Hollywood we were playing in Duffy's Tavern in Cleveland."⁹⁶ Mostel would not appear in another Hollywood film until 1966.

When White and Scott were called to testify, they were well aware that as African Americans, racial prejudice would likely worsen their fates and so testified as "friendly" witnesses (as did folksinger Burl Ives), recanting their leftist affiliations and naming

⁹⁵ *Counterattack* and *Red Channels* specifically listed the names of cultural producers who were suspect, with the implication that hiring them might lead to congressional or FBI investigation. For a thorough overview of how intimidation, innuendo, blacklisting underpinned the Red Scare, see Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998).

⁹⁶ "Obituaries: Judy Holliday Dies; Played Dumb; IQ 172," *Boston Globe*, June 8, 1965, p. 35; "Weavers to Sing Their Final Song: Folk-Music Quartet Plans to Disband at End of Year," *New York Times*, November 9, 1963, p. 14; "Josh White," http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0925024/?ref=fn_al_nm_2 and "Hazel Scott," http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0779220/?ref=fn_al_nm_1 (accessed December 16, 2012); *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, dir. Martin Scorsese (PBS: 2005).

names. (If Paul Robeson's fate is any indication, their assumptions were correct: his "unfriendly" repudiation of HUAC resulted in a ban on his travel abroad and persecution at home.)⁹⁷ In 1951, Scott was listed in *Counterattack* and *Red Channels*, specifically due to her ties to Cafe Society. During her testimony, Scott read a statement denouncing the Red Scare as mudslinging and red baiters as "profiteers in patriotism" guilty of using the "despicable methods" of "totalitarianism." But she also repudiated her leftism, insisting that Josephson "often lent my name and time to affairs without consulting me" and that "managers send their talent to appear at various benefits and we go because our managers tell us it builds our audience."⁹⁸ Whether White and Scott would have gone on to wider acclaim if not for the taint of their HUAC summons is open to speculation; what is certain is that their careers stagnated from that point. Neither appeared in any more feature films and remained mainly nightclub performers through the 1960s.

Judy Holliday's 1952 performance before the McCarran Committee—the Senate's answer to HUAC—split the difference. Raised in a committed leftwing home and with deep roots in Popular Front and Left theater, close friends and family would have been among the communist associates the committee pressed her to name. Through the 1940s, Holliday had participated in Left and antifascist causes, including a 1946 New York Win the Peace Committee demonstration against fascist Spain. She also sat on the board of Seeger's CP-tied People's Songs, supported Henry Wallace's Progressive Party presidential campaign, and worked with the Civil Rights Congress. Yet she never joined

⁹⁷ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 361.

⁹⁸ Chilton, *Hazel Scott*, 144-5; "No Red Stain On Me: Hazel Scott," *The Chicago Defender*, September 23, 1950, p. 21; Louis Lautier, "Artist Asks To Testify Before House Committee: Hazel Scott Is Latest Star To Deny 'Red' Connections," *New Journal and Guide*, September 23, 1950, p. 1. Josephson's recounting of Scott's testimony in his memoir suggests that he was not only damaged professionally, but that, even thirty years later, he was hurt personally: "After seven and a half years at Cafe Society she could give such testimony. That's the way she washed herself. Put it on my back. When she gave this testimony, that was the end of Hazel Scott with me." Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 260-1.

the Communist Party, remaining resistant to any system that meant “being a slave to the state.” Friends later remembered that, while she did not draw a distinct line between her communist and socialist friends, she “knew about communism” enough to say that it “was not an answer. Socialism maybe, but not communism.”⁹⁹ Holliday’s strategy, therefore, was to downplay any communist affiliation and emphasize her antifascist stance, hoping thereby to avoid identifying her associates.

Holliday’s success relied on her use of gender norms and her public persona. Despite having an IQ of 172, Holliday achieved fame playing “dumb blonde” roles, such as Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday*. She used this to great effect in front of the all-male committee, dressing attractively and insisting she was “duped” by communist organizations. Holliday stated that she was “stupid” to allow Left groups use her name, and that she reluctantly gave a “dollar” to People’s Songs, insisting, “I dislike folk songs intensely.” Her fellow Revuer, Alvin Hammer, later remembered being “disappointed” by Holliday’s testimony, saddened that under duress “she denounced folk singing, which she loved.”¹⁰⁰ Despite being listed in *Red Channels* Holliday continued to work in Hollywood and in the theater. But she never again played the kind of lead film role that won her the Academy Award in 1951, nor did she return to nightclubs such as the Village Vanguard. Instead she hovered in mid-level celebrity, marrying jazz saxophonist Gerry Mulligan just a few years before her death from cancer in 1965. Through all those years she remained friends with the Vanguard’s Max and Lorraine Gordon, a sign, perhaps, that

⁹⁹ *Daily Worker*, November 30, 1946, “Simon Rifkind,” and “James Buffington,” Box 28, 644, Folder 8 and “HUAC Testimony” and “Screen, Stage, Radio & TV Archive,” Folder 9, Lee Israel Research Notes, 8-MWEZ, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Performing Arts Library.

¹⁰⁰ Helen Markel Herrman, “Hey-Hey-Day of a ‘Dumb’ Blonde: Judy Holliday’s Whinny and Wiggle Make Her the Nation’s Favorite Nitwit, But She Isn’t,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1951, p. 163; “Was Duped by Reds, Says Judy Holliday: Actress Tells Senators She Lent Her Name to Organizations without Investigation,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1952, p. 32; “Alvin Hammer,” Box 28, 645, Folder 1a, Israel Research Notes, NYPL.

old loyalties were more important to Holliday than successfully climbing the showbiz ladder.¹⁰¹

Mostel's, Seeger's, and Ivan Black's 1955 testimonies took a strictly "unfriendly" stance against HUAC, ridiculing the committee's methods and denouncing them as unconstitutional. Mostel took the Fifth Amendment, refusing to answer questions about his political past, but acknowledging that he had worked for Twentieth-Century Fox, before quipping, "Or was it 18th Century Fox?" Seeger also refused to answer the committee's "improper and immoral questions," while Black suggested that HUAC violated the First, Fifth, Sixth, Tenth, and Fourteenth Amendments. When Rep. Gordon Scherer retorted, "All Commies think so," Black replied, "That's what Hitler said, Congressman Schnorr."¹⁰² Of course the circumstances of their testimonies were decidedly different from Judy Holliday's or Josh White's. Joseph McCarthy had already fallen out of favor by late 1954, having overstepped his bounds by accusing military officials of subversion, and Mostel had little to lose, his career in films already over due to the blacklist. But the effects of the Red Scare remained very real. Black's publicity work had included Hollywood films in the early 1950s and he headed New York's Publicists Guild of Broadway. Both positions ended after his first HUAC subpoena in 1953. His ability to take a stand against HUAC, in fact, relied on the Rebel Cafe. After losing his more prominent clients, Black returned to work as the press agent for New

¹⁰¹ Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 41-2; Lorraine Gordon, as told to Barry Singer, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 100-1. See also Milly S. Barranger, *Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater, and Film in the McCarthy Era* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 9-33.

¹⁰² Comedian Zero Mostel Balks at Red Question: Invokes Fifth Amendment, Denies He Is Communist at Present Hearing Here," *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1955, p. 1; Willard Edwards, "Reds Invade TV Industry, Probe Reveals; Quiz to Open," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 11, 1955, p. 6; "6 More Witnesses Balk At Red Probe Questions," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, August 19, 1955, p. 21.

York nightclubs, particularly those with socially-conscious entertainment.¹⁰³ This gave him a source of income largely outside the reach of the blacklist—a strategy others would follow in the 1950s.

While Seeger and Mostel were able to eke out a living in the 1950s by mixing nightclub appearances with theater shows and concerts, Black singers such as Josh White, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee relied heavily on Rebel Cafe venues. As a result, these nightspots were known for their “authentic” folk performers, while also meeting jazz audience expectations by pairing them with sophisticated, modern bebop groups. And although satirical performers like Irwin Corey and Richard “Lord” Buckley escaped HUAC scrutiny—in part because their material was as much “mumbo-jumbo” as political, thereby hiding it from prying congressional eyes—the overtly political cabaret that had proliferated in the 1930s came to an end by 1950. Until the darkest days of the Red Scare began to lift in 1954, the most significant social protest found in American nightclubs was limited to the more oblique form of jazz-folk performances.

CLOSING TIME

Although the majority of Americans supported the Red Scare, that majority was slim. Many found tactics like the blacklist and HUAC’s interrogations distasteful, even if communism itself was equally unpalatable. The most vitriolic responses from the public were certainly reserved for “Reds” (Holliday received letters stating hopes that she would die in childbirth), friendly witnesses were also castigated. Abe Burrows, the writer of Broadway’s *Guys and Dolls* and a friend of Barney Josephson, received roughly equal

¹⁰³ M. Oakley Stafford, “Informing You,” *The Hartford Courant*, March 1, 1952, p. 7; Hazel Garland, “3-D Films May Revolutionize Movie Industry—Ivan Black,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 10, 1953, p. 14; Walter Winchell, “...Of New York: TWA Sleeper to N.Y.,” *The Washington Post*, May 20, 1953, p. 39; “Biographical Note,” Ivan Black Papers Finding Aid, NYPL.

numbers of supportive and antagonistic letters after his friendly testimony in 1951.

Opponents suggested that it was not a crime to be “Communistic or Leftish in their views” and that HUAC was “damaging and dangerous” to American “democratic society.”¹⁰⁴

Those who shared these views had fewer options for socially-conscious entertainment by 1950. The collapse of the Popular Front stranded Left theaters such as TAC without institutional support, even as Cafe Society closed and the Village Vanguard felt Red Scare pressure to minimize its satirical content. Even the leftist California Labor School had to scale back its programs under federal scrutiny, reducing its curriculum to cultural activities devoid of open politics.¹⁰⁵

In this constrained Left cultural environment, the Vanguard’s underground cabaret model became all the more salient. Through the 1940s, Rebel Cafe nightspots bloomed as pluralistic, egalitarian sites, welcoming the range of race, gender, and sexuality that was so often rejected in mainstream cafe society. Further, the currents of leftism that buoyed these trends tinged nightspots like the Village Vanguard or the Black Cat with hints of social criticism—particularly when McCarthyism began to conflate “un-American” activities such as civil rights agitation and sexual nonconformity with the Communist threat. Social conservatives felt the privilege of white male heterosexual hegemony was under siege and they struck out with a variety of weapons, legal and extralegal, ideological and sometimes violent—occasionally from within the underground itself as social hierarchies reproduced themselves. As legal theorist William Eskridge argues, paralleling C. Wright Mills, these hierarchies could only be maintained through

¹⁰⁴ “Yotta Cohen,” Box 28, 644, Folder 8, Lee Israel Research Notes, NYPL; Letters: 1951, Box 9, Folder 16, Abe Burrows Papers, *T-Mss 2000-006, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Performing Arts Library. See also Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 241 and 256.

¹⁰⁵ Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 122-3.

“a sustained level of institutional cooperation.”¹⁰⁶ Many in the nightclub underground recognized this and began to develop oppositional institutions in response. Foregrounding Black culture and nonconformity as key aspects of political progressivism set the stage for a new jazz-folk ethos—one that embraced both community and the sanctity of the self—in the Rebel Cafe of the 1950s.

There were, of course, tensions between the ideals of community collectivism and the entrepreneurship of nightclub owners. Radical poet Max Bodenheim was quick to note this in his musings about Village life, suggesting pessimistically that “Cafe Society, which by its very name precludes the small-income or no-income set of bohemia who manage to laugh their heads off without paying a cover charge” was “symptomatic of the times.” He declared that Zero Mostel and Ivan Black, who were part of his bohemian circle in the 1930s, had sold out their talents. Since Bodenheim was considered by many, including his friend Kenneth Rexroth, to be a bit of a crank and a “hopeless alcoholic psychotic” by the time he wrote these words in the 1950s, his assertion requires a bit of skepticism.¹⁰⁷ Yet he certainly put his own ideals into practice, living in poverty and surviving in flophouses by selling his poems in Washington Square.

In reality, Bodenheim’s approach represented only a difference in scale, not in kind. Nightclubs were simply part of a wider community—citywide, even nationwide—that paid the wages of performers and club owners in order for patrons to have firsthand entertainment experiences. While government-sponsored arts projects like the WPA did help democratize and disseminate cultural production, their limitations were clear to

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 129.

¹⁰⁷ Bodenheim, *Life and Loves*, 208; Kenneth Rexroth to Lawrence Lipton, January 15, 1953, Box 2, Folder 5, Lawrence Lipton Papers (Collection 819), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

participants. Any state-run project is subject to the whims of politics—and no less so in a democracy. With the end of the Popular Front, and in lieu of a more enlightened (or utopian) alternative, the neo-artisanal creations of nightclub musicians and satirists provided the most direct and progressive public entertainment in the midcentury US. The social meaning of folk forms (broadly defined) from Guthrie's city-billy ballads to Gillespie's bebop became part of an emerging alternative culture industry.

This meant jazz was increasingly absorbed into left-bohemian culture, with contradictory, even paradoxical, results. Even as white bohemians embraced jazz as a “hip” doorway into primal expressions of authenticity, its intellectualization made it less accessible to the broader public. Country music, rock & roll, and rhythm & blues soon replaced jazz as the music of the masses. While jazz proclaimed itself “democratic”—a dialectic between the individual and the group—it became the possession of cultural elites. Yet it is equally important to recognize that cultural categories are never so neatly divided. Jazz was inextricably intertwined with other cultural forms within the nocturnal underground. As the left-bohemian novelists and poets of New York and San Francisco absorbed bebop as an expression of postwar rebellion, they also gathered in bars and cafes, adopting them as the institutions of a literary revolution.

Chapter 4

“Subterranean Aviators: The Psychogeography of an American Subculture and the Emergence of a Counterpublic Sphere”

Vinea submittit capr(e)as non semper edulis.

She goats bred in vineyards are not always edible.

—Kenneth Rexroth, “On a Beautiful Bar Butterfly in the Black Cat” (1949)

Neal—

We’re all at the Pink Elephant

—Allen, Holmes, Bill, Al, Jack (undated note, c. 1948)¹

On June 6, 1945, as Nazi Germany smoldered in the wake of firebombs and defeat, and the US persevered in the Pacific conflict, delegates from fifty nations gathered in San Francisco’s Civic Center to establish the framework for the United Nations. Meanwhile, as conference chairman Alger Hiss presided over debates and draft revisions, a less conspicuous group of young idealists gathered at the Iron Pot in North Beach to hash out the future of “world security.” This small, scruffy clique had no delusions of grandeur, well aware that their plans in no way rivaled the world-historical diplomacy occurring twenty blocks south of their cafe conference. Yet, in their own raffish way they were setting their own standards for the coming postwar era, charting a new path for America. “It is our intent,” they cried amid the smoke and the smell of beer, fists pounding the table in enthusiasm, “to have a club where no one shall be denied membership because of race, creed or color; to have a club whose atmosphere shall be, if you will, Bohemian, and whose purpose shall be the serious furtherance of good living . . . through the media of such diverse means as art, writing, music, drama, chess, cards, food and drink, discussion groups and organized pressure groups.” Housing discrimination, asserted one African-American member, should be their first target. Yes, agreed a writer

¹ Allen Ginsberg, et al. to Neal Cassady, undated, Box 11, Folder 11, Allen Ginsberg Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

from a “local left wing paper,” adding that they should not only fight racism, but advocate on behalf of all workers. Concerned that their new endeavor signaled a lack of gratitude toward their meetings’ hosts, they concluded: “We want it clearly and absolutely understood that the club in no way, shape or form, has any unfriendly intent toward ‘The Black Cat’ or ‘The Iron Pot’.”²

This scene did not represent an earth-shattering historical moment in and of itself; the little gang of Iron Pot-Black Cat radicals did not bloom into a renowned civil rights organization, a new political party, or even a social movement as commonly conceived. It did represent, however whimsically, the kind of conversation that was happening all over the United States, in cafes and bars and coffeehouses and nightclubs, as the Second World War drew to a close. Just as this idealistic band sat among the revelry of the Iron Pot or the quieter confines of the Black Cat Cafe (“where the light is dimmer, the pace slower, and any one who cared to can play boogie-woogie on the battered piano in the corner”), nightspot patrons in American cities downed coffee royales (relished as a “positive stimulant to the brain”) and *talked*—of politics, art, sex, society, and self-expression itself. Such intimate gatherings of four or five in no way rivaled the grandiosity of the UN Conference—not to mention the wave of labor strikes that erupted at war’s end and the civil rights organizing that grew from Black America’s “Double-V” campaign. But the *sum* of these small conversations held perhaps as much significance. Like the tiny intracellular mutations that drive evolution, invisible until retrospection allows us to recognize a new species, these nocturnal discussions, interacting with media and promulgated through a new style of literature and journalism, incrementally changed

² Margaret Parton, “Cellar World Conference: Youth, with Lofty Aims, Rivals the Big Show,” *San Francisco Herald Tribune*, June 6, 1945, n.p. clipping in the Henri Lenoir Papers, BANC MSS 92/842 c, Vol. 1, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

the shape of America's body politic. At another level of the national psyche, the start of the atomic age formed a cloud of concern that hovered on the horizon, obscurely shadowing even the elation of VJ Day. Just a month after the first UN conference convened, the US Army successfully tested the Trinity bomb, setting the stage for the horrors of Hiroshima on August 6. If Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky declared god dead the previous century, this notion took on new meaning that day, when apocalypse became the instrument of humankind rather than the divine.

Of the nightspots that collectively made up the Rebel Cafe milieu between World War II and the end of the Red Scare's McCarthy phase in 1953, the most significant continued to be in the bohemian neighborhoods of North Beach and Greenwich Village. In fact, a new bohemian generation formed there as aspiring artists and intellectuals connected with Depression-era dissidents and nonconformists, or simply claimed the promise of personal and artistic freedom. One small group of novelists and poets that formed around Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs recognized this trend and dubbed themselves the Beat Generation. But they represented just one clique (if the most famous) within a larger cohort that gathered in literary nightspots like San Francisco's Black Cat and New York's White Horse Tavern seeking social connection. This public discourse underpinned the Rebel Cafe's social criticism, as patrons reflected on their own identities and cultural producers sought unconventional inspiration. Moreover, the long-standing but tenuous links between the two coastal bohemias became more firmly tied, both through oppositional networks and shared cultural sensibilities. This vanguardism added to San Francisco's allure as an entertainment alternative to Hollywood—a bohemian challenge to mass media. The mirrors that hung behind the bars

of underground nightspots perhaps reflected a carnivalesque, funhouse image, exaggerating the warps and curves of experimental outrageousness (especially when caught in the sights of skeptical conservative critics or the distortions of intoxication). But they also enabled some Americans to take a good hard look at themselves, and the collective national psyche often disliked what it saw.

While the bohemian subculture certainly was subject to many of the prejudices and inequalities of race and gender that afflicted the broader society, it nonetheless was a key liminal site where novel identities could be tested. For scores of young writers, artists, and dissidents drawn to Greenwich Village or North Beach, “it was the kind of scene [they’d] dreamed of.”³ Nightspots played a vital role in radical communities, providing community institutions, and forming the foundation of a new public sphere—a *counterpublic* that fundamentally challenged many of the assumptions of mainstream America. During the direct and indirect oppression of the Red Scare, the Rebel Cafe was a fallout shelter for Left cultural producers and intellectuals, offering public spaces for discussion and points of connection for dissident social networks. Further, it acted as a social laboratory, and allowed space for the more daring subterranean aviators, as well as aspiring nonconformists, to flight-test flamboyant public personas. As the Greenwich Village poet Max Eastman once said, suggesting the potent mix of art and life that energized many in the nightclub underground, “We wanted to *live* our poetry.”⁴

“MAD TO TALK”: COMMUNICATION AND LIBERATION IN THE REBEL CAFE

In the 1960s, sociologist Jurgen Habermas first fully articulated the idea of the

³ J. R. Goddard, “The Wonderful World of the White Horse,” *Village Voice*, June 22, 1961 in *The Village Voice Anthology (1956—1980): Twenty-five Years of Writing from The Village Voice*, ed. Geoffrey Stokes (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982), 92.

⁴ Ross Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams: Greenwich Village: The American Bohemia, 1910-1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 12.

“public sphere”: the marketplace of ideas that emerged in the eighteenth century to mediate between the private sphere of the citizen and the political realm. Historians, political scientists, and fellow sociologists have debated ever since over how to properly define “the public,” noting the exclusions of gender and race that limited the ideal Habermasian model and refining its framework to account for the competing interests within a pluralistic society.⁵ Conversely, it is possible to mark the appearance of an identifiable “counterpublic” when the oppositional claims of a social class or marginalized community become fully articulated in contradistinction to the dominant public sphere. This occurs through the establishment of independent institutions of public discussion and media, such as the Communist networks of the 1930s or Black Nationalism in the 1960s, which offer challenges to the political status quo.⁶ But within either the dominant public sphere or a counterpublic, communication is the mode through which its social and political realities are defined, as participants articulate ideas, form ideologies, and define the boundaries of inclusion or exclusion.

Like language itself, communication structures reality, shaping the mental world that, like a map, becomes real through its form and function. Reality is therefore a “resource” created by social discourse, structured by language, media, and relations of power. As communications scholar Michael Schudson argues, systematic conversation

⁵ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989); Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992); Evan Charney, “Political Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Public Sphere”: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Mar., 1998): 97-110; Clarissa Rile Hayward, “The Difference States Make: Democracy, Identity, and the American City”: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (Nov., 2003): 501-514; Margaret R. Somers, “What’s Political or Cultural about Political Culture and the Public Sphere? Toward an Historical Sociology of Concept Formation”: *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Jul., 1995): 113-144.

⁶ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Transl. by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 17-19, 60-1, 79-80. 91-2, 138-9, 256.

based on recognized norms is crucial for a functioning, pluralistic democracy, which “stands not only for toleration, law-governed liberty, and a notion of justice centered on rights but also ‘reasoned self-government’.”⁷ As political theorist Hannah Arendt has suggested, however, public faith in language is often diminished by assertions of power and the restriction of public space or social connections.⁸ Yet this struggle only underscores the significance of face-to-face conversation as a crucial element in the public sphere. The Rebel Cafe removed the exchange of ideas from both the diffusion of mass media and the private sphere, making participants’ claims for social space visible, both physically and in their psychogeography, the mental maps that make “society” a reality.

At the center of the Rebel Cafe’s emergence as an oppositional institution was a deceptively simple activity: talk. Admittedly, it has become a cliché to quote Jack Kerouac’s declaration that the demimonde’s subterraneans were “mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved,” a phrase tossed out almost reflexively as shorthand for youthful exuberance and the romance of the American road.⁹ But it is equally true that (literally) this remark’s central meaning—the crucial social and cultural role of talk—is often taken for granted. Bohemians and progressive thinkers in part developed their ideas through intensive sessions of “bar talk,” in which identities and ideologies were examined, explored, and transformed. And while many nocturnal conversations hinged on the

⁷ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 30-1, 83-8; Michael Schudson, “Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14 (1997): 303.

⁸ Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 83-4.

⁹ Blake Bailey, “Mad to Talk,” *New York Times*, August 6, 2010. This is, of course, simply a representative example. Nearly every work on the Beats quotes this phrase and even the most cursory list of titles demonstrates this ubiquity. See, for example, David Sterritt, *Mad to be Saved: The Beats, the ‘50s, and Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998) and Michael Hrebeniak, *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac’s Wild Form* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006).

innocuous or inane, even these cannot be completely dismissed. Nightspots were places to blow off steam and escape the pressures of modern society. Even the most playful bar talk could have profound meaning for those seeking liberation from dominant social, sexual, or racial norms, as nonconformists publicly tested oppositional ideas. Therefore, the *spaces* in which these conversations took place, in terms of both physical places and social relations, had a significant impact on the evolution of Cold War culture.¹⁰

“At ‘The Pot’,” proclaimed the tourist guide, *Where to Sin in San Francisco*, “passionate, tireless artist-debaters mill about the bar.” Taking up the slack where the support of the WPA had left off, the Iron Pot’s function as an avant-garde gallery remained intertwined with the nearby Montgomery Block building as a haven for artists, leftists, and other nonconformists: many local artists garnered the meager incomes needed to maintain residences at the “Monkey Block” with sales from the cafe. The guidebook’s authors continued by offering a colorful description of the Iron Pot that hinted at its dual role as both a community center and as part of North Beach’s commodified bohemia:

Eager tourists, bored card-players, cab-drivers (ardent collectors) and rapt, sometimes wrapped lovers jam the oilcloth-covered tables. . . . And often you’ll find an authentic S.O.S. tacked up: ‘HELP! Being EVICTED again. Desperately need something CHEAP and EMPTY.

Armchair psychoanalysts enjoy the Men’s Room. Here unknown artists have covered the walls . . . with inartistic, venomous, very red symbols of political, sexual and aesthetic frustration.

“*We are not responsible,*” remarks the omniscient menu, “*for lost articles or customers.*”¹¹

This entry captured much of the atmosphere that regulars and tourists alike expected from North Beach and Greenwich Village nightspots, with their potent mix of radical talk,

¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Transl. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1984, 1991), 8-9, 32-9.

¹¹ Jack Lord and Lloyd Hoff, *Where to Sin in San Francisco* (San Francisco: Richard Guggenheim and Jorgenson & Co., 1953), 77.

artistic daring, and transgressive sexuality. Moreover, it presents a blueprint of spatial relationships that often characterized Rebel Cafe sites, with open social spaces up front, relatively welcoming to initiates and furnished with tables for face-to-face interactions, and deeper recesses that connoted sexual or politically subversive activities.

While a night out in bohemia meant adventurous entertainment for the uninitiated, with only the *possibility* of participation in the exotic underworld, for dissident cultural producers nightspots were bound up with the process of creative self-expression and community formation. “We would do the grand tour,” recalled radical artist Knute Stiles, discussing his early experiences in San Francisco. “We covered The Black Cat, The Paper Doll, and so on in North Beach, and then on down to the bars south of Market Street.” Stiles arrived in 1949, joining his friend, photographer Leo Krikorian, a fellow alumnus of the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and “the first night that I was here—he took me to The Black Cat.” Stiles’ anarchist leanings also led him to Kenneth Rexroth’s loquacious Libertarian Circle, whose conversations often went well into the night at various North Beach cafes. Stiles remembered that “there were a lot of people whom I had first known as Marxists who quarreled with me a lot. And so it was a genuine dialogue; it wasn’t a monologue.”¹²

This kind of radical talk, intertwined with increasingly visible gay and lesbian communities, continued to be labeled by Bay Area commentators as “bohemian.” New arrivals like the radical gay poets Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan also joined the young surrealist Phillip Lamantia as part of Rexroth’s anarchist circle. “Above all, I was attracted by his inexhaustible and encyclopedic way of conversing,” Lamantia recalled.

¹² “Stiles, Knute, Transcript of Interview by Ellingham,” May 30, 1982, East-West House, 733 Baker St., San Francisco, pp. 19, 23-3, 85, Papers of Writer Lewis Ellingham, MSS # 126, Box 4, Folder 7, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

“Sometimes we’d talk a whole weekend.” Nightspots gave their rebellious stance a public platform. For radicals like Lamantia in the ever more conservative 1940s, “bars like the Iron Pot and the Black Cat, where intellectuals went to talk” were “islands of freedom.”¹³

BOHEMIA’S SOCIAL BUTTERFLY: HENRI LENOIR AND THE EXPANSION OF NORTH BEACH NIGHTLIFE

While the Black Cat maintained a measure of infamy in the press as a “menace to public morals,” with its occasional arrests for drugs, fistfights, or “lewd” behavior, reporters also heralded it and the Iron Pot as “one of the last vestiges of S.F.’s Bohemia.”¹⁴ As North Beach nightlife experienced a wartime expansion and postwar contraction, scenesters and journalists mistook generational shift as decline. This led Iron Pot promoter Henri Lenoir to wage a sort of artistic public relations campaign in which he promoted avant-garde art showings while snapping photographs to document nonconformist patrons. Iron Pot regulars spanned from the 1930s WPA and laborite crowd, such as Peter Macchiarini, Dong Kingman, Cecil McKiddy, and Luke Gibney, to a younger generation like Peggy Tolk-Watkins, another Black Mountain alumnus from New York, who opened her own nightclub—the campy Tin Angel—in 1948.¹⁵ Lenoir’s photos even captured interactions across the color line, still relatively rare in this period. Images of interracial couples and artists like Sargent Johnson, whose work was influenced by Harlem Renaissance thinkers like Alain Locke, were prominent in Lenoir’s collection—although his captions’ frequent references to Blacks as an unnamed

¹³ Interview: “Philip Lamantia (1998),” in David Meltzer, ed. *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 136; James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters, eds., *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 203.

¹⁴ “Black Cat, Bohemian Bar, Raided After Brawl; Six Jailed,” September 4, 1947, “Three of Six Seized in Raid on Black Cat Cafe Released,” September 5, 1947, and “Tavern Ban Lifted by Court’s Order,” October 25, 1949, *San Francisco Examiner*, n.p., Black Cat Cafe envelope in Examiner Morgue, SFPL; Untitled clipping, April 20, 1948, *San Francisco Examiner*, Iron Pot envelope, Examiner Morgue, SFPL; Undated and unpaginated clipping, Vol. 1, Henri Lenoir Papers.

¹⁵ Photograph, including McKiddy in uniform, at the Iron Pot by Henri Lenoir, undated, Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1.

“wandering musician” or “piano player from Club Alabam” also betray an element of jazz-hipster exoticism.¹⁶ After the war, Lenoir helped supplement Rexroth’s tenuous income by hawking his poems to patrons at the Iron Pot. And in 1949, Marie Rexroth casually wrote to her husband that their friend from the WPA days, painter Richard Ayer, was doing well—healthy and (temporarily) sober—and “has two pictures hanging in the Iron Pot (And why not, says Dick, Varda has two in there also!)”¹⁷

Lenoir’s satirical flair was stamped on the Iron Pot’s paraphernalia. Menus contained price lists for paintings alongside proclamations that the “male customers who need a hair cut are not artists” and “No credit extended to editorial consultants, advertising agency account executives, radio continuity writers, newspaper men or other bums.”¹⁸ Lenoir slyly confirmed the Iron Pot’s bona fides by winking at its commodified artistic allure, advising customers that the “bohemian atmosphere is strictly phony. For genuine bohemian atmosphere, go to the Black Cat.”

Nightspots were also sites of psychosexual experimentation, where seekers flirted with new identities and invoked romantic notions of a cosmopolitan bohemian past. One free-spirited actress remembered North Beach cafes as the places in the early 1950s where she “tried peyote and listened to a lot of writers and musicians and anarchists.” Turning a jaundiced eye toward her youthful exuberance for a milieu that included nudist parties and sexual encounters of all stripes, she continued:

¹⁶ Lenoir Photos, Vol. 1, Henri Lenoir Papers; Tommy Lott, “Sargent Johnson: The ‘New Negro’ Artist,” http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=Sargent_Johnson:_The_%22New_Negro%22_Artist (accessed October 1, 2012); Oral history interview with Richard Ayer, 1964 Sept. 26, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; “Tin Angel’s Peggy Tolk-Watkins Dies,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 26, 1973, n.p. in Examiner Morgue, SFPL; Ralph Gleason, “Days of Peggy and Helen,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 8, 1973, *This World* insert p.33.

¹⁷ Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), 142-3; Marie Rexroth to Kenneth Rexroth, undated, “Monday Night,” Box 24, Folder 5, Kenneth Rexroth Papers (Collection 175), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

¹⁸ “Notice to Tourists,” Iron Pot Menu, 1943, Vol. 1, Henri Lenoir Papers.

For the most part they talked a lot of crap. These people I met would break down and cry over some issue or other. I was no intellectual, and so half the time I didn't understand what they were getting so emotional about.

Once a woman got furious about some pictures in the bathroom: some vaguely Asian prints of a fornicating couple . . . There were these little flames all around their genitals. I thought the bland looks on their faces were supposed to be funny, but the woman who got furious stormed out of the bathroom and gave the painter and his friends hell because she didn't think such pictures should be in the *bathroom* where people could look at them while defecating, because that put sex in the toilet, lowered it to the level of a bodily function. . . .

[The Iron Pot] was on Montgomery Street, but I felt as if it might be on the Left Bank with the last of the Lost Generation. Everything suited my imagination, except the people. I couldn't get them to fit. I thought being bohemian meant being yourself, and I thought being yourself meant being happy. I expected to look up and see Gertrude Stein walk in with Alice. I didn't know Gertrude Stein had moved to Paris because it was *cheaper* than San Francisco. I was naive, even for 20.¹⁹

Rising rents in North Beach were indeed an outcome of the bohemian influx (which was even more pronounced in Greenwich Village), but the gradual proliferation of literary cafes was another sign of the area's radical reputation.²⁰ In 1948, in the wake of the Iron Pot's success, the cafe's owners decided that Lenoir's art-brokering services were superfluous and handed him a pink slip. Lenoir quickly moved his operations, first to the gay-bohemian bar 12 Adler Place, then to "a jermt of his own," the Vesuvio Cafe. Opening in July 1949, the bar was another attempt to wed tourist-friendly publicity with the kind of creative atmosphere found at the Black Cat. Vesuvio marked what one local artist called a "new era in North Beach bohemia."²¹ Lenoir displayed local art as he had at the Iron Pot, including pieces by Hilaire Hiler, with whom he had performed during the 1920s at the Jockey cabaret in Paris. Having purchased the ailing bar from an immigrant family ("nothing but Italian spoken in the joint," remembered Lenoir's first bartender, the

¹⁹ Jennifer Stone, "At the Black Cat, the Iron Pot and the Jackpot," *Mother Jones*, August 1976, 38.

²⁰ Brian J. Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco's Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 8-17, 22-53, 94-127.

²¹ Untitled clipping, *San Francisco Examiner*, May 4, 1948, Iron Pot envelope, Examiner Morgue, SFPL; Mel Fowler, "Henri Lenoir—A Sketch," *Comprehension*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (Winter, 1950-51): 20, photocopy in the Lenoir Pictorial Collection, BANC PIC 2004.158—C, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Untitled clipping dated August 26, 1949 photograph of Vesuvio at time of purchase, and account sheet, Vol. 1, Henri Lenoir Papers; Charles Modecke Interview, *The Beach*.

artist Charles Modecke), Lenoir began to promote his new venture as “Bohemia’s last stand!” First calling the bar “Lenoir’s” he cast about with the locals for a new name, testing out such monikers as The Blue Beret and the Last Stand before caving to patrons’ preference simply to keep “Vesuvio.”²²

Lenoir imported much of the political slant, and many of the regulars, from the Iron Pot and Black Cat. He hired former WPA artist Luke Gibney as a bartender, whom Modecke remembered as “very leftist in his attitudes” and who once refused a much-needed commission because he refused to paint a “filthy capitalist’s” portrait. Noting Gibney’s cosmopolitanism, Modecke continued: “He had been in Paris as a young man and he kind of carried that tradition here, and so did Henri, who came from Switzerland originally. And [Vesuvio] was a little extension of what Paris must have been.”²³ In a letter to Kenneth Rexroth written after the anarchist poet published his autobiography in 1964, Lenoir revealed hints about his radical literary approach to Vesuvio—as well as the misogyny that sometimes suffused bohemian nightspots. After praising Rexroth’s new tome and admitting that he “had no idea of the many fantastic experiences you have had, nor your incredible devotion to study, painting and pussy,” Lenoir reminisced of their pre-war days at the Black Cat and Iron Pot, placing Vesuvio in a tradition going back to Rexroth’s Green Mask.

With my limited experience I tried to make the Vesuvio interesting but it was a far cry from your Chicago joints. In the beginning with the sawdust, candles and beer and wine license, it attracted every penniless chess-player and militant left-wing guitar player and folk singer in Northern California. I had no capital reserves, in fact was in debt, so after putting up with alot of unprofitable bullshit and FBI surveillance, I finally got fed up and kicked alot of those people out. One day I was so exasperated that I put a big sign in the window which said “This establishment is positively non-bohemian.”

²² Herb Caen, “Talk of the Town,” September 9, 1949, clipping, and “Name Contest Entry Blank,” March 28, 1950 in Vol. 1, Henri Lenoir Papers; Charles Modecke Interview, *The Beach*.

²³ *Ibid.*

Lenoir was typical of immigrant nightspot owners who balanced their artistic or social standpoints with the exigencies of commerce. Yet his attempt to clean house, however seriously he took it, could not stem the left-bohemian tide. Noting a news rack that sat in front of the bar, he quipped, “It says IWW, and has ‘The Industrial Worker.’ I don’t know who put it there.”²⁴

One habitu  later recalled the importance of Vesuvio for San Francisco’s changing postwar bohemian community: “Vesuvio has never been just a bar. It’s true that booze sales pay the bills but the place is also an art gallery, a museum, a living room for those of us in cramped apartments, a community meeting place, a support group headquarters, a literary Mecca, a mandatory stop on a tourist’s agenda, and a place to try and get laid.”²⁵ Lenoir further boosted the site’s bohemian feel with printed signs over the bar and matchbook covers with ironic catchphrases such as, “MODERN DANCING and IMMODEST DRESS STIR DESIRE: leading to Lustful Flirting, Fornication, Adultery, Divorce, Disease, Destruction and Judgment,” and, “The customers in this bar are entirely fictitious. Any resemblance to actual, living persons is purely accidental.”²⁶ The conservative *San Francisco Examiner* jovially heralded it as a “hangout for the illiterati,” describing men’s room graffiti drawn opening passage from the *Aeneid*—“in Latin, yet . . .” Vesuvio was also the San Francisco drinking destination of Dylan Thomas, after Knute Stiles brought him there during his first visit to the US in 1950. If, as one local magazine suggested, Vesuvio represented North Beach’s “answer to Greenwich Village”—where the patrons “provide their own entertainment, a la Parisian bistro

²⁴ Henri Lenoir to Kenneth Rexroth, undated (c. 1964), Box 13, Folder 11, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

²⁵ Robert Celli, “Vesuvio’s,” <http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=Vesuvios> (accessed October 1, 2012).

²⁶ Photograph, undated, in Vol. 1, Henri Lenoir Papers; “These Foolish Things,” *San Francisco Examiner*, September 22, 1950, n.p., Vesuvio envelope, Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

style”—Thomas’s visit certainly made it the West Coast counterpart to New York’s White Horse Tavern, where the doomed Welsh poet ultimately drank his last beer three years later.²⁷

It is not surprising that Thomas took a liking to Vesuvio, with its narrow street-level barroom and a balcony with carved-wood railings and balustrades. The bar’s Old World roots were still visible underneath the contrived carelessness of the poetic paraphernalia that cluttered its walls—including a life-sized effigy of Lenoir in beret and sunglasses, pages from Freud, and a Victorian-era magic lantern projecting slides of nudes and impressionist paintings, as well as a direct invocation of North Beach’s esteemed bohemian past: the door from Izzy Gomez’s cafe. With a seventy-five person capacity, much like the Iron Pot and Black Cat, Vesuvio’s close quarters encouraged intimate talk among familiars and inter-table talk among strangers.²⁸

Yet a sort of spatially-reversed hierarchy also formed that helps explain the bar’s success. Regulars capitalized on their insider status, squeezing themselves in at the bar or in tiny ground-floor alcoves, while tourists took the more exposed spaces such as the balcony. This allowed visitors to imbibe both the atmosphere and their cocktails to their hearts’ content, while locals kept a sense of exclusivity, a fictional distance from commercialism that underlay Vesuvio’s bohemian credibility. Modecke later divulged how hip artists playfully enjoyed this arrangement, saying, “I can remember many times

²⁷ “Don’t Be Surprised,” *San Francisco Examiner*, September 5, 1950, n.p. Vesuvio envelope, Examiner Morgue, SFPL; Untitled clipping, *San Francisco News*, May 8, 1950, Vol. 1, Henri Lenoir Papers; Knute Stiles Interview, Ellingham Papers, 65-6; “Vesuvio Cafe,” *Inside San Francisco*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (March, 1958), 13.

²⁸ J.G. Hillard, “The Iron Pot,” condensed from the *Pacific Coast Record with Western Restaurant*, undated clipping, Vol. 1, Henri Lenoir Papers; Don McClure, “A Speakeasy Remembered: Back Through Izzy’s Door,” February 20, 1959, n.p. clipping and “An Agreement between Belfast Beverages, Inc. of San Francisco, California, and Mr. Henri Lenoir, Owner of Vesuvio Cafe, 255 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, California,” February 9, 1959, Vol. 2, Henri Lenoir Papers.

sitting with them in Vesuvio, either before or after a chess game, and they remarking that all those people over there looking at each other are tourists and they think they are looking at artists, but here the artists are over in this corner.”²⁹

These multiple levels of public presentation, conversation, and group play set Vesuvio beside the Black Cat and Iron Pot at the center of North Beach bohemia—even as it gained a reputation among insiders in the 1950s as a “tourist trap.” For many who had to fund their social exploration with day-jobs, these sites satisfied the need to unwind from the “mundane world.” As one young artists recalled, “My greatest joy was to come home in the evening and change my clothes and have some dinner and travel down to Vesuvio’s—sometimes to 12 Adler.”³⁰ Especially for new arrivals, these sites offered points of connection in an otherwise large and impersonal city. In the early 1950s, Jack Spicer went to the Black Cat to overcome his bewilderment at city life and meet area poets after his arrival from the university enclave of Berkeley. But mostly, North Beach nonconformists found the Black Cat to be “a real drinking establishment,” a place for “Sailors and hookers and just everything.” One member of Spicer’s circle remembered the literary connotations of the cafe’s clientele that also evoked hints of European cabaret: “Intellectuals; painters; it was very ‘modern,’ in that sense, because you had everything from transvestites to businessmen to girls out on dates with young boys. It was the sort of place, you know, to start an adventure . . . almost like an existentialist hangout . . . [where] everybody was reading Sartre and Camus.” Leo Krikorian later described the libertine ethos of Vesuvio, with regulars that included a heterosexual transvestite and young woman who stood on tables and stripped each time her favorite song played on the

²⁹ Charles Modecke Interview, *The Beach*.

³⁰ Knute Stiles Interview, Ellingham Papers; Larry Pitt Interview, *The Beach*.

jukebox. In 1953, Krikorian and Stiles started their own bohemian bar, The Place, which shared similar patrons because “we had already been to the [San Francisco Art] Institute, right, so, and then we used to hang out in Vesuvio’s and the Black Cat, so we knew all the artists already.” And what was the attraction? “Well, The Black Cat and Vesuvio’s, you could almost do anything.”³¹

NOCTURNAL NEW YORK, LEFT LITERATI, AND THE BEAT GENERATION

In Greenwich Village, a similar formula that mixed Black Mountain alumni with budding writers and intellectuals from Columbia University and the left-leaning New School gave rise to a new generation of liberated nightspots. The most significant were the San Remo, the Cedar Tavern, and the White Horse Tavern. Each attracted some of the most notorious artistic and literary iconoclasts of twentieth-century. Although there was much overlap among bar patrons, the Cedar was primarily a hangout for painters and claimed Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock; the San Remo and White Horse mainly hosted writers and poets, including Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Judith Malina, and the Beats. As a result, these sites gained quasi-mythical reputations that are sometimes difficult to disentangle from their actual histories. Because of New York’s status as the national (even global) center of postwar publishing and arts, American readers were often privy to offhanded mentions of these Village bars. From the 1960s through the 1990s, they appeared in a multitude of novels, memoirs, and articles focused on the 1950s scene, as writers and journalists placed their accounts in now familiar settings—and grasped the prestige that came with situating themselves in renowned places.

³¹ Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover and London: University of New England Press, 1998), 41-2; Interviews with Charles Modecke and Leo Krikorian, *The Beach*, dir. by Mary Kerr (CA Palm, 1995).

In reality, many other largely-forgotten nightspots fulfilled much the same function within New York's massive nightlife. The Minetta Tavern, Cafe Reggio, Goody's, and Louis's Tavern in the Village, the West End Bar at 113th Street and Broadway near Columbia University, and numerous other bars and clubs along Times Square or 52nd Street were entry points into the larger Rebel Cafe and spaces to explore the underside of American life. Beat writer William Burroughs, working as a bartender during World War II, expressed his fascination with the "characters of the underworld" by keeping an annotated list of bars along Eighth Avenue in Midtown. The West End Bar, however, was the most significant Beat Generation site in these formative years. Beat writer Joyce Johnson later described it as a "plain bar of dark wood and no particular charm, bottles lined up on mirrored tiers." The West End was one of New York's "nondescript places . . . that for some reason always made the best hangouts." Along with the "pads" of local hipsters, she recalled, these bars were like a "psychic way station between the Village and Times Square, or between Morningside Heights and the Lower Depths, in the mental geography of those who came together there."³²

It was at the West End that Jack Kerouac was introduced to Lucien Carr by Edie Parker (Kerouac's first wife), who went there between Columbia art classes with George Grosz. Carr then introduced Kerouac to Burroughs, a friend from his native St. Louis. The West End was also where Allen Ginsberg first met Neal Cassady (the model for Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the Road*). In addition to these literal introductions, the West End also provided literary lessons. It was the place Kerouac and Ginsberg had some of their most fervent early discussions about writing, which Ginsberg fictionalized

³² Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 60; Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), 3, 8-9.

in an abandoned novel he variously titled “The Radical Cafe” and “The Rational Cafe.” In a scene centered on one such discussion between Ducasse (Kerouac) and Bliestein (Ginsberg), the Beat concern with a sense of place and “the real” came to the surface. “The trouble with you, Bliestein, is that you don’t write about your own environment,” penned Ginsberg. “Look at you—a Jew from Jersey City, and you don’t have a feeling for your country. . . . You have no sense of the present, of land.”³³

Harlem also claimed a share of important nightspots, most notably Small’s Paradise, where a seventeen-year-old Malcolm Little became “Detroit Red”—the first stop on his path from the underworld to leadership in the Black Freedom Struggle as Malcolm X. Like so many other ambitious newcomers, he sought to put his small-time past behind him. “Within the first five minutes in Small’s,” he later declared, “I had left Boston and Roxbury forever.”³⁴ But few of the transformations experienced within New York’s nightlife were as dramatic and significant as that of Malcolm X; most passed unremarked and unrecorded. So although many accounts of Small’s, the Cedar, San Remo, and White Horse likely misidentified their locales, they are nonetheless useful as collective memory, symbols which represent many more numerous, nameless, and ephemeral moments within the nocturnal demimonde.

For Village bohemians and cultural producers, literary bars suited much the same function as the Black Cat or Vesuvio in North Beach. The owners of New York bars, however, tended not to be bohemians, but rather paralleled the Iron Pot model, in which immigrant families (often Italian) simply welcomed any crowds willing to spend their dollars. Both the Cedar and White Horse originally opened in the nineteenth century—the

³³ Charters, *Kerouac*, 44-6, 64, 73-4.

³⁴ Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964; New York: Random House, Ballantine Books Edition, 1999), 76, 77-99.

Cedar possibly as early as 1866. The White Horse, a contemporary of New York's original Black Cat, opened in the 1880s to serve the largely Irish immigrant community that swelled the West Village. German émigré Ernest Wohlleben took ownership by 1917, and the White Horse continued through the 1950s under his stewardship. Ernie, as his loyal patrons called him, persevered through Prohibition by serving bootleg beer on the sly, and by the 1930s he had attracted a varied mix of "left wingers," labor organizers, local Irish, and a smattering of bohemians. In 1925, the Santini family opened the San Remo Cafe, which also survived Prohibition.³⁵ The Cedar didn't, but reopened just before Repeal in 1933 under an incorporated ownership. San Francisco artist Robert McChesney later recalled that fellow WPA sculptor Rueben Kadish was part owner of the Cedar, which may help explain its connection with painters such as Pollock, but otherwise there were no significant ties between Village bar owners and the culture industry.³⁶

In fact, one habitué suggested, the Cedar's cultural tabula rasa was precisely its attraction for artists, "because it wasn't handicapped by possessing any character."³⁷ The San Remo similarly contrasted with the flamboyant decor of the Black Cat or Vesuvio. Yet in terms of function, the New York bars paralleled their North Beach brethren: each was small, with a capacity below one hundred, a bar along one wall, and separate sections for face-to-face conversation. At the San Remo and Cedar, this meant booths along the

³⁵ Whitney Pastorek, "My New York Haunt," *New York Times*, December 3, 2006, p. CY-17; Goddard, "The Wonderful World of the White Horse," 92-96; Ernest Wohlleben Draft Registration Card, Local Board Division 164, June 5, 1917; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920*, District 726, Ward 10; New York City Directory, 1933; Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in New York: A Walking Tour of Jack Kerouac's City* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 88-9. The result of this commercial approach was a less dramatic entrance onto the cultural stage, but also perhaps provided greater longevity: the Iron Pot slowly faded as a key bohemian site as Vesuvio and other places stole its thunder in the early 1950s, whereas the San Remo hung on until 1967 and the Cedar until 2006. (The White Horse and Vesuvio remain open as of this writing.)

³⁶ "Business Leases Dominate Trading," *New York Times*, July 27, 1933, p. 32; Oral history interview with Hebe Daum Stackpole and Jack Moxom, 1965 Jan. 9, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³⁷ John Wilcock, *The Village Square* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1961), 170-1.

wall opposite the bar, which became small group gathering points, while the White Horse had two succeeding rooms with small tables, giving patrons a sense of sheltered descent as they moved deeper into the “back room.” And like North Beach, these bars had deep roots in the Greenwich Village working class and before World War II primarily served longshoremen who worked nearby and the neighborhood’s first- and second-generation Italian immigrants.

By 1948, however, *Commentary* journalist Milton Klonsky blithely described the long-forgotten bohemian hangout George’s Bar as “the ancestor of the San Remo today.” The bar’s literary origins are obscure, but poet Harold Norse reported having gone there as early as 1942 with bohemian labor organizer Harry Hershkowitz. He also recalled meeting a teenage James Baldwin after an evening of drinking there the following January. Baldwin himself became a San Remo regular by 1945.³⁸ *New York Times* restaurant critic Mimi Sheraton, who moved to the Village around the same time, remembered the bar as fundamental to her early bohemian experiences. Defiance against her parents’ warnings that interracial couples and “Communists” made the neighborhood unsavory became wrapped up with bohemia’s literary imaginary, since the “raffish Village was as close to Paris as I could get.” When Left activist Michael Harrington arrived in 1949 and innocently wandered into the lesbian Cafe Bohemia seeking local left-wingers, he was quickly told, “You don’t belong here, buddy. You’re a San Remo

³⁸ Milton Klonsky, “Greenwich Village: Decline and Fall,” in Chandler Brossard, ed., *The Scene Before You: A New Approach to American Culture* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), 22; Harold Norse, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1989), 108-10; David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 49-50. Hershkowitz was yet another tie between bohemia and the larger anarchist network. An acolyte of Henry Miller, he was also in touch with George Leite, who printed Rexroth’s Libertarian group journal, *Circle*, in San Francisco. See Phil Nurenberg’s Bern Porter Interview, August 25-27, 1980 in Belfast, Maine, *Vagabond White Paper Number 5*, Vagabond Press, Ellensburg, Washington.

type.”³⁹ The Cedar’s identification with painters was equally established by 1948, the year to which critic Clement Greenberg dated the start of the abstract expressionist “scene”—although it was likely Jackson Pollock’s regular haunt for a couple of years previous. Greenberg, who hated the notion of identifiable art movements and insisted that “a scene kills,” absolutely detested the artists’ tavern. “At the Cedar,” he recalled, with its “studiedly proletarian” ambiance of booths and rickety tables, “*everybody* looked unattractive.”⁴⁰

It is clear that by 1950, when Norman Mailer began to host a writer’s group in the White Horse Tavern, the Village cultural bar scene was already established. The artist and critic Elaine de Kooning, wife of painter Willem, called it the “booze explosion,” as rebellious originators sought authentic lived experience through intense and often sodden interactions with working-class or underworld “characters.”⁴¹ This producerist counterpublic began in isolated pockets of discussion, such as Norse’s wartime East Village bouts with Hershkowitz and other radicals in an area known as “Paradise Alley.” Norse noted that, “unknown to us,” the young Beats were simultaneously “doing their job of making a new sound in the spoken word in New York,” as Ginsberg and Kerouac began their nocturnal excursions in the West End Bar. These clusters slowly overlapped and absorbed each other into a single scene which was psychologically, if not always geographically, set in the Village. While Norse admitted that the eccentric Hershkowitz

³⁹ Mimi Sheraton, “In the Village, 50-Year Affair For a Walker Still in Love: In the Village, a 50-Year Affair for a Walker Still in Love,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1997, p. C-1; Michael Harrington, *Fragments of the Century* (New York: Saturday Review Press/E. P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 39-40.

⁴⁰ John Gruen, *The Party’s Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York’s Artists, Writers, and their Friends* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 128, 181-2. WPA artist Harold Rosenberg, who was also part of the Artist Club that included de Kooning and Kline, and also counted poets like Bodenheim and Siegel as friends, remembered the group coalescing starting in 1943. They often went to local cafeterias to talk, but Pollock preferred the Cedar because he did not like “doing stuff with coffee.” *Ibid*, 174-7.

⁴¹ Mary V. Dearborn, *Mailer: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 88-9; Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams*, 552.

“talked much and wrote little,” the literary circle in which they and Kerouac “traded drunken insults” at the San Remo or MacDougal Tavern proved a creative wellspring.⁴² Over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, it provided fertile soil not only for the Beat writers and their publishing houses, Grove Press and New Directions, but also the *Village Voice*, Norman Mailer’s works of New Journalism, and groundbreaking texts of social criticism which laid foundations for the sweeping changes of the 1960s, such as Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) and Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962).

The poetry and literature spawned by the creative competition in these largely masculine sites also grew from New York’s notoriously close quarters, with its cramped apartments, neighborhoods which mixed working-class denizens and intellectuals, and diverse political viewpoints. “At one time in 1945-6,” Ginsberg wrote in a 1948 journal entry, “Jack and I had spent a lot of time together, even sharing the same small room around Columbia, and we had no money, and no place to go at night to continue talking after the bars closed.” Ginsberg’s “intellectual” friend Lucien Carr introduced him to both “low-life” bars like the West End—where “conversations about Cezanne, Spengler” alternated with jazz and marijuana—and the Village scene at the Minetta Tavern.⁴³ Norse spent his nights with fellow poets like Paul Blackburn, as they would “drink in the Village and talk about [Ezra] Pound.” Norse reported that Blackburn’s group included

⁴² Harold Norse to Paul Carroll, November 30, 1959, Paul D. Carroll Papers, Box 2, Folder 22, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library; Norse, *Bastard Angel*, 108-12; *Ginsberg: A Biography* Materials, Lucien Carr Interview, March 9, 1986, Barry Miles Papers, Box 23, Folder 6, and Allen Ginsberg Interview, 1983, Miles Papers, Box 23, Folder 7, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

⁴³ Barry Miles, “The Beat Generation in the Village,” in Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz, eds., *Greenwich Village* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 165-7; Carr Interview, Miles Papers, Columbia University; Journals, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 6 (typescript, pp. 15 and 25), Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

several “ardent disciples of the great lunatic,” and even counted one “niggerlynchingsonofabitchmotherfuckingbastard” who embraced Pound’s fascist politics.⁴⁴

Pound’s anti-Semitism or Oswald Spengler’s theories of Western civilization’s decline made appropriate bar-talk fodder for a generation disillusioned by World War II. Norse, for example, had witnessed the lynching of a Black worker while serving in sheet-metal production in Alabama, the feeling of helplessness at his inability to stop the attack shattering the optimism kindled during his experiences in the WPA. He was haunted by the incident, which augmented a sense of outsider solidarity rooted at least in part in his gay and Jewish identity.⁴⁵ Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) became the first literary monument to this brand of postwar distress, with its Tolstoy-esque view of human fallibility in war and politics. And fellow New Yorkers such as Goodman, Harrington, Anatole Broyard, and John Clellon Holmes shared his discontent. Each thought that writers and intellectuals could effectively critique society, and they gathered at the San Remo and White Horse to hash out their ideas.⁴⁶

Rather than the cool, almost formalized cocktail conversation that had long characterized private gatherings in the apartments of New York academics and writers, bar talk brewed up a desultory mix of social and sexual ambitions. Cocktail-party talk is

⁴⁴ Norse to Carroll, January 26, 1960, Carroll Papers, University of Chicago. The fascist was named John Kasper.

⁴⁵ Norse remembered the period as a time of underground solidarity among gays, Blacks, and women. With a subtle nod to the naiveté of this ingenuous view, he stated, “Perhaps, because we were young and struggling for liberation from oppression, we shared a community of feeling that gained intensity because we could entertain little hope, realistically, for improvement of our condition.” Noting the significance of Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” to his social awakening, he continued, “Jazz and blues provided the expression of these feelings.” Norse, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, 78-85, 95, 101-2, 166-7.

⁴⁶ Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Carol Southern Books, 1993), 19, 83-5; Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 101-2, 138-9; Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 40-45; Paul Goodman to Paul Carroll, January 9, 1961, Paul Carroll Papers, University of Chicago.

the result of *invitation*, where participants more or less know that they are part of an identifiable group in which they can maneuver. Such interactions were fundamental to dissident social circles—enough so that the intellectual Mary McCarthy was once quipped that radicals ended up in the Communist Party or Socialist Worker’s Party “depending on what cocktail party you went to.”⁴⁷ The bar, on the other hand, is for searching, for navigating multiple social streams in hopes of finding an amenable landing, the place where an invitation is finally obtained. As the writer John Gruen said of his booth-hopping interactions with the painters and Grove Press publishers at the Cedar Tavern, “we did not go the Cedar simply to be seen; we also wanted to belong.”⁴⁸ Literary bar talk, therefore, guided the construction of new social networks and identities from the disruptions and constraints of the war and its aftermath.

Heterosexual writers like Mailer, Broyard, and Holmes, who stylistically tended toward the center of the dissident spectrum, served in the military during the war. (The younger Harrington volunteered for the Army Medical Reserve during the Korean conflict as a compromise between his pacifist convictions and his family’s patriotic pressure.) The journalist and critic Broyard, and the Beat novelist Holmes, both noted the social dislocation of “wartime chaos.” Each described the “nighttime wilderness of a nation at war,” populated by “young people torn up at the roots . . . who searched in bars and movie balconies and deadend streets for home and love, and, failing to find them, forgot.” Broyard recalled that Americans were disjointed and “confronting their

⁴⁷ George Rawick Interview, Maurice Isserman Research Files for *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington*, TAM.239, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University.

⁴⁸ Gruen, *The Party’s Over*, 128. Michael Harrington later recalled gaining his first invitation to one of Norman Mailer’s famous parties through Barbara Bank, whom he met at the San Remo. Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 42.

loneliness for the first time.” “The war had broken the rhythm of American life, and when we tried to pick it up again, we couldn’t find it,” he concluded. “It was as if a great bomb, an explosion of consciousness, had gone off in American life, shattering everything.” As the forlorn “walked the streets of the Village and filled the bars,” it was “loneliness that made it seem such a lively place.” In response, writers looked to literature to tie up the loose ends of disjunction and desire. “If it hadn’t been for books, we’d have been completely at the mercy of sex,” Broyard recalled. “Books enabled us to see ourselves as characters—yes we were characters!—and this gave us a bit of control.”⁴⁹

This performativity should not be dismissed as vacuous. As Harrington later insisted, San Remo and White Horse patrons “postured about the first rate, about Proust and Joyce and Kafka, the later Beethoven quartets and Balanchine choreography, Marx and Lenin,” suggesting that “our phoniness had high standards.” Moreover, Harrington saw the emergence of “Remo types” like himself and Ginsberg as a more “adventurous” extension of the 1930s Village bohemia populated by intellectuals like Irving Howe and Dwight Macdonald. This, he argued, culminated in their own effective literary works, concluding, “The proof is in the production.”⁵⁰

The more bombastic stylists like Kerouac, Norse, Goodman, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, whose eccentricity or homosexuality made the military an ill fit, and therefore worked in the merchant marine or sat out the war among anarcho-pacifists, were mainly

⁴⁹ Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 22-3; John Clellon Holmes, *Go* (Mamaroneck, NY: Paul P. Appel, Publisher, 1952; Reprint, 1977), 32; Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage*, 80, 30.

⁵⁰ Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 46, 52; Notebook, “Me Boheme,” Box 3, Folder 1, Michael Harrington Papers, TAM 209, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, 70 Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012, New York University Libraries.

attracted to the nonconformity of Village bars.⁵¹ With more experimental (and experiential) approaches than the observational Holmes and Broyard, their accounts were peppered with mentions of “visions” and “madness,” of beauty, the “fidelity of memory,” and “unashamed desire.” Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Goodman found places to explore their homosexuality in literary sites like the San Remo (despite the homophobia of its owner) and other bars that were recognized by locals as gay. Kerouac, in an August 1945 letter to Ginsberg describing a night out in Times Square after the Japanese surrender, focused mostly on the ensuing “drinking and charming madness,” but also on his and Burroughs’ inability to pick up women since it was “a night for servicemen.” Kerouac ended the evening by sleeping with a friend’s wife as the husband lay passed out beside them.⁵²

Of course, in a Freudian world, talk was as important to sex as sex was to experience, all of which was fundamental to nocturnal explorations of identity and group dynamics as intellectuals. As an academic already in his thirties, Goodman’s approach was sometimes clinical—literally applying his theories of Gestalt psychology during discussions at the San Remo with participants such as Malina. In turn, she soon developed the inner strength to reject the misogynistic aspects of Goodman’s therapy.⁵³ Parisian émigré Anais Nin, who during the 1940s had become a legendary symbol of Greenwich Village sexual liberation, claimed the White Horse as her “favorite cafe” in

⁵¹ Charters, *Kerouac*, 39, 52; Harold Norse Biographical Statement, Box 2, Folder 22, Paul Carroll Papers, University of Chicago; Norse, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, 95; Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 47-8, 67-71; Kingsley Widmer, *Paul Goodman* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 14, 38.

⁵² Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, September 18, 1948, Box 11, Folder 15, and August 17, 1945, Box 11, Folder 14, Allen Ginsberg Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library; Journal, p. 110, Box 4, Folder 5, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford; Norse, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, 155-6, 177-84; *Paul Goodman Changed my Life*, dir. Jonathan Lee (JSL Films, 2011); Ronald Sukenick, *Down and In: Life in the Underground* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987), 23.

⁵³ Widmer, *Paul Goodman*, 92-9; Malina, *Diaries*, 211.

the early 1950s. Embracing it as “truly Irish,” replete with “old-fashioned mirrors” and “dark wood panels, mugs of dark beer and a mixture of artists and the underworld of the docks,” Nin found its working-class roots still intact:

A workman in workmen’s clothes with a giant poodle, who looked sad and innocent watching his master drinking. Artists in house painters’ uniforms. Beards, mustaches, corduroy trousers, soldiers, Negro jazz players, a Chinese girl out of a Chinese print. And the rapid machine-gun talk. Directness like a thousand arrows and utter freedom. We can say anything. There are no pauses, no examination of what we are going to say, and no effort of sequence. It is elating and invigorating. Euphoria comes from the freedom of improvisation and the fact that we never judge each other. We have set no moral, social, or realistic limits. All we ask is the electric charge of vital life dynamics, and the next day, as after listening to jazz, no hangover, no backtracking, no censorship, no malaise.

Much like her contemporaries Henry Miller and Kenneth Rexroth, Nin found liberation and authenticity in the exoticized mix of transnationalism, jazz, and unfettered talk of the nocturnal underground, making her another bridge between the bohemias of the 1930s and the 1950s.⁵⁴

Similarly, feminist Simone de Beauvoir, whose existentialist discussions with Jean-Paul Sartre at the Cafe Floré symbolized the very height of European sophistication for American bohemians, frequented New York’s nightspots as a way to experience the postwar US. Chronicling her 1947 visit as *America Day by Day*, de Beauvoir used bars as a way into a foreign culture: “I don’t like the taste of whiskey . . . Yet until three o’clock in the morning, I drink scotch docilely because scotch is one of the keys to America.” She found hotel bars too genteel, like “tearooms for old ladies,” and she noted disappointingly that “it’s not customary here to do work where people drink.” As her visit offered self-reflection and an opportunity to view the city’s glittery promise with a newfound identity as “European”—a word which “I never use in France”—de Beauvoir suggested that New York did not support bohemianism, that “there are no cafes or salons where intellectuals

⁵⁴ Anais Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin, 1947-1955* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 211-14, 215. See also Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 134, 153.

meet; everyone leads separate lives.” She saw attempts to recreate Parisian styles as inadequate: “I go down to Greenwich Village with my friends. Near Washington Square they show me a charming cafe, the Jumble Shop, which looks almost European with its red tiled floor and its quiet little tables arrayed along the walls. You can eat and drink there all night. . . . During years of exile, French writers and painters tried to resuscitate Les Deux Magots and Le Cafe de Floré here, but they failed; their get-togethers were always too contrived. For one reason or another, New York doesn’t have the right atmosphere for cafe life.” Yet it was also in the city’s bars that de Beauvoir found “places [that] are open to the world,” where patrons “are living out the real moments of their lives.”⁵⁵

European sensibilities like those of Nin and de Beauvoir provided both inspiration and psychological resources for the burgeoning feminism of American bohemians who challenged traditional domesticity, as a public presence in the company of other rebellious women offered new horizons of experience. Judith Malina, founder of the influential and avant-garde Living Theatre, was a regular at the San Remo and White Horse throughout the early 1950s. She found the San Remo to be like a “Paris café,” where she talked anarchism with “sophisticated” patrons and explored the “possibilities radiating from the present.” In a different vein, Alice Denham painstakingly carved out a career writing and modeling, allowing her to resist family pressure to marry and forgo her

⁵⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, (New York: Grove Press, 1953), 15-20, 70-75, 130-43. Dwight Macdonald recommended that when she trekked to California, she contact Rexroth as an “eccentric and genial poet” whose group of “anarchist bohemians” represented the leading West-Coast intellectuals, “if only by default.” She apparently rejected the idea, thus missing the opportunity to travel full circle through America’s left-bohemia. In a letter to *Now*’s George Woodcock, Macdonald further revealed both the ties and divides between the 1930s bicoastal intellectuals, characterizing Rexroth as “a brilliant crackpot” with “imagination, wit, and a sense of the heart of the matter.” He concluded, “But he’s also a kind of comic-strip anarchist in his wilder moments, and that kind of thing does no good, in print, either to him or to the ideals all three of us share.” Dwight Macdonald, *A Moral Temper: The Letters of Dwight Macdonald*, Michael Wreszin, ed. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 136-9.

work. The “desirably seedy” San Remo “with a plateglass view of its own hip corner” was Denham’s first destination in New York when she left home in 1951 to “seek my intellectual freedom.”⁵⁶ For these pioneering women, Village bars were doorways to independence, key points in the psychogeography of personal liberation.

The Beats, still in their teens and twenties, sought personal and artistic transcendence through a weave of lascivious and loquacious encounters, mixing intoxication with similar invocations of de Beauvoir’s native milieu. Ginsberg wrestled with the intellectual divide he felt from a lover he met at the San Remo, yet wanted to recapture “the feeling of pure wonder and joy” of their meeting, perhaps by pressing him on the issue of intellectualism itself. Amid “subterranean explorations” in Bowery bars, he found “likker kicks similar to marijuana—same corridors; same drive to metaphysics and concretion.” Kerouac opined that drinking Pernod in a “Parisian” bar in the Village “brought in another light” like “that Cezanne light of the day” or “the light of Lucien’s intelligence,” as he saw people with “new eyes.” Bar talk offered the chance to probe the “possibilities of each other.” If a bar marked the start of Kerouac’s evening in a search for female companionship, failure to find “love” meant a late-night return with male cohorts, where having a “great time talking” just might lead to “perfection of understanding.”⁵⁷

The Beats’ adventurism amounted to a fairly juvenile, if sincere, search for a single source of both happiness and creativity—a naively optimistic hope. Yet Kerouac’s admonition to “live more, and write more” and his mantra that life’s “joy” lay in “good

⁵⁶ Judith Malina, “The Voyage,” *Neurotica*: 3 (Autumn 1948); Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 159, 211, 214, 234-5; Alice Denham, *Sleeping with Bad Boys: a Juicy Tell-All of Literary New York in the Fifties and Sixties* (No Location: Book Republic Press, 2006), 9.

⁵⁷ Journal, pp. 11-12, Box 3, Folder 10 and Journal, p. 81, Box 4, Folder 8, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford University; Kerouac to Ginsberg, September 23, 1945, Box 11, Folder 14 and September 18, 1948, Folder 15, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University.

food, and drinks, and many women all around, the interplay of the sexes, and much happy meaningless talk” fit snugly alongside Goodman’s anarchist psychological theories, as well as the hyper-masculine antics at the Cedar Tavern, which frequently involved fistfights between Pollock and other abstract expressionists. Each found representational language inadequate and emphasized “action”—even aggression—as a healthy antidote to the neuroses of modern life and the post-atomic age; each found liberation, in Goodman’s words, in “concentrated sensation and in the playful manipulation of the material medium.”⁵⁸

While the teetotaling Goodman most often psychoanalyzed patients in the privacy of their apartments, his frequent presence at the San Remo also suggests his recognition that drinking lifted inhibitions in both word and deed—a common notion among both Beats and abstract expressionists. Alcohol and drugs played a role in Villagers’ attempts to live life as art, a kind of creative self-destruction. For instance, within the painters’ idea of “drinking as prowess,” a test of masculinity that was often accompanied by (sometimes playful) violence, Elaine de Kooning noted, “Booze was the talisman.” The Beats simply factored language into this art-as-life equation, echoing Goodman’s admonition that making “common speech poetic” was one solution to social problems stemming from the “false stimulation” of mass media.⁵⁹ True enough, the Beats’ outrageous alcoholic and drug-fueled behavior—their “quest for the unusual, the ‘real,’ the crazy”—smacks dangerously of auto-medicated self-psychoanalysis. But the postwar generation that Holmes decried as “everywhere wild, everywhere lost, everywhere

⁵⁸ Kerouac to Ginsberg, undated postcard and letter, December, 1948, Box 11, Folder 15, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University; Widmer, *Paul Goodman*, 97.

⁵⁹ Norse, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, 155-6; Gruen, *The Party’s Over*, 218, 220; Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 364-5; Widmer, *Paul Goodman*, 97. See also Hrebniak, *Action Writing*, 1-6, 14, and 130-46.

loveless, faithless, homeless,” was also conscious of bar talk as a path to social critique. “Booze was a social thing,” recalled one Villager. “The bar scene wasn’t just to get drunk. It was like the public square in a town or a sidewalk café in Paris—comradely meeting and talking.”⁶⁰

This point was colorfully illustrated in Ginsberg’s aborted novel, which portrayed his bohemian clique along the lines of Holmes’s *Go*. In a letter to his father in 1948, Ginsberg described his intent to write a “naturalistic-symbolistic” account of “a whole community in its own terms,” in which the characters and literary devices acted as “symbols of society.” The novel’s climax, set in the fictitious “Rational Cafe,” personified the kind of social disease that resulted in “Nazism” by contrasting the actions of the “avowedly decadent” poet Rimbaud with the “social sadism” imposed by the “normalcy” of the cafe patrons—sailors, farmers, wives, bourgeois businessmen.” It is clear that this was a microcosm of the postwar West End, San Remo, Cedar, and White Horse scene, replete with “eccentricity,” “crucial [obscene] language,” and “iconoclasm,” in opposition to the sexual “repression” and “emotional imbalance” of America’s “bourgeois intellectual attitude.”⁶¹ Ginsberg’s “Rational Cafe” was a spatial representation of the Village ethos, the psychogeography of social liberation, and a dialogue between modernity—with its rationality, militarism, and bureaucratic economy—and the primal human desire for free expression, sexuality, and unfettered liberty. Or, as another bohemian regular at the White Horse put it simply, there was

⁶⁰ Holmes, *Go*, 310; Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1992), 130-1.

⁶¹ Allen Ginsberg to Louis Ginsberg, undated letter (c. 1948), Box 7, Folder 14, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University; Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams*, 472. Unfortunately, the text of Ginsberg’s novel is not extant. See Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 74.

“drinking in the front room if you wanted to get laid, drinking in the back room if you wanted to talk politics.”⁶²

THE POETICS OF POLITICS AND COMMUNITY IN A COLD WAR COUNTERPUBLIC

In 1950, Kerouac sent Ginsberg a clipping of an article by syndicated columnist Westbrook Pegler that suggested, in no uncertain terms, that the respected Columbia literature professor Mark Van Doren was a communist dupe. The clipping, along with Kerouac’s tongue-in-cheek note saying he wished he could get such wide publicity so that he could “sell my books and get married and be happy in Havana,” speaks volumes about the ambivalence of Cold War culture. Pegler’s was unabashed red-baiting, accusing Van Doren for nothing more than joining the Society for the Prevention of World War III, which opposed the US anti-Soviet strategy of German rearmament. While Van Doren’s position at Columbia was secure, the Red Scare forced thousands of less renowned professors, school teachers, and government workers from their jobs for far less.⁶³ Even Kerouac’s flippancy betrays a hint of concern for his and Ginsberg’s former mentor—otherwise why send the clipping at all? Yet Kerouac’s dispassion was also symptomatic of a postwar generation who rejected both the USSR’s collectivism and the USA’s bourgeois repression. In fact, *On the Road* later made him the very symbol of American rebellion that claimed unconventional individualism as its only ideal.

The Rebel Cafe continued to nurture leftism, however, if not in the same institutional form as the 1930s. Conservative congressmen like Martin Dies began to shut

⁶² Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties*, 80-8; Ross Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams: Greenwich Village: The American Bohemia, 1910-1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 472.

⁶³ Kerouac to Ginsberg, undated note and clipping, 1950, Box 11, Folder 17, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University; Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 211, 298, 366; Steven Casey, “The Campaign to Sell a Harsh Peace for Germany to the American Public, 1944-1948,” *History*, 90 (297) 2005: 62-92. See also Westbrook Pegler, “Van Doren’s Background,” *The Post-Standard* (Syracuse, NY), October 31, 1950, Section 2, p. 11.

down the WPA in 1939, but HUAC, along with Hoover's FBI, went into high gear with the start of Cold War tensions in 1946. By the time Joseph McCarthy gained notoriety in 1950, prosecutions of Communist Party members under the 1940 Smith Act and purges of CP loyalists from unions, civil rights groups, and liberal organizations had already decimated Left institutions.⁶⁴ But like the furry little mammals that survived Mesozoic extinction while lumbering lizards' very size made them vulnerable, the Rebel Cafe harbored a compact but committed core of the cultural anti-Stalinist Left. Identifying variously as Trotskyists, anarchists, and Libertarians, their ideas formed a species that survived the Cold-War winter and, through a process of cultural evolution, eventually branched and bloomed into significant social movements.

Anarchist-libertarian networks formed a motley weave of social relations, little magazines, and loose political affiliations, which organically overlapped with artistic-bohemian communities. Although Rebel Cafe nightspots did not make up the bulk of this leftist fabric, they did serve as patches that covered the institutional holes torn by McCarthyism and the nation's rightward turn. By the official end of the WPA in 1943, cultural leftists could no longer rely on its formal channels and federally-funded offices for social connections. So they began to fill this vacuum by using informal institutions such as the Black Cat, Iron Pot, Vesuvio, San Remo, Cedar, and White Horse as nodes in their social networks.⁶⁵ Moreover, the war had further disrupted these connections as

⁶⁴ Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 96-131; 211-20, 317-40, 359-415; Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Praeger, 1957; Rev. ed. 1962), 437-499; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 80, 462.

⁶⁵ Kenneth Rexroth to Lawrence Lipton, January 15, 1953, Lawrence Lipton Papers (Collection 819), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA; Lawrence Lipton Oral History, Interviewed by Donald Schippers, Oral History Dept., UCLA, 1962, pp. 770-1, 803-11, 830; Shirley Triest to Kenneth Rexroth, February 5, 1937, Box 30, Folder 12, Kenneth Rexroth to Weldon Kees, undated, 1939, undated, c. 1940, January 12, 1940, and June, 1941, Box 23, Folder 15, Goodfriend to

pacifists like Kenneth Rexroth and Frank Tiest worked stateside, were imprisoned as conscientious objectors, or, like Paul Goodman, simply laid low. Allied victory offered the chance to reorganize, as well as to refine their ideas.⁶⁶ They formed new Libertarian groups in both San Francisco and New York that proffered an intellectual alternative to the Manichean militarism of the US and USSR, confounding the cold-war logic of conservatives and Communists alike.

Anarchist-libertarians had never fit easily within formal American communism; their anti-statism made them frequent targets of CP purges that sought to maintain a pro-Soviet party line. New York Libertarians, such as Goodman and the radical poet Jackson Mac Low, never relied on Party facilities for meetings, and instead were comfortable with small gatherings in private apartments or in Village nightspots. San Francisco, farther from Gotham's CP center, offered opportunities for public meetings in the Longshoreman's Hall and Workman's Circle meeting room, where Rexroth's Libertarian Circle gathered between 1946 and 1949. This difference may have led Rexroth, always defensive about San Francisco's junior position in the Left hierarchy, to refer disparagingly to the "American Stalinoid of the Cafe Society Downtown Set" and the

Rexroth, March 13, 1946, Box 8, Folder 3, Philip Lamantia to Rexroth, August 3, 1948, Box 12, Folder 15, James T. Farrell to Rexroth, February 14, 1948, July 7, 1948, and August 20, 1948, Box 6, Folder 11, Henry Miller to Rexroth, Jan 16, 1945, Box 16, Folder 6, and Marie Rexroth to Rexroth, Aug. 17, 1948, Box 24, Folder 5, Rexroth Papers, UCLA; See also Rexroth Papers, Box 13, Folder 6, for Rexroth's correspondence with James Laughlin, 1937-1948, in which the two frequently mention interactions with a wide variety of Left and cultural figures, from William Saroyan, Hillary Belloc, and Tennessee Williams to Dwight Macdonald and his circle of Trotskyists.

⁶⁶ Frank Tiest to Kenneth Rexroth, November 11, 1945 and May 18, 1946, Box 30, Folder 12, Rexroth Papers, UCLA; Paul Goodman to Jackson Mac Low, February 7, 1943, Box 17, Folder 15, Jackson Mac Low Papers, MSS# 0180, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego; Widmer, *Paul Goodman*, 37-42; Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 99-129; Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 51-6.

“wishful grand strategies of the habitués of New York coffee shops.”⁶⁷ But even his Libertarian Circle came to an end after infiltrations and disruptions by both the FBI and CP, leading him to host less political gatherings in his home and the Black Cat by 1950.⁶⁸ In any case, small, less formal meetings suited anarchism’s anti-bureaucratic ideology. Yet during the early years of the Cold War, East- and West-Coast anarchist-libertarian circles became more intertwined through the exchange of ideas in print and the movement of individuals within an emerging bicoastal oppositional community.

Of course, the conversations that took place among dissidents in Village and North Beach nightspots can never be recovered. But a semblance can be reconstructed in bits and pieces from their personal journals and correspondence which reflected, at least to some extent, the content of more casual cafe chats. For instance, Rexroth shared thoughts with Goodman or his old Chicago friend Lawrence Lipton during their visits to San Francisco about topics such as pacifism, the intricacies of Marxism, alienation, ethnic identity, jazz and folk music, and HUAC hearings (“that American version of Kafka’s TRIAL”), the relationship between culture and psychology, Dada, social planning, marriage, and sexuality—which was also fodder for Goodman’s conversations with Mac Low and other New York anarchists.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, bohemian poets like Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, and Tram Combs conversed with anarchists such as Knute

⁶⁷ Ellen Tallman, “My Stories with Robert Duncan,” in Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf, eds., *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 63; Kenneth Rexroth to Franklin Folsom (Writers Congress), May 12, 1941, Rexroth to Jacobsen, July 12, 1946, and Rexroth to Louis Brigante, July 16, 1950, Box 23, Folder 14, Rexroth Papers, UCLA. See also Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 99, 111, 311, and 421.

⁶⁸ Robert Duncan to Jack Spicer, undated, “Dear Jack,” (1947), Box 1, Robert Duncan Papers, BANC FILM 2053, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Kenneth Rexroth, *Excerpts from a Life*, Ekbert Faas, ed. (Santa Barbara: Conjunctions Books, 1981), 58-61.

⁶⁹ Paul Goodman to Kenneth Rexroth, undated letters (c. 1948), Box 8, Folder 3, and Lawrence Lipton to Rexroth, January 28, 1953, Feb 28, 1953, April 5 and 17, 1953, May 3 and 27, 1953, June 27, 1953, and October 15, 1953, Rexroth Papers, UCLA; Jackson Mac Low Journal, January 9-February 15, 1948, Box 1, Folder 1, and September 9, 1949, Folder 2, and Mac Low to Goodman, February 5, 1943, Box 17, Folder 15, Mac Low Papers, UC San Diego.

Stiles about religion, poetry, and participatory democracy (“the feeling that true country is the promise within the tyranny of the ‘nation’”). They mulled over industrial capitalism, existentialism (the typical New Yorker feels “he really shouldn’t be an existentialist but then ‘it is important’”), and the ties between bohemianism, surrealism, and the Left. And they discoursed on community, racial equality, and gay culture (John Gielgud’s “campy” production of *Love for Love* was “rivaled only by Walter Hart of Finocchio fame”). “If I sound a little bitter,” wrote Stiles to Combs in 1952, after detailing the horrors a soldier friend had relayed from Korea, “put it down to the fact that I always feel a little bitter and revolutionary when I’m broke—besides it’s appropriate to feel a little bitter on May Day when one realizes that one is almost alone in one’s revolt against the square world which is more clearly dedicated to permanent war each day.”⁷⁰

Stiles and Duncan also reported clashes during private family functions that demonstrated their distance from the mainstream. Stiles described a visit by his brother, who was shocked by his “north beach bohemian life,” and whose navy buddy threw a cocktail party which Stiles attended. “I was astonished: such respectable, bourgeois philistines I have never met,” he quipped of the veteran and his friends. “He stood on a chair to demonstrate its strength, he talked about chairs, tables, the war, commodes, the war, chairs and tables, the Episcopalian church, the navy, the war, the navy, chairs and tables . . . and wanted to know, did I do portraits and altar pictures? I made it quite clear that I was a pacifist, an anarchist, an atheist, and an abstractionist; I too stood on the chair

⁷⁰ Robert Duncan to Jack Spicer, February 26, 1947 and undated, c. 1947, Box 1, and Notebooks, Box 2, Duncan Papers, UC Berkeley; Robert Duncan to Kenneth Rexroth, undated (1946), Box 5, Folder 18, Rexroth Papers, UCLA; Allan Ginsberg to Lionel Trilling, August 17, 1945, Louis Ginsberg to Allen Ginsberg, November 1, 1945, Box 9, Folder 13, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University; Lipton Oral History, pp. 187-224, 770; Knute Stiles to Tram Combs, December 10, 1952 and May 1, 1952, Box 3, Folder 3, Tram Combs Papers, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

just to make sure that it was really sturdy; it cracked.” Besides betraying Stiles’ own inverted elitism concerning middle-class values, this scene sits squarely beside Duncan’s description of a dinner with a friend and her racist father, who piqued his ire by continually referring to Blacks as “Niggers” and left them feeling “as if we had been trampled for two weeks by some gross monster created by the bourgeoisie’s Frankenstein.”⁷¹

While Duncan’s primary vocation as a poet has left him largely ignored by historians, he was nonetheless a gifted social critic and an influential figure, particularly within North Beach’s bohemian community where he worked diligently as a mentor to young intellectuals. His groundbreaking 1944 essay in Dwight Macdonald’s *Politics* magazine, “The Homosexual in Society,” was a demand for gay liberation that neatly encompassed the Rebel Cafe’s most egalitarian ideals. In anarchist terms, Duncan wrote that a just society required “devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations”:

To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance. . . . It must always be remembered that one’s own honesty, one’s battle against the inhumanity of his own group (be it against patriotism, against bigotry, against—in this special case—the homosexual cult) is a battle that cannot be won in its immediate scene. The forces of inhumanity are overwhelming, but only one’s continued opposition can make any other order possible, will give an added strength for all those who desire freedom and equality to break at last those fetters that seem now so unbreakable.

More succinctly, he wrote to Rexroth in 1946, “We will find our strength more and more, our intellectual strength, our erotic strength, our creative strength in the flesh, in the actual.” He concluded, “Only the individual can experience or express fraternity of

⁷¹ Stiles to Combs, April 24, 1951, Combs Papers, UC San Diego; Duncan to Rexroth, undated, c. 1946, Box 5, Folder 18, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

freedom or justice.”⁷²

This eloquence and fortitude brought Rexroth past his own admitted homophobia. “Now look honey,” he wrote, “you are the first homosexual I have ever entrusted w/ a confidence, because, I suppose, as I told you years ago, you were the only one I ever knew personally who had lived thru, past & beyond Jewish Xian [Christian] queer guilt.”⁷³ Whether you find Rexroth’s strident language offensive or, perhaps, ahead of its time is beside the point. The content of his statement is important—and perhaps remarkable given his Catholic faith. It suggests that if one lives strictly according to a moral code that insists on respect for oneself and for others equally as individuals—including the acknowledgement that this means working for the collective good—then one’s sexuality cannot, by definition, be a source of guilt. Rather the reverse: such guilt can only undermine individual and collective dignity.

Ideas about how to achieve this differed wildly within the bohemian underground. Some, like Rexroth and Lipton, continued their bohemian opposition to bourgeois life as part of the class struggle, emphasizing organization and cultural movements. The Beats were a more ambivalent reflection of this, as Ginsberg carried forward an alternative form of organizing through his personal correspondence and social networks that demonstrated his grounding in Marxism, despite Kerouac’s overt rejection of formal politics (and eventually even the notion of the “Beat Generation” itself).⁷⁴ The common

⁷² Quoted in Gelpi and Bertholf, *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 11; Duncan to Rexroth, undated, 1946, Box 5, Folder 18, Rexroth Papers, UCLA. Tyler T. Schmidt notes that Duncan’s essay, by using a parallel to racial caste, “asserts an integrationist sexual politics” that complemented “the era’s universalizing literary gestures by African American writers that future critics would come to see as naive visions of assimilation.” Tyler T. Schmidt, *Desegregating Desire: Race and Sexuality on Cold War American Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 134.

⁷³ Rexroth to Duncan, undated, 1956, Box 5, Folder 18, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

⁷⁴ Michael Harrington deftly characterized Ginsberg’s blend of bohemianism and political consciousness: “For Ginsberg has deep roots in the American tradition. He traces himself back, of course, to Walt

thread through both camps was a rejection of statism and the espousal of individual liberty and notions of an authentic self, which applied to both queer and bohemian identity.

COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY IN THE URBAN UNDERGROUND

Nightspots made this stance public. While the left-bohemian community was certainly not reducible to literary bars' social networks, the bar scene nonetheless helped form and maintain it. In 1953, Goodman completed a short story that he later insisted showed "how a scene really is."⁷⁵ Fictionalizing the San Remo as the "San Carlo," and with a lens focused by his distinct anarchist-libertarian point of view, Goodman captured a snapshot of the Village's radical literary circle, with its mix of masculine intellectual competition, ambivalent valorization of the working class, and transgressive sexuality. His characters hop from booths to tables, arguing about poetic affect and the effects of psychoanalysis, all the while eyeing a pair of attractive sailors standing conspicuously near the bar. Goodman attempts to make a "gift" of one sailor for his friend's birthday, joining the two in conversation and encouraging a casual tryst. The sailors, in their uniforms "cut for public love," symbolize the inherent conflict between community and the individual desire for (sexual) possession ("I stood next to *my* sailor") that formed the very heart of his libertarian dialectic. Although the San Carlo crowd "thinned out to its mean size and it was my community"—precisely the conditions Goodman claims he

Whitman and he has obvious affinities with the Bohemia of personal exploration typified by Henry Miller. But his penchant for organization and detail—he functioned as a sort of international address book and courier for the Beat Generation—was part of his radical political background. So in one aspect Ginsberg is a literary-political rebel on the model of the pre-World War I Villager, and innovator in art, social attitudes, and life-style. The young who turned him into a guru tended to ignore his traditionalism and critical standards." Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 52. For examples of Ginsberg's Left political roots and activism see Michael Harrington Interview, Box 1, Folder 35 and George Rawick Interview, Box 1, Folder 71, Isserman Files, NYU and Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 5-6, 21, 31-2.

⁷⁵ Paul Goodman to Paul Carroll, January 9, 1961, Box 1, Folder 48, Paul Carroll Papers, University of Chicago.

needs “to be happy”—the tension between individual desire and love, between a hotel room at “magical two o’clock” and his home with “my bed and wife,” make fulfillment of the communal ideal “impossible.” Yet for Goodman it was the promise of *communitas* that underlay the potential political function of the bar scene: to talk, to strive for connection, to recognize that community is not a static entity but a process continually reformed by interaction. Such recognition itself was fundamental to oppositional left-bohemianism. “It didn’t, in the end, much matter whether or not you got what you wanted,” he mused. “Just to be able to ask for it.”⁷⁶

On a practical level, bars offered opportunities for homosexual encounters. This was particularly important for the bisexual Goodman, who sought to keep his private sphere of wife and kids separate from his public gay identity.⁷⁷ Ginsberg still struggled with making his homosexuality public in this period, but already he was inching toward the open revelations that made his 6 Gallery reading of *Howl* a landmark in gay liberation. Despite concerns about his “preoccupation with queerness, dope, vice & bop, apocalypse of Subterraneans, dispersal of attention to practical affairs, call of Amazon voyage,” Ginsberg’s journal reveals how each new encounter in a Village bar steeled him against the fear of “being discovered on the block as a queer.”⁷⁸ This kind of atomic-age queer bohemianism developed partly through a process of *self-reflection*—sometimes

⁷⁶ Paul Goodman, “Casper’s Birthday,” in *The Galley to Mytilene: Stories, 1949-1960* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 99-109. Goodman’s anarchist ideal, to “increase intrinsic functioning and diminish extrinsic power,” was a utopian call for life on a “human scale,” in which aesthetics and community took precedent over the dominant American consumerist-consumption notion of a high “standard of living.” As noted by critic Kingsley Widmer, this emphasis on community overshadowed broader themes of justice, freedom, and equality, yet did offer ambitious alternatives to capitalism and state power. In this sense, the “San Carlo” scene was a synecdoche for the continual dialectic Goodman endorsed: “Depowering and liberating are not devices and dogmas but a philosophy.” Widmer, *Paul Goodman*, 42-50. For a critique of the psychological embrace of community and identity as a political stance, see Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 251-61.

⁷⁷ James Laughlin to Kenneth Rexroth, August 9, 1945, Box 13, Folder 5, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

⁷⁸ Journal, Box 4, Folder 5, p. 118 and Folder 8, p.67, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford University.

metaphorically through social “mirroring,” but also literally in Village bars. Here Ginsberg met older gay poets such as W. H. Auden (fictionalized in Goodman’s San Carlo story) who soothed his concerns with stories of their own experiences. One night, Ginsberg might gleefully converse with a group of Village lesbians, as one especially vocal woman in “men’s clothes barking away the Milton Berle-like lesbian obscenity lines” pronounced that hypocritically uptight academics were “Freudian on campus and freaks in bed.” Another night he could reflect that “I don’t like my own looks in the bar mirror—my image of floating city slicker, disillusioned, somewhat of an empty heel or a middle class intellectual con artist,” finally concluding that he was “too mental and lonely and personally sadistic—as I once saw myself through [psychotherapist] Dr. Cott’s eyes.”⁷⁹

The penultimate scene of Holmes’s *Go*, in which his bohemian band mourns the accidental death of one of its own by going on a Bacchanalian spree through the bars of the Village and the New Jersey riverfront, similarly ends with an image in the men’s room mirror of a bar. As Holmes’s alter-ego protagonist flees his friends’ drunken antics, which for him have become a scene out of Dante’s *Inferno*, he catches “a dark glimpse of himself in the shattered mirror over the sink: a drawn haunted face.” Always more pessimistic about the promise of bohemian rebellion than his fellow Beats, Holmes continues: “The fumes of chlorine, urine and vomit rise from the slippery floor. . . . Defaced telephone numbers, obscene drawings, and humorless epigrams were scrawled on [the wall] with that desperate and precise crudity of which men are capable only in the privacy of a latrine. . . . blunt confessions of longing, words as would be written on the

⁷⁹ Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 86; Journal, Box 4, Folder 5, pp. 69-70 and 122, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford University.

walls of hell. He was paralyzed by a vision of unending lovelessness.” Holmes’s protagonist, not “daring to look at himself again” bolted from the bar, heading toward the lights of New York. The novel concluded with the line: “‘Where is our home?’ he said to himself gravely, for he could not see it yet.”⁸⁰ For Holmes, the bohemian bar scene represented the dystopian mirror-image of Goodman’s *communitas*. Yet both expressed a longing to belong amid the foreboding senses of dislocation and disillusionment that characterized the late 1940s.

As World War II’s promise of lasting peace gave way to the Cold War’s “darkening of world events,” the nightclub underground balanced apocalyptic visions with an embrace of the carnivalesque as a method of empowerment and cohesion. Invoking the Medieval, Rabelaisian ritual social reversals of *charivari* and carnival, bohemians symbolically claimed liberation from social norms through outrageous behavior. By 1948 Kerouac’s letters became “apocalyptic” and “full of ‘frightening’ and inescapable predictions, scatologically smeared with an evil leer sometimes, much as ‘old me, old spontaneous me’ is that way.” Commentators proclaimed that Dylan Thomas’s visits to Third Avenue bars, “loud with Rabelaisian reminiscence” and “pubroom ribaldries,” matched the Cedar’s “carnival atmosphere” of macho performativity.⁸¹ This outrageousness played a part within the national public sphere, sparking sociocultural change as underground sites and their antics gained visibility. Jackson Mac Low recorded in his journal an exchange that highlighted the tensions around radical authenticity in

⁸⁰ Holmes, *Go*, 309-11.

⁸¹ Ibid, 35; Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, “December,” 1948, Box 11, Folder 15, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University; John Malcolm Brinnan, *Dylan Thomas in America: An Intimate Journal* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 13; Elaine de Kooning quoted in Gruen, *The Party’s Over*, 219; Bohemian poet Max Bodenheimer similarly spoke of the Village’s erotic humor as “worthy of Moliere or Rabelais.” Maxwell Bodenheimer, *My Life and Loves in Greenwich Village* (New York: Bridgehead Books, 1954), 80.

sites that also required the considerations of commerce: “Had an arg[ument] w[ith] ‘Jackson,’ bartender at the Remo who wanted me to be in some shots *Life* was taking of the Remo—for picturesqueness. I refused & he became angry. Besides not wanting my picture taken, I felt it inappropriate that I should be in a Remo picture, being so seldom there. Besides I’d rather not be so strongly associated w[ith] the Remo in that *Life* magazine way!” Indeed, Mac Low’s concerns seem justified by *Life*’s demeaning description of the San Remo corner of Bleecker and MacDougal as “a center of infamy”—a phrase that implied both homosexuality and interracial encounters.⁸²

Yet since the days of Rodolphe Salis’s Chat Noir, bohemia’s nonconformity always existed symbiotically with commerce. Kerouac bewailed such associations in the 1940s, suggesting that Village scenesters were too self-conscious, “Like a professional group, almost. The way they foregather at bars and try to achieve some sort of vague synthesis between respectability and illicitness.”⁸³ Meanwhile, the Minetta Tavern hired the down-on-his-luck poet Joe Gould to sit at a window table a scribble in his notebooks in order to advertize its bohemian atmosphere—likewise with North Beach poet Hube the Cube at Vesuvio in the 1950s.⁸⁴ But wider exposure also was part of the uneven process of making gay and bohemian life visible, and thus something that could be claimed publicly, as well as advertising potential sites of liberation for hopefuls in the

⁸² Notebooks, 1949, Folder 2, Mac Low Papers, UCSD; Winthrop Sargeant, “Bernard Maybeck: He Is a Sage, a Dreamer, and Eccentric and California’s Greatest Architect,” *Life*, May 17, 1948, p. 148. *Life* made a habit of such flippant, inflammatory language, referring to recent arrivals in Washington Square as “art-struck invaders from surrounding Greenwich Village”—despite its longtime status as *part* of the Village, as well as the article’s exultation of the neighborhood’s literary claims to Mark Twain and Theodore Dreiser—and blithely recalling its associations with 1930s communism. “Washington Square: Its North Side Homes Linger on, an Outpost of Patrician New York,” *Life*, August 14, 1950, pp. 67-8; Ruth Fischer, “Conspiracy Inside Communism,” *Life*, May 8, 1950, p. 103.

⁸³ Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, September 6, 1945, Box 11, Folder 14, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University.

⁸⁴ Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams*, 430; “Unspeakable Visions: The Beat Generation and The Bohemian Dialectic: 4.0.0 - The Absorption of the Avant-garde,” <http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/~hayward/UnspeakableVisions/Absorption.html> (accessed October 24, 2012).

hinterlands—more of whom flocked to Village nightspots every year.⁸⁵

These issues also underlay changes in North Beach in the early postwar years, as proletarian struggle gave way to the politics of the personal. During the war, Black Cat owner Charlie Haberkern, weary of running a bustling (and controversial) business and perhaps in bad health, sold the cafe to his accountant, Sol Stoumen.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, Rexroth's pacifism, Libertarian Circle organizing, and a readings tour in Europe had kept him out of the late 1940s North Beach cafe scene. Following his divorce in 1950, he returned to the Black Cat as a way of reconnecting with the local bohemia and found that under Stoumen's stewardship the cafe had also become "a hangout for militant homosexuals."⁸⁷ This characterization actually proved more prescient than Rexroth could have known. The 1949 police raids against gays in the Black Cat led Stoumen to challenge California state law, resulting in a State Supreme Court decision in 1951 that banned arrests of homosexuals for simply gathering in public.

While historian Nan Alamilla Boyd has documented this as an early salvo in the gay liberation movement, it was also intertwined with bohemia's more general opposition to Cold War social norms. The 1949 homosexual prosecutions were simply the most recent in a series of police raids dating back to the war, *before* the cafe became primarily a gay venue. Stoumen continued to insist as late as 1949 that the cafe was "one of the few remaining colorful bohemian" sites in the city. Stoumen himself was straight, with social

⁸⁵ While there was an increase in the number of nightspots in the Village in the 1950s, few of their patrons actually lived there. The population of fifteen to thirty four year olds decreased between 1940 and 1960, due to rising rents. This stood in stark contrast to North Beach, which remained affordable throughout the 1950s and whose scene maintained a fully cohesive neighborhood and alternative community. R. David Corwin, Jarome Krase, Paula Hudis, *Greenwich Village: Statistical Trends and Observations* (New York: New York University, Department of Sociology, 1969), 3-5.

⁸⁶ Henri Lenoir, "The Painting by Cornelius Sampson of the Habitues of the Black Cat Cafe in 1938," undated press release, Henri Lenoir Papers. Haberkern subsequently died in 1949. San Francisco Death Certificate, Carl Haberkern, 26 July, 1949.

⁸⁷ Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 163, 213.

ties to the Black Cat that went back to the the 1930s.⁸⁸ The Black Cat maintained a reputation as *both* a bohemian and gay hangout until at least the mid-1950s, and following a second attempt by local and state authorities to close the cafe in 1956, Stoumen explicitly tied his defense of gay rights to bohemianism. “My patrons are merely members of the bohemian intelligentsia who gather at the Black Cat to discuss art and semantics,” he asserted during a court hearing. Bohemianism was “a way of life, a way of thinking. It has no reference whatsoever to moral or immoral conduct.” Calling the prosecutions a “witch hunt” he insisted that his patrons’ sexual activities were “none of my business.” Add to this Stoumen’s chief ally throughout his legal battles, prominent local attorney Morris Lowenthal—a civil rights advocate and staunch opponent of the University of California loyalty oath requirement—and it seems certain that while *Stoumen v. Reilly* was an important milestone in the gay liberation struggle, it cannot be divorced from the cafe’s bohemian and Left history.⁸⁹

**BARS, THE BEATS, AND BOHEMIA:
THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY**

⁸⁸ The raids were also bound up with a labor dispute between Stoumen and the conservative AFL-affiliated Waiter’s Union, which he cited as the source of the original complaints. In 1940 he married Black Cat “Regular” Gay Van Natta, strong evidence of his familiarity with the WPA circles of which she was a part. “Black Out Over,” October 7, 1949, n.p., “Black Cat Cafe Wins Right to Open, Pending a Hearing,” October 25, 1949, n.p., “Black Cat Owner Sued,” October 10, 1953, n.p., and “Black Cat Bar Litigation,” March 20, 1954, n.p., *San Francisco Examiner*, clippings in Examiner Morgue, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library; “Gay Van Natta,” listed on Cornelius Sampson’s “Black Cat Regulars,” Henri Lenoir Papers, Vol. 1, Bancroft Library, Berkeley; Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States*, S.D. No. 4, E.D. No. 38-476, Sheet No. 69-A.

⁸⁹ “Its Last Life,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 25, 1963, n.p., Mildred Harcourt, “A Gallery with a Colorful Past,” August 14, 1979, *San Francisco Examiner*, n.p., and “Black Cat Owner Defends Bohemians,” January 29, 1957, n.p., clippings in Examiner Morgue, SFPL; “S.F. Lawyer Heads Jewish Congress,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 7, 1958, p. 64; “Homosexuality Discussion Set,” *The Daily Review*, December 25, 1958, p. 23; “Pornography Bill Defeated by Assembly Committee, 7-5,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, May 2, 1961, p. 2; “Assessor Audit Suit Opposed,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 2, 1966, p. 6-E; Letter, Lowenthal to Milton Chernin, March 30, 1951, Banc Mss 78/18, Carton 21, Folder 47: Loyalty Oath, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Lowenthal’s spouse, Juliet, the first woman to become a lawyer in Richmond, CA, actively supported lesbian rights through the Daughters of Bilitis. Together, the Lowenthals also signed an *amicus curiae* brief to aid in the defense of a prosecuted lesbian bar, Mary’s First and Last Chance, in the mid 1950s. See “Bride Not to Desert Career,” *Oakland Tribune*, May 2, 1935, p. 22-B and Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 170.

The Black Cat's postwar clientele did include a younger generation of gay bohemians like Stiles, but also hipsters and radical poets who began crisscrossing the country in search of both "kicks" and community as San Francisco and New York bohemia overlapped. While Kerouac's *On the Road* would not be published until 1957, it was between 1947 and 1949 that he made the legendary cross-country trips to with Neal Cassady on which the novel was based. This journey, John Clellon Holmes wrote in *Go*, was a quest for "the real," an antidote for what the Beats saw as the emptiness of bourgeois existence.

Bars were often the doorways to such experience as Kerouac motored from one end of the continent to the other. In response to Holmes's report that Kerouac had hit the road and "searches out the good bar (or Life) in Denver," Ginsberg wrote in 1949: "Life as Jack (and other writers) says is basically irrational because we live in a world of thoughts, and . . . [t]he difference between absolute thought and absolute feeling is something that can only be known, by experience."⁹⁰ A central moment of *On the Road* is an argument between Kerouac's alter-ego Sal Paradise and "Old Bull Lee" (William Burroughs) over the continued existence of the "ideal bar" in America. Responding to Paradise's desire for a night out in nearby New Orleans, Lee responds that it's "a very dull town. It's against the law to go to the colored section. The bars are insufferably dreary." Furthermore, he cantankerously (and nostalgically) insists:

An ideal bar is something that's gone beyond our ken. In nineteen ten a bar was a place where men went to meet during or after work, and all there was was a long counter, brass rails, spittoons, player piano for music, a few mirrors, and barrels of whisky at ten cents a shot together with barrels of beer at five cents a mug. Now all you get is chromium, drunken women, fags, hostile bartenders, anxious owners who hover around the door, worried about their leather seats and the law; just a lot of screaming at the wrong time

⁹⁰ Charters, *Kerouac*, 81-3, 110-12; Holmes, *Go*, 35, 182; Allen Ginsberg to John Clellon Holmes, "July," 1949 and Holmes to Ginsberg, June 14, 1949, Box 1, Folder 32, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford University.

and deadly silence when a stranger walks in.⁹¹

Hidden within this declaration's masculinist assumptions (which always sat conspicuously next to Burroughs real-life homosexuality) were Kerouac's own idealistic notions of the American bar as a site of authentic community, uncorrupted by considerations of commerce, free from policing by a powerful state, welcoming to any intrepid stranger ready to embrace its rough-hewn and non-alienated way of living. That Old Bull Lee was half right—such an ideal not only was impossible in 1949, but had never in fact been fully realized—did little to temper Kerouac's quasi-utopian enthusiasm.

Kerouac was not alone. Other bicoastal “seekers” in this period included New Yorkers like Gerd Stern, who began his connections with the bicoastal bohemia through the San Remo and Black Cat; bohemians Bill and Betty Keck, who left San Francisco for Ginsberg's San Remo circle (and subsequently offered him his first peyote trip); and Philip Lamantia, who returned to San Francisco in 1946 after working with Gotham's Surrealist émigrés. As a budding fifteen year old poet, Lamantia had contacted the Surrealist Andre Breton in 1943 and after garnering some quick advice from Rexroth, departed for New York to work as an assistant editor for the journal *View*. Interaction with European refugees such as Breton and Max Ernst had a pronounced influence on Lamantia's art and politics, as did American avant-gardists such as Charles Henri Ford and Paul Bowles, and Left activists like Dorothy Day of the Catholic Workers. Yet Lamantia also noted that the formal artistic and literary world was intertwined with jazz nightlife, as his New York sojourn was defined by “weekly gallery openings, jazz on

⁹¹ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), 146-7.

Fifty-Second Street, endless parties, and almost daily invitations to lunch and dinner.”⁹²

A falling out with Ford, *View*'s editor, soon led him back to the West Coast.

Lamantia rejoined a scene that Rexroth now called the “San Francisco Renaissance,” but which was rapidly becoming a bicoastal nocturnal underground. “There were parallels to what was going on in New York at the same time,” Lamantia recalled.

Here [in San Francisco] it was after-hours jazz in the Fillmore district and rhythm-and-blues at the Little Harlem off Folsom and Third Streets, both scenes celebrated by Kerouac in *On the Road*. Those of us, like Gerd Stern (he was “Jack Steen” in *The Subterraneans*), who knew Birdland and Fifty-Second Street in New York and Jackson’s Nook here, were living these connections. For poetry the main focus were the groups around Rexroth here and Robert Duncan in Berkeley.⁹³

Duncan’s subsequent move to San Francisco along with Jack Spicer completed the core of poetic radicalism that defined North Beach in the early 1950s as both a gay and bohemian haven.

This period also marked the arrival of another Jewish anarchist poet who, like Ginsberg, had studied under Van Doren at Columbia, Lawrence Ferling—who soon adopted a *nom de plume* (or *de guerre*) appropriate for the city’s Latin Quarter, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Introduced to the bohemian scene at the Black Cat, Ferlinghetti met left activist Peter Martin, who had begun publishing a magazine called *City Lights*. “I discovered North Beach around this time, about 1952,” he recalled. “The Black Cat was the first place I ever went to and then the Iron Pot. I met Pete Martin around then.” The two partnered up, but the magazine failed to support itself, so in 1953 Ferlinghetti opened a bookstore across the alley from Vesuvio. City Lights Books became an anchor in the

⁹² Gerd Stern, “From Beat Scene Poet to Psychedelic Multimedia Artist in San Francisco and Beyond, 1948-1948,” an oral history conducted in 1996 by Victoria Morris Byerly, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2001, pp. 16, 20; Allen Ginsberg, *Journals Early Fifties Early Sixties*, Gordon Ball, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 18; Interview: “Philip Lamantia (1998),” in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat*, 134-9.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 134.

bicoastal bohemia, serving as an “unintentional non-profit” that supported the bohemian community and only gradually made money from publishing after the success of Ginsberg’s *Howl* in 1956.⁹⁴

City Lights was simply one of the many independent publishers that appeared in the postwar period, several of which had symbiotic relationships with local nightspots, either financially, socially, or creatively. City Lights’ bookstore business fed off Vesuvio (and vice versa), while the Village’s 8th Street Bookstore and Barney Rossett’s Grove Press continually drew both artistic content and staff from patrons of the San Remo and Cedar Tavern. Less successful, yet still highly influential, was *Neurotica* magazine, published by the St. Louis nightclub owner (and hometown comrade of Michael Harrington) Jay Landesman. Although it folded in 1951 after only three years, *Neurotica* gave some of the first national exposure to budding poets, writers, and intellectuals like Ginsberg, Holmes, Broyard, Malina, and Marshall McLuhan.⁹⁵ These bohemian publications were complemented in the political sphere by left publications such as the *Partisan Review*; the anarchist little magazines *Why?* and *The Catholic Worker* in New York and *Circle* in San Francisco; and perhaps most important, *Liberation*. The latter’s editor, Bayard Rustin, used it as an institutional foundation to help organize the 1963 March on Washington, but also maintained ties with radical and gay liberation writers like Jackson Mac Low, Tram Combs, and James Baldwin in the late 1950s. These, along with James Laughlin’s *New Directions*, gave a voice to the postwar demimonde, drawing

⁹⁴ Interview, “Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1969),” in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat*, 91, 93; Knute Stiles Interview, pp. 33-5, Ellingham Papers, UC San Diego; Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2003), 1.

⁹⁵ Gruen, *The Party’s Over*, 43-9; *Obscene*, dir. by Neil Ortenberg and Daniel O’Connor (2007); *Neurotica* (St. Louis and Stamford, CN: Neurotica Publishing): 3 (Autumn, 1948), 5 (autumn, 1949), 6 (Spring, 1950), and 7 (Autumn, 1950); Notebook: “Me I: Village,” Box 3, Folder 2, Harrington Papers, NYU; Jay Landesman, *Rebel without Applause* (New York: Paragon House, 1987), 43, 46-70.

directly from the unconventional rebellion of North Beach and Greenwich Village literary bars.⁹⁶

These counterpublic institutions also reveal the limitations of Rebel Cafe liberation in this period. Whether in the pages of *Neurotica* or *Politics*, few voices of women or African Americans were heard. Women certainly maintained a forceful presence in the anarchist world—Marie Rexroth’s organizing, for instance, practically held the Libertarian Circle together during Kenneth’s travels in the 1940s and Harrington’s introduction to the anti-poverty campaign was through Day’s Catholic Workers, where he joined forces with several women activists.⁹⁷ But women rarely claimed positions as spokespeople. Rather, they remained largely in supportive, even domestic roles, ignored by publishers. As Elizabeth Pollett, wife of *Partisan Review*’s Delmore Schwartz and a successful author in her own right, stated in a recent interview, “I didn’t have much sense of a career. What I wanted to do was write, which was an essential part of my being. Delmore handed my novel to James Laughlin at New Directions with no name on it. Laughlin liked it a lot. If my name had been on it, maybe he wouldn’t have liked it so much.”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Interview: “Philip Lamantia (1998), in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat*, 139; Morgan, *The Beat Generation in New York*, 77-8; Jackson Mac Low to Bayard Rustin, Statement on Civil Defense Drill Protest of June 15, 1955, Box 32, Folder 4, Mac Low Papers, UC San Diego; Tram Combs to Rustin, August 2, 1957, Rustin to Combs, August 13, 1957, Aug 19, 1957, David McReynolds (*Liberation*) to Combs, Box 2, Folder 10, Tram Combs Papers, UC San Diego; Herb Boyd, *Baldwin’s Harlem: A Biography of James Baldwin* (New York: Atria Books, 2008), 80-1; James Laughlin to Marie Rexroth, Undated (c. 1944), Box 13, Folder 6 and Laughlin to Kenneth Rexroth, “April 8” (c. 1950), Box 13, Folder 7, Rexroth Papers, UCLA. Even the nation’s first listener-supported radio station, San Francisco’s KPFA, had roots in this milieu, having grown in part from Rexroth’s Libertarian Circle. Moreover, Rustin himself got his start within the early Rebel Cafe milieu, as a backup singer for the Popular Front folksinger Josh White. See Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 156 and Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 180, 218.

⁹⁷ Marie Rexroth to Kenneth Rexroth, March 5, 1948, undated “Thursday” (c. 1948), and August 17, 1948, Box 24, Folder 5, Rexroth Papers, UCLA; Eileen Fantino Diaz Interview, Box 1, Folder 15, Mary Nichols Interview, Box 1, Folder 65, Isserman Files, NYU.

⁹⁸ Dylan Foley, “Elizabeth Pollett, Novelist, Rest in Peace,”

And while left-bohemians had long begun the tentative work of overcoming racism (including their own), the color line remained largely unbroken by the early 1950s. James Baldwin was the first of the postwar generation of Black writers to follow the trails blazed by Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright. His San Remo experiences symbolized Black writers' place in the postwar counterpublic. Baldwin left Harlem for the Village in 1943, hoping its gay scene would offer the sexual freedom denied him uptown. But his skin color made him the target of local Italians who, "egged on by the cops, thought it was great fun to bounce tables and chairs off my head." In an oft-repeated tragedy of the American melting-pot, these ethnic Villagers, defensive of their "white" status that was only one generation removed from the stigma of immigration, saw the presence of Blacks as a threat. This included Joe Santini, the owner of the San Remo, who refused to serve the struggling young writer. Baldwin soon made friends with an Italian Villager, however, whose threats of retaliation apparently stopped the beatings. Moreover, by 1945 Baldwin was being courted by Harper's Publishing president Frank S. MacGregor, who took him to the San Remo for dinner at Baldwin's request. "We entered, and they seated us and we were served," Baldwin recalled. "The San Remo thus began to attract a varied clientele, indeed—so much so that Allen Ginsberg and company arrived there the year I left New York for Paris [in 1948]." Soon, Santini was actually *defending* the young writer against a racist crowd of tourists who were offended by the bar's interracial patronage. For Baldwin, the San Remo became a public declaration of his acceptance into the republic of letters: "Once I was in the San Remo, for example, I was *in*, and anybody who messed with me was *out*—that was all

there was to it, and it happened more than once. And no one seemed to remember a time when I had not been there.”⁹⁹

Baldwin’s Village experiences powerfully informed his work, including the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), the essays in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), and particularly *Another Country*, which he published amid his vocal civil rights activism in 1962. Baldwin’s insightful examinations of the social fiction of race and the human distance it creates evocatively expose the fact that, even among dissident intellectuals, the drive for experience and sexuality often carried hints of exoticism. James Laughlin, for example, in response to Rexroth’s query about his glamorous life in New York publishing, replied in a manner that suggested the kind of phony revolution of the “cocktail set” that the genuinely radical Rexroth deplored. “I assume you are joking when you speak of my having a ‘hell of a time’,” Laughlin quipped. “Life is the shattering of illusions. I have to spend my evenings dancing in places like El Morroco [sic], The Stork Club, Cafe Society. And for what? Because I have a necessity to be in love. Oh hell. Harold, hand me the hatchet, I’s’ll [sic] cut the things off.”¹⁰⁰

Anatole Broyard, who “passed” for white throughout his time in New York from the 1940s through the 1960s, often recounted a story that spotlighted the contradictory layers of radical intellectualism, exoticism, and masculine authenticity that suffused postwar bohemia. The tale, which describes a night he took Delmore Schwartz, Clement Greenberg, and Dwight Macdonald to a dancehall in Spanish Harlem, also uses

⁹⁹ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, reprint 1984), xv, and “Here be Dragons,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), 686-7. On Italian ethnicity, assimilation, and radicalism in New York, see also Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ James Laughlin to Kenneth Rexroth, “Thursday—NYC” [c. 1945], Box 13, Folder 6 and Rexroth to Carey McWilliams, July 28, 1955, Box 17, Folder 2, Rexroth Papers, UCLA; Rexroth to Lipton, January 15, 1953, Box 2, Folder 5, Lipton Papers, UCLA.

nightspots to illustrate the generational divide between 1930s and postwar intellectuals. Beginning in a booth at the San Remo, Broyard was pleased to find himself included in the older writers' conversation about primitivism in Picasso and Hemingway. But as the author of a recent *Partisan Review* article titled, "Portrait of the Hipster" (a precursor to Mailer's more famous "White Negro"), he "was a bit uneasy" since he "didn't want to be typecast as an aficionado of the primitive."

Broyard continued, noting the nightclub's radical potential, but also betraying many of the unconscious assumptions of the postwar counterpublic, with its conflation of "the real" with the violence of among society's marginalized, subtle assumptions of male privilege, and faith in the liberatory power of sexuality:

I had noticed in taking strolls with Delmore that he was surprised and even impressed by what I thought of as ordinary observations. He seemed to see American life only in the abstract. . . . Like many other New York writers and intellectuals of his generation, Delmore seemed to me to have read himself right out of American culture. He was a citizen only of literature. His Greenwich Village was part Dostoyevski's Saint Petersburg and part Kafka's Amerika. . . . They still thought of ordinary people as the proletariat, or the masses.

I wanted to be an intellectual, too, to see life from a great height, yet I didn't want to give up my sense of connection, my intimacy with things. . . . I talked about Spanish Harlem . . . that I'd seen a man killed [in a dance hall there]. . . . so we jumped into a taxi and went straight up Fifth Avenue It was my secret conviction that Delmore and the other writer-intellectuals had very little sense of rhythm. It wasn't just that Delmore, for example, was clumsy—it went further than that. As Kenneth Burke said, the symbolic act is the *dancing* of an attitude—and I thought there was something about the way New York intellectuals danced their attitudes. There was not much syncopation in their writing. . . .

I offered to find partners for our group. Delmore, who never hesitated to play the crazy, impulsive poet, had a blank look on his face. Clem was sliding his eyes around—not like an art critic, but a tourist. Only Dwight, who was a permanent revolutionary, wanted to dance and appeared to be at home in the Park Plaza. . . . Tall, thin, white-haired even then, with glasses and a goatee, he was every inch an intellectual—yet he was something more too. He wasn't standing outside the culture looking in. He was in the thick of it. He felt its rhythm.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Anatole Broyard, "Reading and Writing: Perennial Bloom," *New York Times*, October 18, 1981, p. BR-13; Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage*, 110-118.

The chief function of nightspots for such cultural figures was to make their rebellion public. For some, like Rexroth and Duncan, this was as ambitious as social revolution: the end of capitalism and the start of a brand of anarchism that was, in the words of Walter Lowenfels, “The World as Poem,” a society in which “poems will be acted out in the daily living realization of the earth and man’s socially productive processes.”¹⁰² While the Rebel Cafe certainly fell short of this lofty vision of Truth and Beauty made manifest, it did provide sites in which chosen identities and community formed. Dylan Thomas’s performative visits to the San Remo, Vesuvio, and, momentarily, the White Horse were prime examples of this process. During his stateside visits between 1950 and 1953, Thomas confirmed his poetic fame by holding court in local pubs, pontificating and punning crowds into adoration or, when he became too drunk and belligerent, annoyance. But this also confirmed the position of those present, solidifying their claim to insider status. It was, of course, Thomas’ death after a night of drinking at the White Horse that permanently solidified the tavern as a literary site for regulars, and one of pilgrimage for tourists. Little mind that Thomas’s drinking binges were largely the product of trying to live up to his own legend, limited to his American tours, and that the actual cause of death was most likely failure to properly treat diabetes. Thomas’s host and biographer John Brinnan sold more books by ignoring the fact that Thomas drank only three beers that night at the White Horse, instead repeating the apocryphal tale that he drank “eighteen straight whiskies,” thus cementing the tavern’s

¹⁰² Walter Lowenfels to Kenneth Rexroth, March 17, 1937, Box 14, Folder 11, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

part—and his own—in the Dylan mythology.¹⁰³

Being known at the San Remo or Cedar also confirmed such inclusion: identification as a “San Remo type” became a badge of bohemian literary authenticity. Conversely, drinking at the San Remo without gaining recognition meant risking the label of hipster poseur.¹⁰⁴ Yet this sort of subcultural elitism should not be taken entirely as shallow exclusivity. Reputations were made or broken not only on frivolous criteria like fashion sense, but also on creative and verbal ability, on wit, eloquence, wordplay, and “intelligence.” This was how the Village literary community formed its own style of meritocracy. Jack Spicer similarly understood this in North Beach as “*communitas*,” with nightspots also serving an alternative *private* sphere, homes for family-by-choice, with whom he could wage his “war on God” of poetic anarchism and gay liberation. “But *communitas* isolated from pride becomes whoredom and pride isolated from *communitas* becomes madness,” he declared. Instead, it was “something we could build together.”¹⁰⁵

With the Red Scare underway, this principled opposition included both leftism and transgressive gender norms. While poetry readings in formal settings had remained available to those like Dylan Thomas, the cancellation of William Carlos Williams’ Library of Congress post and a planned reading for young poets in 1953 due to his marginally Left past marked a nadir of public support for dissident arts in America. And although some of the academic support that most poets rely on remained available for those like Spicer and Ferlinghetti, it was only when “there was no wafer to be eaten

¹⁰³ Ginsberg Journal, Series 2, Box 4, Folder 8, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford University; Brinnan, *Dylan Thomas in America*, 271-2; Norse, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, 185-94; Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams*, 471-7, 484.

¹⁰⁴ Allen Ginsberg to Paul Carroll, September 27, 1959, Box 1, Folder 44, Paul Carroll Papers, University of Chicago; Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, “March or April,” 1952, Box 11, Folder 19, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia University.

¹⁰⁵ Jack Spicer to Robin Blaser, undated, c. 1951, Box 1, Folder 7, Jack Spicer Papers, BANC MSS 2004/209, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

(loyalty oath) to get the job.” With the market significantly narrowed, Rebel Cafe sites offered both moral and financial support, with work as bartenders, through readings, or sales of little magazines.¹⁰⁶ And while San Francisco law prevented women from bartending, nightspot ownership bypassed the prohibition, opening opportunities for a host of entrepreneurs within the bohemian and lesbian community such as Ann Dee, of Ann’s 440 in North Beach, and Peggy Tolk-Watkins.¹⁰⁷ Yet the difficulty of recovering women’s voices testifies to the resistance they faced as cultural producers, both in American society as a whole and within the Rebel Cafe. It would not be until a new generation of bohemians arrived in North Beach and the Village in the late 1950s that women would claim a significant place in the bicoastal counterpublic and the national public sphere.

LAST CALL FOR THE OLD ORDER . . .

The poet and activist Maya Angelou, who began her career in the nightclubs of North Beach, once said, “The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” Angelou equally recognized the complexity of social change, recalling her youth in wartime San Francisco, where the influx of southern Blacks rested on the forced expulsion of Japanese Americans and acceptance into white society was gained grudgingly at best. Yet it was there that she first achieved a sense of “belonging,” becoming part of the conflicted project of urban pluralism. “Then the city acted in wartime like an intelligent woman under siege,” she wrote in her autobiography. “She gave what she couldn’t with safety withhold, and secured those things which lay in

¹⁰⁶ Blaser to Spicer, October 23, 1950, Spicer Papers, UC Berkeley; Norse, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, 219; “More Politics Than Poetry,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, October 12, 1954, p. 14; Lawrence Ferlinghetti to Rexroth, “May 29,” c. 1952, Box 6, Folder 13, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

¹⁰⁷ Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 83.

her reach.”¹⁰⁸

While “safety” is certainly a relative term when discussing bohemian nightspots, Rebel Cafe sites nonetheless offered some shelter from the cold winds of America’s dominant social norms. For a postwar generation of nonconformists seeking continuity with the bohemian past, nightspots offered points of connection with intellectuals and radicals of the 1930s, giving psychological support to their rebellion. But these interactions also presented a clear target for critique as younger radicals moved away from the Depression’s model of proletarian revolt and toward more personal notions of liberation. The nocturnal underground thus established informal institutions within the emerging bicoastal bohemian counterpublic, as new social networks and bar talk paved the way for sexual experimentation and cultural challenges to American assumptions about race, militarism, domesticity, and homosexuality. These challenges were uneven, of course, lacking the direction of an organized effort. And North Beach and Village rebels often reproduced the prejudices of the broader society. Yet literary bars like the Black Cat and San Remo were spaces in which dissident ideas took hold, gradually transforming the American body politic at a cellular level. The molecular processes of conversation and critique, fundamental to the public sphere and increasingly disseminated through print culture, slowly opened opportunities for further, more visible demands for both individual and collective liberation. As the Cold War deepened, this liberationism became more entwined with the ethos of jazz, making nightclubs such as the Village Vanguard part of the emerging bicoastal bohemia.

These processes never occurred in isolation: nightclub patrons entered Rebel Cafe

¹⁰⁸ Maya Angelou, *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 163-4.

sites with ideas and expectations drawn from mass media, as well as their own experiences. Nightclub culture, therefore, developed in dialogue with various media—much like the classic public sphere of the eighteenth century—as patrons debated the content of the press in face-to-face discussions. At the start of the 1950s, however, the “press” began to take on an even more expansive meaning. With new recording industry technology, long-play vinyl records, “LPs,” were being pressed by the tens of thousands. Previous formats could only carry about five minutes of recorded sound; LPs carried an entire “album’s” worth—almost thirty minutes per side. This transformed the way Americans listened to music at home (and eventually comedy as well), allowing a closer simulation of long pieces as one would hear them at a symphony or nightclub. Live albums that recorded the improvised performances of the jazz club became hot commodities. But instead of replacing the nightclub, albums worked in symbiosis with it, introducing new fans to modern styles and increasing its aura as a place of exploration. At a discursive level, these mediated interactions became their own kind of talk. As a result, a new generation of nightclub patrons and performers arrived at the boîtes of New York and San Francisco armed with new expectations and novel styles. The Rebel Cafe’s “transformed talk” continued to reshape the national conversation about the meaning of “America.”

Chapter 5

“Transformed Talk: The Politics of Performance, Race, and Space in the Cold War Jazz-Folk Cabaret”

Many People forget that jazz, no matter what form it takes, must come from the heart as well as the mind. Regardless of what technique he may have, a jazzman must be able also to tell a story.

— Mary Lou Williams (1954)

[INTERVIEWER]: “What about British jazz? Have we got the right feeling?”

[MINGUS]: “If you’re talking about technique, musicianship, I guess the British can be as good as anybody else. But what do they need to play jazz for? It’s the American Negro tradition, it’s his music. White people don’t have a right to play it, it’s colored folk music.”

—Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* (1971)

[Stan] Kenton is the closest thing to classical music there is in the jazz field, if you want to call it jazz; I mean, as far as I’m concerned, there’s no such thing.

—Charlie Parker (1948)¹

On February 17, 1951, the *New York Amsterdam News* society columnist Allan McMillan reported that the glamorous Josephine Baker would begin a short run at the Strand Theatre. The engagement was part of Baker’s sensational return to the US, after nearly three decades in France where she had fundamentally redefined Parisian cabaret, as well as fought in the Resistance against the Nazis. She planned to follow the Strand with a more permanent cabaret gig—but only on her own terms. “At least three night club operators are now dickering for her services,” McMillan reported, “but one thing certain she will not accept any night club engagements unless there is no discrimination whatsoever.” Baker’s civil rights stance was not new. She had previously worked with *Ebony* magazine and the NAACP’s Walter White to desegregate audiences during her stint at the Miami Beach Copacabana. In October 1951, Baker and White spearheaded

¹ Mary Lou Williams, “Mary Lou Williams,” in Robert Gottlieb, ed., *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 115; Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*, Nel King, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 351; Leonard Feather, “A Bird’s-Ear View of Music,” *Metronome* 64, no. 8 (August 1948): 21-2.

protests in New York, this time against the swanky Stork Club's racist policies.²

As historian Martha Biondi has shown, the Stork Club protest was a vital symbol of the Black Freedom Struggle early in the Cold War—with typically contradictory results. While the protest sparked wide publicity and a new state law banning discrimination in public accommodations, Baker's leftist associations put her on the blacklist and hardened NAACP resolve to purge communists for fear of media backlash. The protest, which featured luminaries such as Thurgood Marshall and actress Mary Martin on the picket lines, also successfully undermined the prominence of the Stork Club and its media mouthpiece, Walter Winchell. Yet while Biondi notes this as an important turning point in the integrationist phase of the Civil Rights Movement, Baker's stand had even deeper roots in nightclub culture than she recognizes. Over a year before, Allan McMillan had reported that "New York's cafe society crowd [is] snubbing Broadway spots that use discriminating tactics in the seating of patrons." He followed with a "list of the OK spots" that were exempt from the boycott, including the jazz clubs Bop City and Birdland, as well as Cafe Society Downtown, Herbert Jacoby's Le Ruban Bleu, and Max Gordon's Village Vanguard.³ Baker's high-profile protests were actually part of a longer effort to resist racial discrimination in which Black activists used nightclubs to gain public visibility, and patrons displayed their claims to social space, leisure, and affluence.

² Allan McMillan, "Allan's alley: Notes Of A Dawn Patroler," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 17, 1951, p. 22; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 188. On Baker's significance in French cabaret, see Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

³ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 186-90; Allan McMillan, "Allan's Alley: Cafe Society Intelligence," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 24, 1950, p. 30. Baker also successfully brought criminal charges against a belligerent patron in Los Angeles when he verbally assaulted her in a hotel lounge, again demonstrating her dedication to claiming Black dignity in public spaces.

Throughout the 1950s, Rebel Cafe nightclubs fermented this potent concoction of racial integration, Black self-determination, urban cosmopolitanism, and left-cabaret sensibilities. Jazz and folk music promoted universalism and contributed to the national conversation about civil rights, even as this discourse sometimes relied on racist assumptions about “natural” Black abilities. It is highly symbolic that jazz first appeared in the cabarets and brothels of New Orleans. Jazz represented a distinctly modern mix of Freudian desire to transcend repression through “wish-fulfillment” and play, and the socioeconomic structures that forced African-Americans into these sites for income. Throughout the twentieth century, jazz bore the stamp of both sexual expression and economic function for (mostly) Black men to live up to the breadwinning ideology demanded by traditional Western patriarchy, to establish their manhood through jobs as entertainers in America’s nightclubs. To put it bluntly: Black men played music while Black women “serviced” whites. This formula—a convoluted mix of fantasy, white privilege, liberated sexuality, and economic coercion—inflected jazz’s multivalent expressions of modernity, masculinity, and conflicted American consciousness.⁴

Changing norms of gender and sexuality were therefore significant in this milieu.

Nightspots had long been coded as a masculine domain, but in the 1950s women

⁴ Although jazz’s origins are not reducible to its emergence in New Orleans, having started with musicians who traveled up and down the Mississippi River, that city’s racial and sexual history make it the most illustrative example of the genre’s social role. New Orleans was where the modern form of scientific racism first became institutionalized: the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which enshrined the “separate but equal” policy of Jim Crow, decided whether Louisiana could legally ban Blacks from first-class train cars. This notion of racial separation was also bound up with the period’s demands for sexual repression. New Orleans’ red-light district, known as Storyville, was established as a site where white male sexuality could be satisfied with Black prostitutes—thus preserving the supposed “virtue” of white womanhood. While the jazz of the 1940s and 1950s bore almost no audible resemblance to the “jass” of 1900 New Orleans’ sexual subculture, it nonetheless carried its forbear’s DNA. Yet even Storyville’s part in jazz’s origins has likely been exaggerated by scholars and popular culture alike. Given the genre’s disparate influences, Storyville is more useful as a *symbol* of complex social functions than as a singular historical site. Court Carney, *Cuttin’ Up: How Jazz Got America’s Ear* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 31-56; Emily Epstein Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 3-5, 16-31, 45-50.

increasingly claimed these sites of social, cultural, and sexual expression. Moreover, gender and race were mutually constructed through these struggles over social space. For instance, both popular and bohemian notions about Cold War-era jazz were founded largely on assumptions of authentic Black masculinity and often had misogynistic effects. Both white and Black women, on the other hand, negotiated the complex routes toward full citizenship rights by alternately utilizing and rejecting racialized notions of sexuality and domesticity—the latter being significantly contested terrain considering the mainstream’s emphasis on traditional nuclear families.⁵ Black women especially suffered invisibility in this period, as media focused primarily on male cultural producers.⁶ This invisibility was overcome, however, by a key group of audacious entertainers, including Maya Angelou and folk-singer Odetta. Both came to prominence within the queer world of San Francisco nightclubs, indicating the city’s increasing cultural significance nationally and hinting at the previously unrecognized importance of gay and lesbian communities in jazz-folk history. Moreover, cultural historians have continually separated studies of jazz and folk music, despite the fact that both were often performed within the same American nightclub spaces. While the fans for jazz and folk certainly differed according to tastes, there was nonetheless vast overlap among both patrons and performers which formed the outlines of an identifiable jazz-folk public.

⁵ See Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1983), and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

⁶ This cultural phenomenon was a parallel to the political sphere, as seen in the Civil Rights Movement so often associated with male “leaders” such as Martin Luther King, while ignoring the fundamental work that grassroots activists such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer were doing within Black communities and activist organizations such as SNCC. See Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

If Cafe Society and the Village Vanguard inaugurated the “socially-minded nightclub,” they and their ilk also legitimated nightclub entertainment as something more than frivolous revelry. Central to this was the assertion of modern jazz performers and critics that the music was a new form of high art—one that was simultaneously avant-garde and rooted in urban communities. Alongside folk music’s tradition of social protest going back to Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly, often on the same small stages of Rebel Cafe nightspots, this progressive musical approach became part of a critical discourse that is perhaps best termed the “jazz-folk sublime.” More than simply a musical style, the jazz-folk sublime played a part in transforming American society and politics in the 1950s, as its ethos, language, and prominent figures joined national discussions about the most recent phase of the Black Freedom Struggle.

Meanwhile, as Kenneth Rexroth promoted his poetic renaissance in the Black Cat and Iron Pot, as well proselytizing to fellow-traveling literary friends in New York and southern California, he could make the backhanded boast that “every time I mention something- it creates a sort of fad . . . I have a deadly fear I am turning into the Sam Johnson of San Francisco.”⁷ His vision of the city as a rival cultural center to New York and Hollywood was becoming a reality. Yet it is important to avoid teleology when discussing its evolution as a nightlife capital. Despite Rexroth’s bohemian boosterism, few in the late 1940s would have thought of it as any more a jazz-club city than Boston—certainly less so than Chicago. The Windy City’s association with mob-owned clubs sat beside renowned venues such as the Blue Note. But jazz clubs bloomed across the country, from Boston’s Storyville to Washington, DC’s Bohemian Caverns, as well as

⁷ Kenneth Rexroth to Eli Jacobsen [*sic*], December 12, 1946, Box 23, Folder 14, Kenneth Rexroth Papers (Collection 175), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

lesser-known venues from Philadelphia to Kansas City and Denver. Jay Landesman's Crystal Palace in St. Louis, remained a destination well into the 1950s, confounding the simple bicoastal bohemian formula. Rather, (as Malcolm Cowley had noted in the 1930s) Greenwich Village and North Beach were simply the most visible symbols of a national social network. As late as 1952, Herbert Gold could write to Allen Ginsberg without any sense of self-parody, "Come to Cleveland and we can do a job together. I've been casing Lindsay's Skybar . . . where Art Tatum and Muggy [*sic*] Spanier alight, and where every other drinker hopes to submit a novel to the Exposition Press someday."⁸ Still, the Bay Area scene developed rapidly, bolstered by the continual influx of revelers through the city's ports and paralleling changes in New York, as jazz outgrew the African-American Fillmore, expanding into bohemian North Beach. Two nightclubs, the Black Hawk and Tin Angel, were particularly important, as they challenged nightlife norms with both their female ownership and their progressive styles.

Finally, the Rebel Cafe's left-bohemian role as a Cold War fallout shelter continued. To call nightspots fallout shelters is an apt metaphor: these underground venues (often literally located in basements) were commercial endeavors that provided a modicum of real protection for a few ardent leftists. Yet they were perhaps more important as symbols of future survival. While some victims of the Red Scare found employment in nightclubs such as San Francisco's hungry i and New York's Village Vanguard, clubs of the late 1950s, including the Village Gate and the Cellar in North Beach, were informal institutions that spawned renewed activism. Club owners and performers alike gave ideological and material support to groups ranging from opponents to HUAC's "witch hunts" to proponents of civil rights. In these intimate spaces, cultural

⁸ Herbert Gold to Allen Ginsberg, April 12, 1952, Box 3, Folder 33, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford University.

artisans crafted unique performances that were all the more vital as audiences experienced them in person—art on a human scale that thrived on interaction. Subterranean nightclubs became important aspects of the public sphere, where the “transformed talk” of jazz-folk performances became part of a broader national dialogue defining Cold War Americanism.

TWO OF A KIND: BLACK HAWK AND THE TIN ANGEL

As Cafe Society was closing its doors in 1949, Barney Josephson packed up one of its satirical murals and shipped it to the WPA artist Anton Refregier, who was then teaching at San Francisco’s California Labor School.⁹ Even as this symbol of the Popular Front’s defeat arrived, however, two of the most significant venues in the history of the Rebel Cafe opened across town. Both challenged dominant nightlife norms; both became key sites in San Francisco’s jazz-bohemian scene of the 1950s and helped solidify the city’s bicoastal connections to New York. The Black Hawk and Tin Angel nightclubs, run by Helen Noga and Peggy Tolk-Watkins respectively, broke from the Bay Area’s previous nightclub culture, each in a distinct way. In the 1940s, San Francisco’s jazz clubs mostly featured Dixieland, evoking nostalgia for the Gay ‘90s and the 1920s Jazz Age as mythical eras of decadence and cheer. With the exception of the small Fillmore club scene around Bop City and Jack’s Tavern, little modern jazz was heard in area nightspots until the opening of the Black Hawk at Turk and Hyde Streets, in the heart of the old Tenderloin cabaret district. Avoiding flamboyant decor, Noga and her partners—husband John and fellow bartender Guido Cacianti—instead focused on musical virtuosity and avant-garde jazz. Bringing “culture to the people,” they opened a spare,

⁹ Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 242-3; Robert W. Cherny, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Taylor, *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 207.

rectangular basement venue, soon to be infamous almost as much for its ability to trap cigarette smoke as for its musical acts.¹⁰

Before the Black Hawk, touring for most jazz bands, particularly the modernists, was less a circuit than a one-way trip. Heading out from the center of the jazz world in New York, their West Coast destination was usually just Los Angeles, where it was useful to make contact with Hollywood producers. But Noga and her partners brought in prominent modern acts, including Billie Holiday and Dizzy Gillespie's protégé, Miles Davis. Moreover, the Black Hawk completed the jazz circuit by offering a viable export—the ambitious young pianist, Dave Brubeck—who for the first time gave the jazz players of Chicago and Gotham a run for their money. Brubeck debuted at the Black Hawk in 1950, the same year another California jazzman, Charles Mingus, moved to New York.¹¹ Both established considerable reputations in the jazz world, with Brubeck defining what came to be known as the West Coast “cool” style.

Mob-owned venues in San Francisco were uncommon, but the few that did exist were mostly jazz clubs in the Fillmore or Tenderloin. The Black Hawk therefore became another key link in a developing network of progressive venues that challenged organized crime's control of American nightlife. While left-leaning nightclub owners such as Barney Josephson and Max and Lorraine Gordon have been generally (and understandably) tight-lipped about any pressures they felt from organized crime, the few brief references they have made to the mob are suggestive. In her memoir, for example, Lorraine Gordon continually distinguished between the Village Vanguard's and Blue

¹⁰ C.H. Garrigues, “A Decade of Jazz at the Blackhawk,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 1, 1959, n.p., Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

¹¹ “Blackhawk Display Ad,” July 1, 1950, p. 6 and Hy Porter, “Acapulco Offering Draws ‘Bay White Way,’” July 8, 1950, p. 16, *San Francisco News*.

Angel's "sophistication" in contrast to mob-tied clubs like the Stork. Josephson was more outspoken, describing gangsters' efforts to muscle in on Cafe Society with tactics such as taking "ownership" of the coatroom and then demanding a monthly payment for "rent." Josephson's resistance to organized crime played a part in establishing progressive nightclubs as a "legitimate business"—part of a larger process of jazz respectability and racial integration in the American mainstream (as well as a likely tactic to avoid attention from hostile authorities).¹² Although the Nogas and Cacianti had no significant ties to the political Left, Brubeck and his band (in particular saxophonist Paul Desmond) were part of Rexroth's extended circle of bohemian anarchist-libertarians. This later made the club an important anchor for the Beat Generation writers, as well as Rexroth's own explorations of jazz and poetry.

This was also true of the Tin Angel, although Tolk-Watkins featured a very different style of entertainment, leaning heavily on traditional jazz and progressive folk music. But formal entertainment was largely secondary to the club's appeal. Rather Tolk-Watkins herself, known as a local wit and raconteur, was the main attraction, the club an extension of her own bohemian performativity. Born in 1922 to Jewish parents in New York, her mother a seamstress and her father a low-level gangster, she studied photography under Arnold Eagle in Roosevelt's National Youth Administration and did social work on the Lower East Side in the early 1940s. In 1945, Peggy Tolk came to San Francisco, again doing social work, teaching art to children and participating in a mural project in the Richmond area. She soon gravitated toward the Black Cat's bohemian crowd, where she likely first met Rexroth. The following year she bounced back east, teaching children's art classes at the Negro Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina

¹² Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 8-9, 11-12, 39-40, 54-5.

and studying English literature at Black Mountain College. There she met Harriett Zwerling, who became her lover, and Ragland “Rags” Watkins, who became her husband. Succumbing to Tolk-Watkins’s “seduction by music,” which included Billie Holiday and Marlene Dietrich records—as well as her literary tastes that ranged from Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* to Proust and Faulkner—both followed her back to the Bay Area in 1948. The trio soon became a fixture on the jazz-queer-bohemian scene.¹³

The Tin Angel, which first opened the next year, was more an extension of the Tolk-Watkins persona than a definitive site. Its first location was across the bay from San Francisco in Sausalito and it featured eye-popping colors, including a bright yellow piano, courtesy of Black Mountain friends and local artist Jean Varda. The Tin Angel became a Sausalito landmark, and locals invoked Montmartre and Greenwich Village to describe its flavor, with its jazz bands and abstract art exhibitions—including Enid Foster’s canvas ode to Edna St. Vincent Millay.¹⁴ It closed in 1951 and was followed by two subsequent locations, each in the Embarcadero neighborhood of San Francisco. Throughout, Tolk-Watkins’s razor-sharp conversation and whimsical sense of decor underpinned the club’s allure. Jazz critic Ralph Gleason remembered that while she was “not always diplomatic in her relations with her staff and entertainers,” she consistently enlisted seasoned musicians such as Turk Murphy as part of the club’s “carnival atmosphere.” “Peggy Tolk-Watkins had flair,” Gleason gleefully recalled, contending that she and Helen Noga

¹³ “Self-Taught Painter Shows at De Young” and “The Art of Peggy T-W,” unidentified clippings, Harriet Sommers Zwerling, “Peggy,” and photograph of Richland mural, dated 1945, listing Peggy Tolk as “Instructor,” courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins (also archived at the San Francisco Historical Society); Author Interview: Ragland Tolk Watkins, December 4, 2012, New York, NY; Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, S.D. No. 10, E.D. No. 24-634, Sheet No. 3-B; “Tin Angel’s Peggy Tolk-Watkins Dies,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 1973, n.p. and “Tin Angel Operator Dead at 51,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 26, 1973, n.p., clippings in Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

¹⁴ Rafael Marin, “Marin Musings,” *Daily Independent Journal* (Marin County), June 2, 1949 and September 29, 1949, p. 1; “Deyala Missed Fun of His Celebration at Sausalito Regatta,” *Daily Independent Journal*, September 26, 1949, pp. 1-3.

stood as “important figures in the entertainment world.” As a self-avowed “socialist,” she also was part of the city’s anarchist-libertarian circle. Bringing together elements of jazz-bohemianism and the city’s gay and lesbian community, Tolk-Watkins made the Tin Angel another significant Rebel Cafe site in the 1950s.¹⁵ Moreover, her feminist vivacity and knack for publicity helped promote a new cadre of San Francisco performers who challenged public preconceptions about race and gender, and further solidified connections between North Beach and Greenwich Village.

“I THOUGHT IT WAS PRETTY STRUTTY”:

ANGELOU, ODETTA, BELAFONTE, AND THE DIGNITY OF BLACK FOLK

In 1954, after years of making her way in San Francisco’s nightlife as a dancer and B-girl, the poet and activist Maya Angelou made her debut at the Purple Onion nightclub in North Beach. Educated at the California Labor School, and presented at the Onion by Barry Drew, a local gay-bohemian who had cut his teeth with the WPA Theatre Project, Angelou started her rise to fame with this nightclub moment. Yet she did not recite a word of poetry that night. Instead she performed as a “Cuban” calypso singer, replete with an exotic costume and a carefully rehearsed accent.¹⁶ Despite the Rebel Cafe’s progressivism, it was primarily through performance that African Americans (*especially* women) broke through the barriers of racial caste. The act of performing, however, should not be underestimated as a force of social and cultural change. Rather it

¹⁵ “Foster, Watson, and Norman Art Exhibits,” *Independent Journal*, November 3, 1950, p. 20 and “Tin Angel Sold; Glad Hand to Take Its Place,” *Independent Journal*, July 6, 1951, p. 18; Ralph J. Gleason, “Days of Peggy and Helen,” *San Francisco Chronicle: This World*, July 8, 1973, p. 33; “Tin Angel,” unidentified press clipping, 33-A and Interview: Ragland Tolk Watkins.

¹⁶ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name*, and *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* in *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004.), 452-60; “‘Mambo King’ Stars at Downbeat Club,” *San Francisco News*, March 13, 1954, p. 4; James Gavin, *Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 120; “Maya Angelou: Biography: Global Renaissance Woman,” in <http://mayaangelou.com/bio/> (accessed December 18, 2012); Barbara Bladen, “Theatre of the 40’s,” *San Mateo Times*, September 5, 1959, p. 9-A.

was another form of communication, a kind of transformed talk that allowed different parts of American society to exchange ideas at the widest levels of discourse.

Angelou's story in many ways encapsulated the Black experience since World War II. Part of the Great Migration of southern African Americans to the North and West, Angelou's Arkansas family settled in the Fillmore neighborhood of San Francisco during the war, finding available housing there due to the internment of Japanese citizens. Her social consciousness was a product of both the heightened Black politicization growing from the wartime Double-V campaign and the nocturnal world of left-bohemia and jazz. While racism certainly existed in the Bay Area, she experienced relative freedom compared with the South. Angelou studied dance on a scholarship at the Labor School, whose Left associations led to her dismissal from the army in the early 1950s. She also was San Francisco's first female Black streetcar operator—an early point of pride in a life of defiance against social barriers. This progressivism was underpinned by a mix of cultural influences, which ranged from Dostoyevsky and the poetry of Langston Hughes to Radclyffe Hall's early lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* and Charlie Parker's bebop.¹⁷

Angelou channeled this cultural breadth into the narrow avenues available in postwar Black life. She worked in various nightlife capacities: as a cook in ethnic niteries and a dancer at the Hi Hat club in San Diego—even briefly as a madam in a brothel. She was doing a striptease act at the San Francisco nightclub the Garden of Allah when Barry Drew, accompanied by the comedienne Jorie Remus, saw her and recruited her for the Purple Onion. Angelou's account reveals the cultural codes at work as she crossed the threshold into a new nightclub milieu:

¹⁷ Maya Angelou, *The Collected Autobiographies*, 161-8, 197, 207-9, 261, 274, 310, 314.

Three fashionably dressed men and a young Marlene Dietrich-looking woman huddled over a table in the center of the room. The woman had a shock of sunlight-yellow hair and brooded over a cigarette holder. . . . Now the four sat watching me as if they were French couturiers and I was wearing the latest creation from Jacques Fath. The more I tried to ignore them, the more they intruded into my mind. Who were they? Some slumming socialites looking for thrills? . . . It occurred to me that they might be talent scouts and maybe I was going to be discovered. I threw that silly thought out of my mind before it could take hold. Lana Turner and Rita Hayworth got discovered, Black girls got uncovered.¹⁸

Drew and Remus's presence that night did, in a way, mean Angelou's "discovery": her nightclub appearances led to a role in a touring version of *Porgy and Bess* that took her across the country and to Europe, followed by acclaim in Genet's *The Blacks* and the socially-conscious *Cabaret for Freedom*. This notoriety opened up wider artistic and educational vistas as Angelou gradually established herself as a revered public figure and activist in the 1960s. Yet her rise from the nightclub underground also reveals its tensions. While Drew and Remus avoided Angelou's worst expectations, Black women nonetheless were often the object of the white gaze, exoticized as an authentic Other—however sophisticated their performances.¹⁹ On the other hand, although elements of exoticization were discernible in her "calypso" performances, Angelou's insistence on controlling her own career, such as finagling out of her Purple Onion contract to join the *Porgy* cast, was another small wave in the tide of Black self-determination.

The Purple Onion was part of a wider nightclub culture that was emerging in the early 1950s, intertwined with the bicoastal bohemia. Angelou was briefly involved with Kerouac-compatriot Gerd Stern, who was both her manager and love interest during her return to California nightclubs after the *Porgy* tour ended in 1955. Stern was part of San Francisco's bohemian social network, which connected him both to Barry Drew and to Angelou's first husband, Reed College alumnus Tosh Angelou. While Stern later

¹⁸ Ibid, 252-4, 397-8, 432, 452.

¹⁹ Ibid, 495-501.

incorrectly stated that he introduced her to the Purple Onion following her *Porgy* run, his relationship with Angelou nonetheless drew her further into bohemian circles.²⁰ This network was anchored on the East Coast by the Village Vanguard and Blue Angel, and on the West Coast by the Tin Angel and the hungry i—a cabaret located across the street from the Purple Onion that became the Vanguard’s most significant counterpart.

SAN FRANCISCO’S LEFT-BOHEMIA AND ODETTA’S SOCIALLY-CONSCIOUS FOLK

The hungry i was first opened in 1950 by Eric “Big Daddy” Nord, later dubbed “King of the Beatniks” by the press and recognized as a West-Coast originator of the bohemian lifestyle associated with the Beat Generation. From the start, he and artist co-owner Mark Adams envisioned the club as a site of provocative discussion and psychic exploration—the “i” stood for either “id” or “intellectual,” depending on who you asked.²¹ Nord failed to make a splash, however, and six months later sold controlling interest in the club for \$800 (reportedly to stake the purchase of a large quantity of Mexican marijuana). The new owner was Enrico Banducci, a flamboyant impresario whose mustache and beret became a North Beach trademark, invoking Old World style and artiste flair. He was initiated into bohemianism living in the Monkey Block building as a teenager in the late 1930s and 1940s, hoping for a career as an opera singer and concert violinist. But fame eluded him and Banducci now envisioned a nightspot that would welcome nonconformists of every stripe, from North Beach bohos to Berkeley brainiacs. The club’s early clientele was similar to the Black Cat’s mix of bohemian and

²⁰ Gerd Stern, “From Beat Scene Poet to Psychedelic Multimedia Artist in San Francisco and Beyond, 1948-1948,” an oral history conducted in 1996 by Victoria Morris Byerly, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2001, 44-5, 60-1, 245; “Night Life across Bay, Too,” *Oakland Tribune*, September 13, 1955, p. 25.

²¹ Untitled clipping, *San Francisco Examiner*, September 6, 1950, n.p., and “3d. St. Bar Operator Loses License in Vice Case Echo,” November 16, 1951, n.p., Ralph J. Gleason, “Banducci Closes one “i” and Opens Another,” October 20, 1969, n.p., and “Bay City Beat,” November 5, 1970, n.p., Examiner Morgue, San Francisco Public Library.

gay patrons, and its entertainment consisted primarily of folk musicians such as Josh White and Stan Wilson.²²

Most early press accounts focused on the hungry i's appeal to the "Bohemian intelligentsia" or the "high IQ crowd" of North Beach. In 1955, the club featured the long-running musical satire *The Pizza Pusher* starring Vesuvio bartender Guy Wernham and John Allen Ryan, who was part of Knute Stiles' and Jack Spicer's radical-queer circles. As late as 1960, Lawrence Lipton, author of the renowned treatise on the Beats, *The Holy Barbarians*, performed poetry and jazz there (backed by Eric Nord on congas).²³ But this artistic eccentricity veiled a deeper leftist streak that ran through the heart of the hungry i. In addition to hiring White while he was blacklisted in *Red Channels*, Banducci brought in White's fellow Popular Front protest singers Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee.²⁴ Perhaps most strikingly, in 1956 Banducci hired the blacklisted Hollywood Ten screenwriter Alvah Bessie as the club's light and sound man, following Bessie's prison term for a HUAC conviction. Bessie worked at the hungry i for the next seven years while he struggled to return to Hollywood, later telling Banducci that he had "always been grateful to you for hiring me at a difficult time."²⁵

Despite Josh White's performances and Banducci's roots in left-bohemia, the

²² Gerald Nachman, "A Funny Thing Happened to the Hungry i," *Oakland Tribune*, January 11, 1970, 3-EN; Dick Boyd, *Broadway North Beach, The Golden Years: A Saloonkeeper's Tales*. San Francisco: Cape Foundations Publications, 2006, 37-9; Alvah Bessie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 20, Folder 8, Statement to the Court, 1963; *Billboard*, May 6, 1967. Banducci later insisted the name meant "hungry id": "Enrico Banducci's hungry i: San Francisco's Legendary Nightclub," Exhibition Video Loop, San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum: Sahl and Banducci Interview, 1997; Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 22.

²³ Jack Spicer Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, Box 3, Folder 27, Ryan to Spicer, January 15 and 24, 1956; Lewis Ellingham Papers, Box 4, Folder 1, John Allen Ryan Interview Transcript, 12-21; Don Steele, "Going Places," *Oakland Tribune*, June 12, 1954, D-11; hungry i Exhibition Video Loop, San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum.

²⁴ *Ibid*; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 349-60; "A Record Success Story," *Wisconsin State Journal*, August 30, 1977, I-17; Bessie Papers, Box 2, Folder 12, Bessie-Bruce Correspondence, 1959-1960.

²⁵ Bessie Papers, Box 20, Folder 8, Bessie to Banducci, January 3, 1964.

hungry i never launched the careers of any notable Cold War-era protest singers. Starting in 1954, the club instead became known for a different form of protest: its comic satire, featuring Jorie Remus, Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and Dick Gregory. The only folk acts that emerged from the basement venue were the edgy Limelitters, who gained only moderate renown, and the rather bland Kingston Trio who, despite massive popularity in the early 1960s, did little to challenge the status quo. The Trio helped popularize folk, but in the process presented a defanged version of Rebel Cafe culture. In effect, they “covered” it, offering the form that flourished in the hungry i, but without its rebellious substance and style.²⁶

Instead, the Tin Angel launched the city’s most significant folk singer, the influential and socially-conscious Odetta. When, in 1953, she joined what one reporter called, in Rabelaisian terms, the club’s nightly “charivari.”²⁷ Odetta’s story shadowed Angelou’s. Born in 1930, Odetta Felious moved with her family from Alabama to Los Angeles at age six. She trained as a classical vocalist, but popular styles caught her imagination and in 1949 she joined the cast of the Popular Front musical *Finian’s Rainbow*, which protested conditions in the Jim-Crow South (and featured Sonny Terry on harmonica).²⁸ While on tour, Odetta fell in with the folk music crowd of North Beach and became a dedicated convert. “I heard ‘I Am My Mother’s Child’ and wept with a surge of homesickness,” she told one reporter. “I heard ‘Take This Hammer,’ and I felt the work ways of my people . . . and then I knew that our songs expressed our heritage

²⁶ Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 120, 148-50; “In One Ear,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 17, 1964, n.p. and “For the Old hungry i,” September 10, 1968, n.p., clippings in Examiner Morgue, SFPL. The Kingston Trio purchased and ran the club for a few years in the mid-1960s.

²⁷ “AVGA Standard Form of Artists Employment Contract: Peggy Tolk-Watkins and Odetta Felious,” August 19, 1953, courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins (also archived at the San Francisco Historical Society).

²⁸ “Folk Singer Odetta Back To Ash Grove,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 18, 1960, p. C-1; “Odetta Biography,” liner notes for *Sings Ballads and Blues* (1956); Denning, *Cultural Front*, 360.

and our truths.” Odetta was also connected to Kenneth Rexroth’s extended anarchist-libertarian circle. The WPA artists Frank and Shirley Triest counted her as “a friend of our family,” and Odetta attended soirees at their house, along with Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.²⁹ This made her part of a cultural and intellectual genealogy that extended from the Montgomery Block’s early bohemians through the nightspots of North Beach, rooting her early career firmly in its left-cabaret milieu. But it also directly affected her musical style. “Speaking of guides and angels,” she told one interviewer, “that was around the time that I was meeting more and more people in the folk community who were taking around petitions to save Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. So my interest in folk music has always been around my interest in [social justice].”³⁰

While visiting the hungry i, the aspiring singer was called onstage and the audience responded so wildly that Banducci offered to hire her on the spot. But the headliner objected to the competition, so through the summer of 1953 Odetta played local youth functions until the Tin Angel came calling. She recorded much of her first album live at the club for Fantasy Records, a San Francisco label with close connections to the Tin Angel’s Peggy Tolk-Watkins. Tolk-Watkins signed Odetta to a management contract and suggested that she perform simply under her first name. “‘Nobody is going to be able to pronounce this Felious thing’,” the singer later recalled Tolk-Watkins proposing, “‘so why don’t you just go as Odetta.’ And I loved the idea; I thought it was pretty struttly, but

²⁹ Whitney Bolton, “Glancing Sideways,” *The Sunday Times* (Cumberland, MD), July 24, 1960, p. 8; Shirley Staschen Triest, “A Life on the First Waves of Radical Bohemianism in San Francisco,” an oral history conducted in 1995 and 1996 by Victoria Morris Byerly, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley, 1997, p. 248.

³⁰ “Odetta ([born] December 31, 1930),” in LaShonda Barnett, ed., *I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on Their Craft* (Philadelphia: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2007), 177.

I loved the idea.”³¹

After a year of wowing Tin Angel audiences with her powerful contralto renditions of Popular Front folk standards such as “John Henry,” and briefly appearing in a Tin Angel club scene in Hollywood’s *Cinerama Holiday*, Odetta went on the road. She recorded a studio album in 1956 and another live record in 1957 at the Gate of Horn, a Chicago nightclub which also presented radical folksters such as Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee. Odetta’s national breakthrough came with her appearance on Harry Belafonte’s December 1959 television special and soon her influence as a socially-conscious performer widened. Her newest album featured Paul Robeson’s “The Ballad for Americans,” and her concert tickets sold wildly.³²

One of Odetta’s new fans was a skinny kid from Minnesota named Robert Zimmerman, who subsequently moved to Greenwich Village and adopted the name of his favorite poet, rechristening himself Bob Dylan. “The first thing that turned me on to folk singing was Odetta,” he later remembered. “I heard a record of hers, *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*, in a record store . . . Right then and there, I went out and traded my electric guitar and amplifier for an acoustical guitar, a flat-top Gibson.”³³

For Angelou, Odetta’s influence was more direct and inspirational. When Odetta attended her show at the Gate of Horn, Angelou recalled, “she gave me an afternoon of

³¹ Bolton, “Glancing Sideways”; “Scintillating Vocalist Odetta to Feature Negro Spirituals, Blues in July 16 Show,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 11, 1970, p. 22; “Mischa Elman Plays Tonight in San Leandro,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 23, 1953, D-21; “Exclusive Personal Management Contract between Peggy Tolk-Watkins, manager, and Odetta Felious, Artist,” September 4, 1953, courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins (also archived at the San Francisco Historical Society); Odetta Oral History, National Visionary Leadership Project, <http://www.visionaryproject.com/gordonodetta/> (accessed December 18, 2012).

³² “Sights, Sounds of S.F. Mark New Cinerama,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 10, 1954; “Chicago’s Hootenany’s Snares Fugitives from Rock and Roll,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 11, 1958, 20-D; “Odetta, Newest Folk Song Star, at Town Hall,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 26, 1960, p. 5. The Gate of Horn’s owner, Albert Grossman, became a key figure in the 1960s folk scene, managing Joan Baez, Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Bob Dylan.

³³ Interview: “Bob Dylan,” *Playboy*, March 1978.

advice. ‘Keep on telling the truth, Maya. Stay on the stage. I don’t mean the night-club stage . . . I mean the stage of life.’” Through the early 1960s, Odetta’s reputation as an outspoken and powerful performer grew, solidifying her position as a model artist in the struggle for Black liberation. In 1963, Odetta performed “Oh, Freedom” before hundreds of thousands at the 1963 March on Washington, a pinnacle of Rebel Cafe culture’s political expression.³⁴

Early steps in Odetta’s and Angelou’s journeys also illustrate the evolution of Rebel Cafe networks and the ties between New York and San Francisco nightclub cultures. Two weeks after her Tin Angel debut, Max Gordon and Herbert Jacoby brought Odetta to New York to perform at the Blue Angel. In late 1954, Jacoby contacted Peggy Tolk-Watkins to book Odetta for another one-month run. The Blue Angel engagement benefited Odetta financially: her pay went from the \$100 per week she made at the Tin Angel to \$250 per week (around \$2,100 in current dollars), with optional extended engagements at \$350 and \$500, plus plane tickets. (Always with a flair for self-promotion, Tolk-Watkins stipulated that the Tin Angel be mentioned in all publicity.) The shows’ success launched Odetta on the national tour that led her to the Gate of Horn and Belafonte’s TV special. Angelou’s 1954 debut at the Purple Onion had stemmed from a similar exchange, when Jorie Remus brought Angelou in as a replacement during her own trek to the Blue Angel. Angelou soon followed, performing there in 1956 with the comic Paul Mazursky.³⁵ Gotham’s jazzmen had become a regular sight for San Francisco

³⁴ Angelou, *Collected Autobiographies*, 691; Samantha Donovan, “World Mourns Passing of Odetta,” *The World Today*, December 4, 2008 in <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2008/s2437786.htm> (accessed December 12, 2012).

³⁵ Walter Winchell, “In New York,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, September 18, 1953, p. 28; Telegram: Herbert Jacoby to Peggy Tolk-Watkins, September 3, 1954, courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins; Hazel L. Lamarre, “APPLAUSE!: In the Theatre,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 1, 1956, p. A-10; Walter Winchell, “The Broadway Lights,” *The Washington Post*, December 6, 1953, p. L-1; Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 150; Lorraine

audiences since the late 1940s, but the exportation of Bay Area talent to New York was new. Angelou, Jorie Remus, and Odetta helped complete a new bicoastal circuit that commingled the culture of the two cities.

HARRY BELAFONTE, NEW YORK'S NIGHTCLUB UNDERGROUND, AND THE POLITICS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN AUTHENTICITY

Folksinger Harry Belafonte, who began his career at Max Gordon's Village Vanguard, also gained wide popularity in the mid-1950s as his *Calypso* album became the first LP to sell a million copies, its "Day-o" cry of "The Banana Boat Song" embedding itself in America's cultural consciousness. Born in 1927 New York to West Indian parents, Belafonte served in the navy during World War II, where he was radicalized by fellow African-American servicemen. These were "the intellectuals in our crowd," he recalled, "Pullman-car porters, college graduates," who lent him copies of W.E.B. Du Bois. This consciousness-raising continued as he joined the American Negro Theatre, which brought him to the attention of Paul Robeson. Sidney Poitier, who also started at the ANT, remembered that he and Belafonte used to "meet Robeson in a bar on Fifth Avenue just off a Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street, and sit there and talk." "I was in some of the best company America created," Belafonte said. "Robeson was my mentor."³⁶

Gordon, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, 110. Remus decided that she wanted to stay in New York after her Blue Angel run and opened her own club on 51st Street called the Purple Onion. Gossip columnist Dorothy Kilgallen described it this way: "If you're the type that likes to explore queer little cellar places on the Left Bank when you go to Paris (or would like to, if you ever went to Paris!), you'll get a similar message as you creep down the stairs of The Purple Onion . . ." Dorothy Kilgallen, "Voice of Broadway," *Anderson Daily Bulletin*, May 6, 1955, p. 4. Mazursky fictionalized his 1950s New York experiences in the film *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976).

³⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997), 159-61; "Belafonte's Second Try," *Oakland Tribune*, June 16, 1957, p. 2-B; Maurice Zolotow, "Belafonte," *The American Weekly*, May 10, 1959, p. 13; Sally Vincent, "What Makes Hairy Wild," *The Guardian*, November 16, 1996, p. B-13; "TV: Belafonte Interviewed," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 3, 1979, p. 47. While Belafonte briefly studied acting (along with Marlon Brando and Paddy Chayefsky) at the left-

Belafonte's musical education was equally grassroots. Determined to make it as a singer, he sat in at the Royal Roost, a 52nd Street bebop club. But his impact on jazz rooms, including Cafe Society, was less than stellar. Belafonte retreated to familiar turf and in 1950, he opened a cafe in the Village called the Sage. Belafonte began to absorb the area's folk music, singing informally with friends who brought in guitars, and playing The Weavers and Josh White on the jukebox. "He wanted what he believed in to be part of his work," suggested Poitier. "The whole history of black people was in the texture of folksinging."³⁷ Belafonte's breakthrough came soon after, at the Village Vanguard. It began inauspiciously: Gordon was initially unconvinced by his audition. The Vanguard was a bastion of gritty southern blues, bebop, and Trinidadian Calypso; Gordon found Belafonte's style too studied. "Harry's no Leadbelly, no prisoner swinging a hammer on a chain gang down in Georgia," he recalled. Belafonte's charming good looks and his manager's insistence that women would flock to the club convinced Gordon to give him a try at \$200 a week.³⁸ Women did flock in; men followed. The rest is proverbial showbiz history.

Gordon's reaction, in contrast to the broader American public's, reveals the contradictory demands white progressives placed on Black folk singers, seeking "authentic" voices that were at once socially situated in the oppression of their people and transcendent in their expression of innate racial genius. Belafonte was outspoken about civil rights from his earliest successes, and a 1953 press release shows that he buttressed his sociopolitical position with discourse about folk music drawn straight from the

leaning New School following his time at the ANT, his political education grew from more organic intellectual soil.

³⁷ "Belafonte's Second Try," *Oakland Tribune*, June 16, 1957, p. 2-B; Gates, *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, 162-3.

³⁸ Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 89.

Cultural Front: Belafonte's appeal was in his "genuine folk music, genuinely sung." The article continued, fusing the language of authenticity and populism with hints of psychoanalytical individualism: "Harry Belafonte deserted jazz and popular music because he felt that . . . he couldn't really function in it as a person. To folk music he brings a fine voice and dramatic training . . . and a perception of the enduring value of music that is of, by and for the people."³⁹ The same discourse surrounded Odetta throughout the 1950s, as the press hailed her as the "genuine article," the "descendent of Bessie Smith and Leadbelly" whose songs were "like standing at the bend of a wide, deep and brown river flowing endlessly toward the sea." This fit snugly with an urban underground emphasis on folk's ethos of democratic pluralism. "It's do-it-yourself music, in keeping with our present way of life," said Gate of Horn owner Al Grossman. "People love folk music because they can participate."⁴⁰

Yet even as Belafonte claimed the mantle of folk authenticity, he simultaneously subverted it. By acknowledging his own theatricality, he drew attention to his studied use of folk songs and defied white expectations of "natural" Black ability. By 1956, he openly discussed his preference for concert halls, which allowed more control over the necessities of a slick performance, stating that "a night club is restrictive in the sense of an artist not being able to do any real costuming or using a wide range of material."⁴¹ By contrast, the press declared Odetta to be the real deal. As one reporter proclaimed in Salinger-like terms, she was different from the "phonies" of the music world, hinting that

³⁹ John B. Callaghan, "Words and Music," *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, October 1, 1953, p. C-3.

⁴⁰ Whitney Bolton, "Glancing Sideways," *The Sunday Times* (Cumberland, MD), July 24, 1960, p. 8; Milton R. Bass, "Duke Ellington Orchestra," *The Berkshire Eagle*, July 7, 1958, p. 5; "Folk Singer Odetta Back to Ash Grove," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 18, 1960, p. C-1; "Chicago's Hootenanny Snares Fugitives from Rock and Roll," *Oakland Tribune*, March 11, 1958, p. 20-D.

⁴¹ "Belafonte, Ace of Clubs, Prefers Stage," *Slytheville Courier News* (AR), October 22, 1956, p. 10.

this included Belafonte. When Odetta did come under criticism, it was for her failure to live up to this “natural” blues ideal, when her performances “lapse[d] into stylization.”⁴² What Belafonte brought to the discourse around Black folk music was a conscious reframing of the relationship between performativity and the authentic self. His early career and image were carefully crafted by two Svengali-like white managers, Jack Rollins and Jay Kennedy, whom he fired in turn, forming his own company, Belafonte Presents, Inc., in 1957.⁴³ Considering his studious forays into W.E.B. Du Bois and efforts to place his work in its “sociological environment,” Belafonte clearly sought to control his own career and transcend the bounds of race. Further, as Henry Louis Gates has noted, Belafonte’s own heritage included two white grandparents which, along with facial features that conformed to typically “white” standards of attractiveness, destabilized the social fiction of race itself in the public eye.⁴⁴

This multilayered mix of performativity, race, and sexual allure helps explain Belafonte’s popularity, but also the criticism he suffered from white liberals. In an insightful 1949 essay reprinted in a 1955 compendium on American culture, Bernard Wolfe criticized America’s history of absorbing Black entertainment on terms that demanded “authenticity,” spontaneity, and “ecstatic” expression. Even as culture-industry progressives such as Max Gordon rejected the most demeaning aspects of minstrelsy and Stepin’ Fetchit comedy, their embrace of “genuine” southern Black folk and blues carried

⁴² Norman O’Connor, “Odetta, the Genuine Article: The Superb Artistry And Spiritual Depth Of a Sad Folk-Singer,” *Daily Boston Globe*, March 1, 1959, p. 57; Robert Gustafson, “Teaming on the Blues,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 12, 1958, p. 5.

⁴³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997), 159-61; “Belafonte’s Second Try,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 16, 1957, p. 2-B; Maurice Zolotow, “Belafonte,” *The American Weekly*, May 10, 1959, pp. 11-13; Sally Vincent, “What Makes Hairy Wild,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 1996, p. B-13; “TV: Belafonte Interviewed,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 3, 1979, p. 47.

⁴⁴ Gates, *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, 168-9.

implicit assumptions of innate, effortless racial creativity. “Negrophiles, no less than Negrophobes, have their own pet notions as to what the Negro ‘really’ is, and become incensed when the flesh-and-blood Negro shatters these notions,” Wolfe declared. “Witness the indignation of the white cultists of ‘primitive’ New Orleans jazz when young ghetto Negroes step abruptly out of the Southern folksy-Negro mold to create the supersophisticated music of bebop—or when the barefoot levee stomper slips into ballet shoes and enrolls in Martha Graham’s classes.”⁴⁵ Belafonte’s image as both a performer and a businessman—as well as his open admissions of the theatrical, performative aspects of folk—undermined white liberal notions of Black authenticity.

Belafonte’s insistence on self-determination made him a cultural “bridge,” carrying Du Bois’s and Paul Robeson’s notions of Black independence through the constrictions of the Cold War period. Odetta, too, acknowledged this continuity in the Black Freedom Struggle, citing Robeson as “the one that politicized me” and 1930s opera singer Marian Anderson as an icon who “demonstrated to me the dignity of a woman, a Black woman.”⁴⁶ Black folk music was a new cultural expression of what Du Bois termed “double consciousness,” in which Blacks continually recognized the face they had to show to white society, while maintaining a self that was their own. Performers like Angelou, Odetta, and Belafonte knew what was required of them to succeed in a white-

⁴⁵ Bernard Wolfe, “Ecstatic in Blackface,” in Chandler Brossard, ed., *The Scene Before You: A New Approach to American Culture* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), 56, 60. An even more vile version of this attitude underlay of the Daughters of the American Revolution’s 1939 ban on Marian Anderson’s Constitution Hall performance: minstrel shows or African Americans playing the fool for whites’ entertainment in vaudeville was tolerated in this venue as base but droll, but a Black opera singer implied cultural equality.

⁴⁶ Odetta Oral History. Charles Mingus further underscored this generational cultural transmission, citing Robeson and Anderson in precisely the same way. See Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 351-2. For a full examination of Du Boisian ideas about Black liberation in the twentieth century, see Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

dominated culture industry, but made these concessions on their own terms.⁴⁷ This was also a revision of what Eric Lott has termed minstrelsy's "love and theft," in which white appropriation of Black styles extended both admiration and racial hierarchy. While such cultural theft certainly continued, African-American claims on social space within the public sphere meant that such appropriation would no longer go unchallenged. The insistence of Black folk artists on the dignity of their work and public personae was a sharp distinction to the *indignities* of segregation and racial caste.

As the modern Civil Rights Movement heated up in the early 1960s, Angelou, Odetta, and Belafonte each backed their socially-conscious cultural work with political action, participating in benefit concerts for organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). With characteristic humility, Odetta credited the Movement as the source of her own success, stating that "the civil rights movement gave me my career, it certainly made it viable for folks to see me," and insisting that there was "no other way a black girl singing folk songs about injustice during that time period was ever going to gain an audience." Yet she simultaneously revealed a more circular process, as her work and visibility as an artist contributed to political consciousness-raising: "I felt I had to say a lot because our schools certainly weren't teaching us anything about ourselves. We didn't know the stock or the people we descended from and nothing of the cleverness, the vision, the will it took for our ancestors to get over, under, through, or around. Well, as momentum really

⁴⁷ Ironically, from the mid-1960s this approach came under fire not from white liberals but Black Power advocates, such as Amiri Baraka, whose stance was undercut by its own version of racial essentialism. See LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1963), 160-4, 221-30.

started lighting up, that's when folks started hearing about me."⁴⁸

Yet, until the national folk revival of the early 1960s, the most potent musical expression of social protest in both San Francisco and New York was jazz. Why? Because it spoke to those alienated from the norms of Cold War America. Jazz represented mystery that could only be unraveled by those in the know, those who were “hip,” but paradoxically also invoked Black self-determination and democracy with its dialectic of the individual voice working within a group. This medley of meaning perfectly suited an oppositional underground that was still inchoate, but blindly reaching toward a new kind of American Left—one that could both reject Soviet totalitarianism and embrace a “beloved community” of collective economic and racial justice. Rock & roll’s impulse was similar, but in the 1950s it appealed mostly to teens and was dismissed by critics as the silly stuff of school dances. While its brand of cultural rebellion sold at a record pace, it was not the soundtrack of political rebellion until the 1960s, when the rock & roll generation grew up enough to apply its lessons to the social realm. In the meantime, jazz filled the Cold War void. As the din of geopolitical saber-rattling drowned out calls for universalism—and nihilism simmered in the back of the American psyche, occasioned by wide-eyed confrontations with the atomic threat—the dissonant, contrapuntal, antiphonal, intricately harmonic, and sometimes atonal dialogue of modern jazz was the perfect musical vessel for 1950s oppositional consciousness.

THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR AND INTO THE CELLAR

On June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed for passing secret information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union, the only executions for treason during the Cold War. The information they helped provide may have given the Russians

⁴⁸ “Odetta,” in Barnett, *I Got Thunder*, 179.

the bomb in 1949, rather than in 1950 as scientists had projected.⁴⁹ Despite the protests of those on the Left, as well as Pope Pius the XII, the newly sworn-in Republican president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, like his Democratic predecessor Harry Truman, refused to grant clemency. That year was also the height of Joseph McCarthy's influence. Although Eisenhower personally despised the loudmouthed Wisconsin senator's red-baiting tactics, Ike refrained from public criticism, due to his need to establish anticommunist credentials (as evidenced by the choice of Richard Nixon as his running mate). The strategy was probably wise: a month after the Rosenberg execution, Eisenhower was able to claim an armistice with communist North Korea without suffering any major political fallout. Coupled with Joseph Stalin's death the previous March, this was the moment the US began to emerge from the darkest period of the Cold War.

Moreover, in 1954 the Supreme Court's *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision called for an end to racial segregation in schools—even as the Court's vague order that desegregation take place with “all deliberate speed,” and the gruesome murder of Emmet Till in 1955, dramatized the painfully slow pace of America's reckoning with racism. That year further signaled the start of a new phase in the Black Freedom Struggle with the Montgomery bus boycott sparked by Rosa Parks. Also symbolic of the times, Charlie Parker moved to Greenwich Village in 1953, living with African-American poet and jazz trumpeter Ted Joans. Parker performed for hip intellectual audiences and stated that he moved because, “I like the people around here. They don't give you no hype.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Michael S. Goodman, “The grandfather of the hydrogen bomb?: Anglo-American intelligence and Klaus Fuchs,” *Historical Studies in the Physical and Biological Sciences* 34, no. 1 (2003): 1-22; Gerald E. Markowitz and Michael Meeropol, “The ‘Crime of the Century’ Revisited: David Greenglass’ Scientific Evidence in the Rosenberg Case,” *Science & Society* 44, no. 1 (Spring, 1980): 1-26; Matthew Connelly, et al., “‘General, I Have Fought Just as Many Nuclear Wars as You Have’: Forecasts, Future Scenarios, and the Politics of Armageddon,” *The American Historical Review* 117, no.3 (December 2012): 1431-60.

⁵⁰ Robert George Reisner, *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), 11.

The previous year, Parker had debuted in San Francisco, at the Say When Club—an appearance memorable for both its musicality and social stridency. Drawing large crowds who came to marvel at his virtuosity, Parker was fired for spontaneously announcing onstage that the club would match audience contributions to a local charity drive. Cornered into matching a thousand dollars in donations, the club’s notoriously tough owner, Gordon “Dutch” Nieman, was not amused. As saxophonist Pony Poindexter recalled, “It took half an hour to count it at the bar and exactly five minutes for Charlie Parker to get fired and physically ejected from the joint.”⁵¹ Parker packed up and headed to the after-hours jam at Jimbo’s Bop City, which had developed a solid reputation for both good jazz and racial integration. “Jimbo’s was more than just a place to gather to hear great sounds,” recalled one Bop City regular. “It was like a snapshot of your soul or a snapshot of the soul of the community. I think in the early dawn of the civil rights movement, it was 3:00 AM at Jimbo’s.”⁵²

Parker’s performances at the Open Door, a short-lived club promoted by jazz critic and New School professor Robert Reisner, held a similar spirit for New York’s bohemian enclave. The politically progressive Reisner approached the Open Door with a sense of mission to “propagate and proselytize and open up the Greenwich Village area to modern jazz.”⁵³ Reisner’s patrons included radical underground figures like the painter and saxophonist Larry Rivers, who would “drop in at the Open Door or Club Bohemia or

⁵¹ Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in New York: A Walking Tour of Jack Kerouac’s City* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 58; Poindexter, *The Pony Express*, 146; Chet Baker, *As Though I Had Wings: The Lost Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 57; Reisner, *Bird*, 240.

⁵² Carol Chamberland, “Jimbo’s Bop City,” *SF Gate*, foundsf.org/index.php?title=Jimbo%27s_Bop_City (accessed January 10, 2013); Jack Lind, “When Jazz Was King,” *North Beach Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall, 1985), 6-11, 34-7.

⁵³ Poppy Cannon White, “‘Yardbird’ Lives Again,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 29, 1964, p. 19; Leonard Feather, “3 Musicians Prove That ‘Bird Lives’,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1968, p. C33; Reisner, *Bird*, 12.

the Nineteenth Hole for a drink, for a listen, for a possible encounter with a woman.” Rivers not only shared the stage and his chosen instrument with Parker, but a dose of self-destruction as well: he sometimes went to the Open Door to score pot or heroin. The club was also where Parker solidified his reputation in jazz circles for unreliability, showing up late and unprepared for sessions with Monk and Mingus.⁵⁴

Kerouac’s “Jazz America” also included the Open Door, dubbed the “Red Drum” in *The Subterraneans* and peopled with “a wild generation party all smoky and mad . . . and up on the stand Bird Parker with solemn eyes who’d been busted fairly recently . . . but had just discovered or been told about the Red Drum, the great new generation gang wailing and gathering there, so here he was on the stand, examining them with his eyes as he blew his now-settled-down-into-regulated-design ‘crazy’ notes.” Joyce Johnson took this significance a step further, tracing the root meaning of “Beat” to Parker’s namesake, Birdland, where “there was a whole generation that moved to the vibrations of a particular rhythm—some kind of new music.”⁵⁵ Yet Birdland was never the vanguard of New York jazz. The Forty-Fourth Street club was divided from the Village geographically, but more importantly, psychologically. Tourists had to be amused as much as the Beats and its ownership was too businesslike, its name too renowned, to allow much experimentation. (Parker himself was fired from Birdland in 1954 for “excessive clowning.”)⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Larry Rivers and Arnold Weinstein, *What Did I Do?: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 199; Unsigned and undated to Max Roach (c. 1953), Box 57, Folder 20, Charles Mingus Collection, ML31.M56, Library of Congress Music Division, Washington, DC.

⁵⁵ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 204; Morgan, *Beat Generation in New York*, 82; Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 13; Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), 71.

⁵⁶ Conversely, Billie Holiday once stated that “clowning” was necessary to entertain audiences at Bop City. Dorothy Kilgallen, “Cyd Charisse Cancels Trip East,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, September 6, 1954, p. 12; Billie Holiday, “Lady Day Has Her Say,” in Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 637.

THE REBEL CAFE GOES BOOM: THE EXPLOSION OF JAZZ-BOHEMIAN NIGHTCLUBS

Throughout 1953-4, the Open Door was the main site for modern jazz in Greenwich Village, but this was also a period of transition. The club's demise came the same year as Charlie Parker's, in 1955. Its role was partially filled by Cafe Bohemia, which switched to a jazz format that year (and also hired Canada Lee's son as its doorman), but it was often too expensive for local starving artists and writers. And other than nights featuring Belafonte or Eartha Kitt, Max Gordon was having little luck attracting new audiences to the Vanguard's "supper-club formal" format as the crowds of older regulars began to thin out.⁵⁷

Instead, the Five Spot Cafe, near the Bowery at 5 Cooper Square, became the main locus for left-bohemian jazz when it opened in 1956. Originally known as the Bowery Bar when Sicilian-born Salvatore Termini purchased the place in 1937, it served the neighborhood's working class men, sometimes providing respite from the cold for local transients. Salvatore's sons, Ignatze ("Iggy") and Joe, rechristened it the No. 5 bar when they took over in the late 1940s and the influx of bohemians to the East Side in the mid-1950s led them to jazz. With a new decor made from art-show posters, and cabaret license in hand, the bar was once again refashioned, dubbed the Five Spot in August 1956.

⁵⁷ Ross Russell, *Bird Lives! The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker* (New York: Charterhouse, 1973), 378; Dorothy Kilgallen, "The Voice of Broadway," *The Oneonta Star* (NY), June 20, 1955, p. 4; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 194-5; Morgan, *Beat Generation in New York*, 58-9; Harry Gilroy, "A Peep at Mr. Peepers—and Wally Cox: The Shy Teacher and the New TV Star are Deceptively Alike," *New York Times*, January 11, 1953, p. SM-14; Gilbert Millstein, "Lament for New York's Night Life," *New York Times*, May 22, 1955, p. 233; Lorraine Gordon, as told to Barry Singer, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 110-11; "Lost and Found: Jewelry," *New York Times*, May 30, 1951, p. 26. A tantalizing hint about the Vanguard's early-1950s patrons could be found in the "Lost and Found" section of the *New York Times* in 1951. There, the owner of a lost platinum and diamond brooch suggested that it might be found in the Criterion Theater, Rough Riders Bar, Cheval Blanc Restaurant, the Vanguard, or a taxi running to Brooklyn Heights—an affluent neighborhood that also claimed a history of renowned literary residents including Hart Crane, W.H. Auden, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Norman Mailer.

Beat poet and activist LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) later recalled Joe and Iggy Termini as “two of the nicest guys in the business.” The Five Spot ran advertisements in Jones’s *Yugen* magazine, the text of which spoke volumes about the club’s atmosphere and bohemian appeal: “Home of Thelonious Monk—Home of Jazz-Poetry—Home of America’s Leading Painters, Sculptors, Composers, Actors, Poets, PEOPLE.”⁵⁸

North Beach’s jazz-bohemian community also found new homes that year. The area’s reputation for jazz grew from two simultaneous phenomena. Several older clubs such as the Say When and Ciro’s closed down due to military restrictions and charges of prostitution and underage drinking.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, radical writers Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Duncan attracted a new generation of scribblers who flocked to bohemian nightspots. This cohort’s craving for modern jazz was sated by the sounds emanating from the Jazz Workshop and the Cellar.

Attorney Art Auerbach opened the Jazz Workshop at 473 Broadway, extending the hip modern jazz scene that included the Downbeat and the Black Hawk into North Beach. His appearance as a conservative family man belied a desire to present provocative productions, and the Workshop quickly became a favorite among jazz enthusiasts in search of bleeding-edge bebop.⁶⁰ A New York and Chicago native, Auerbach had come to San Francisco to attend law school and purchased the club a year before his graduation. While he still considered civil law his primary vocation, Auerbach

⁵⁸ Kelley, *Thelonious Monk*, 226-7; Robert Shelton, “Jazz Man Is Changing His Beat: Charlie Mingus at Work on Story of His Hard Times,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1962, p. 17; Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984), 235-6.

⁵⁹ “Hot Five Jazz Club Faces New Charges,” August 27, 1952, “Reopening of Notorious S. F. Bar Fought,” October 8, 1954, and “‘Red’ Ferrari Must Close Bar Today,” July 14, 1956, *San Francisco Examiner*, clippings in the Examiner Morgue, SFPL. The Say When closed in June 1954 and Ciro’s in July 1956, amid charges of mob ties, drug trafficking, stolen property, and violation of gun laws.

⁶⁰ Don Steele, “Going Places,” *Oakland Tribune*, November 7, 1956, 2-E; Author Interview, Charles and Marlene Inman, June 19, 2011. See also Eileen Kaufman, “Introduction,” <http://www.beatituedeopetry.com/introd.html> (accessed April 2, 2011).

was dedicated to promoting jazz, bemoaning it as “an art that too many Americans overlooked.” Auerbach himself was far from bohemian and often emphasized that the club’s success was due to his sound “business principles.” Yet Auerbach also became a devoted fan. “I now book groups largely according to what kind of jazz sells, but some of my favorites are those on whom I took a chance. John Coltrane, for example, or Mingus. I really get involved in what they play,” he said. “We are in the jazz business, and for me that means sticking to the point—music . . . and the emphasis is on listening.”⁶¹

In 1958, he further entrenched the Jazz Workshop within bohemia by offering gallery space to a pair of young painters, Jim Newman and Bob Alexander, who opened the Dilexi Gallery. “Our idea was that you could go to the Jazz Workshop,” Newman recounted, “hear some music, go up and check out the art upstairs, and order your drinks up from the club below through a dumbwaiter system.”⁶² Although the Alcohol Beverage Control board put the kibosh was on the dumbwaiter idea, interaction between the club and the gallery became commonplace, attracting a wide range of patrons including local artists, jazz devotees, and Beat poets.

The Cellar, also opened in 1956, embodied the connections between “hip” street sensibilities and bebop bohemianism, perhaps more than any other San Francisco nightspot. Run by a group of jazz musicians, Wil Carlson, Jack Minger, drummer Sonny Nelson, and later joined by pianist Bill Weisjahn, the Cellar became the city’s chief site for jazz and poetry. Following a trend started by the German émigré Ruth Weiss, Kenneth

⁶¹ “Art Wanted it That Way,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 2, 1966, 18-E; “Jazzmen Mourn Arthur Auerbach,” June 2, 1966, Richard Hadlock, “How the Jazz Workshop Manages to Stay Alive,” and Phillip Elwood, “Jazz Workshop Sold to Lou Ganapoler,” September 11, 1967, October 27, 1963, *San Francisco Examiner*, n.p. clippings, Examiner Morgue, SFPL. After Auerbach’s untimely death from a heart attack in 1966, the club was sold to Lou Ganapoler, a former booking agent for the Village Vanguard and a friend of Max Gordon.

⁶² *The Beach*, dir. Mary Kerr, CA Palm, 1995; Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, 29.

Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti held “Jazz and Poetry Nights” and subsequently released Fantasy Records’ now-legendary *Poetry Readings in the Cellar* in 1957. While the style, noted at the time as “a kind of Wild West legend on the eastern seaboard,” soon became a “beatnik” cliché, it nonetheless cemented the relationship between Beat writing and live improvisation, as well as links between modern poetry and music that fully bloomed in the 1960s.⁶³

Far more important than the jazz-poetry craze specifically was the social role played by nightclub culture as a whole. Modern jazz gave the new bohemians a common focal point and an immediate form of shorthand communication: if one could demonstrate fluency in its language, s/he could instantly find a place within the underground community. This was fundamental to the bicoastal bohemia, as its denizens traversed the continent from coast to coast. For young bohemian writers like Joyce Johnson or LeRoi Jones, jazz clubs offered destinations and spaces for self-reinvention, points that marked their physical and artistic arrival in the Village or North Beach. In the midst of her affair with Kerouac in 1957, Johnson pined to join him in San Francisco, where “I’d find him waiting for me in the Greyhound terminal, ready to carry my suitcase through the streets of North Beach until he found me a beautiful cheap room in some hotel where Allen Ginsberg once lived, where we’d make love on the new bed. And he’d take me out to all the jazz joints that very night, and introduce me to everyone.” For Jones, who came to the Village in 1957 seeking to escape both racism and his parents’ staid middle-class life of in New Jersey, bebop meant “another kind of life that existed

⁶³ Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, 55-6; Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*, 58; “Reviews in Brief,” *Oakland Tribune*, July 20, 1958, p. C-9; Russ Wilson, “World of Jazz,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 3, 1957; Russ Wilson, “Death Knell Sounds for Jazz Poetry,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 19, 1960, pp. 6-B and 18-B.

that somehow I had access to.” Jones’s partner at *Yugen*, Diane di Prima, recalled jazz as a structuring poetic element, asserting that “the things in my words” were informed by “Miles Davis at the Cafe Bohemia.”⁶⁴

But the New York club that most wholeheartedly seized the jazz-folk cabaret tradition was the Village Gate. Opened at 160 Bleecker Street in 1958 by the former journalist and concert promoter Art D’Lugoff, the Village Gate was a conscious attempt to bridge Popular Front cabaret sensibilities with the Beat Generation. The son of a Russian-born father and a mother who immigrated from Jerusalem, D’Lugoff was born in a Harlem hospital in 1924. He grew up in the Brighton Beach Jewish community where, he recalled, the synagogue and the local CP headquarters shared the same building and “were always vying for our souls.” After serving in the army during World War II, D’Lugoff attended New York University, studying English literature and political science on the GI Bill. The universalist thinker Norman Corwin was also an early influence, and D’Lugoff admired his antiracism and “humanist” stance as a “One Worlder.” Coming from a well-educated “liberal Jewish family,” D’Lugoff was attracted to campus politics, participating in both the Young Democrats and the 1948 Wallace campaign. But he later insisted that the less structured bohemian circles in Greenwich Village truly “radicalized” him. Like many of his generation, he rejected formal communism (finding any group that sat gazing at “Stalin’s picture” to be “sort of fishy”), but he was active with the Left-tied Electrical Workers Union (UE) and considered himself a “bohemian anarchist.” In the early 1950s, D’Lugoff also worked at the *Compass* newspaper (successor to the leftwing *PM*) and was impressed by the left-liberal journalists George Seldes and I.F. Stone. He

⁶⁴ Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 155; *The Beat Generation*, dir. Janet Forman (New York: Renaissance Motion Pictures, 1987).

continued his own journalism at small papers in the Catskills and wrote for the African-American *California Eagle*, where he expressed his concerns about McCarthy's anticommunist methods.⁶⁵

In 1955, D'Lugoff's interest in music and the "bubbling" of folk popularity led him to book a folk series at the Village's Circle in the Square theater, starting with Pete Seeger and later including Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. He continued with "ethnic" performers like Clancy Brothers and by 1956 was booking jazz concerts with Dave Brubeck, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington. During Billie Holiday's cabaret card suspension in 1957, D'Lugoff promoted her at the Sheridan Theater, one of her legendary last performances. In 1958, D'Lugoff continued his connection to the Cultural Front by orchestrating the return of Paul Robeson to Carnegie Hall after nearly a decade of blacklisting.⁶⁶

Described by one friend as a "a left wing Jewish atheist," and "very proud of it," D'Lugoff gave the Village Gate a "radical" point of view.⁶⁷ He opened his new venue in the basement of a flophouse, the Greenwich Mills Hotel. And the club fit in snugly among the coffeehouses of Bleecker Street—modeled after "Italian and Austrian coffee shops, with a place to sit down, enjoy pastry and conversation"—as the scene picked up steam. D'Lugoff had felt at home in the Village since his NYU years, and the Gate was one part concert hall, one part restaurant, and one part bohemian bar—"something of an

⁶⁵ Art D'Lugoff Oral History, Transcript of an interview conducted by Trudy Balch, Dec. 24, 1993, **P (Oral Histories, Box 215 no. 3), New York Public Library, 5-22; "The Reminiscences of Art D'Lugoff," conducted by Christiane Bird on September 20 and November 6, 1996, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University (1999), 1-8.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 8; Samuel Haynes, "Robeson Had 'Whole World in His Hands,'" *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 17, 1958, p. 1. D'Lugoff also worked as Robeson's personal manager for a time.

⁶⁷ Tom Robbins, "Art D'Lugoff, Village Royalty, Gone Too Soon at 85," *The Village Voice*, November 5, 2009, in http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2009/11/art_dlugoff_vil.php (accessed January 21, 2013).

unofficial headquarters” for folk singers and radicals, said the *Village Voice*, where “formal folk concerts will supplement the casual entertainment provided by the customers.” As folk’s popularity waned in the mid-1960s, D’Lugoff shifted to jazz (due to its “history”), featuring Monk, Davis, Coltrane, but also blues and folk-jazz like Angelou, Odetta, and Nina Simone. D’Lugoff considered Barney Josephson a role model and continued Cafe Society’s approach, warmly welcoming integrated audiences and making the Village Gate the heir apparent to its socially-conscious cabaret tradition.⁶⁸

TALKIN’ SUBTERRANEAN HOMESICK BLUES

As critical theorist Henri Lefebvre has argued, built environments—particularly urban ones—are manifestations of social space, where thought becomes physical, the Hegelian “Idea” and “Nature” mutually (re)constructing one another.⁶⁹ While nightclub designs were frequently ad hoc and limited by the availability of cheap rents, they were nonetheless key examples of this kind of social representation. With seating facing the stage, usually arranged around tables for two or four, performances were both a *raison d’être* for patrons to gather and an artistic focal point to enrich, and possibly transcend, their socializing. Nightclubs’ spatial designs fell into two general categories: small basement venues, frequently with a stage placed in one corner, and larger, concert-style venues, often in reclaimed warehouses. These categories sometimes overlap, but the former suitably describes clubs such as the hungry i, the Cellar, the Village Vanguard, and the Five Spot, while the latter would include the Tin Angel and Village Gate. (These divisions sometimes blurred beyond recognition: noting the Tin Angel’s smoldering,

⁶⁸ John Wilcock, *The Village Square*, (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1961), 133; D’Lugoff Oral History, NYPL, 22-45; “The Reminiscences of Art D’Lugoff,” Columbia, 8-10, 18-19. The hard work of remodeling the club, he later recalled, was how “I . . . developed my beard,” noting his renowned beatnik appearance.

⁶⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Transl. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1984, 1991), 32-3, 118-23.

intimate atmosphere in 1955, music critic Ralph Gleason called it the “the only upstairs cellar extant.”)⁷⁰

Basement venues had seating capacities between fifty and two-hundred, while those in concert-style held between 150 and 450 patrons. (In yet another dry turn of phrase, radical journalist John Wilcock quipped in 1958 that the Village Gate “looks like the world’s biggest underground bar,” a cellar “wide enough to accommodate at least a dozen of the old-type double-decker buses, assuming they could be navigated down the narrow stairway.”)⁷¹ Both types of nightclub were dimly lit, windowless and smoky, giving the feeling of separation and even shelter from the outside world—a sense that was further enhanced as patrons descended into basement venues. Probably the most significant difference between spaces was the stage placement, with basement venues’ very low platforms (around a foot or less) and concert venues’ at around three to four feet. These higher stages created more separation between performers and patrons, while in rooms like the Cellar, such divisions all but disappeared.

Poet David Meltzer offered a description of the venue, where he often performed: “The Jazz Cellar was a basement club. . . . The long staircase leading down to it took up more space than the club itself which was a narrow room with a bar on one side, a tow of tables and chairs on the other side, and a small stage where the band played.”⁷² Similarly, guitarist Eddie Duran recalled a show accompanying Vince Guaraldi at the hungry i: “Mort Sahl was doing his act in the main room. We were sitting in the corner of the

⁷⁰ Ralph J. Gleason, “On the S.F. Waterfront—2 Outposts of Dixieland,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 3, 1955, p. 17. Examples of the flexibility of these categories also include the fact that the Five Spot was at street level while the Village Gate was a basement venue. However, once inside patrons would have experienced them as the reverse, due to their size and spatial design.

⁷¹ Harold H. Hart, *Hart’s Guide to New York City* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1964), 857-77, 918-19; Wilcock, *The Village Square*, 132-3.

⁷² David Meltzer, “Poetry and Jazz,” in Ann Charters, ed., *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 398-9.

outside room, which was a gallery for local artists. There were no chairs so people were sitting on the floor listening to us play. . . . Those were good times.”⁷³ As Duran’s language suggests, this close interaction brought a measure of solidarity between performers and audiences that was more difficult in theater settings, although larger clubs like the Village Gate still managed to create some sense of intimacy and unity.

JAZZ CLUBS AND THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL SPACE

Nightspots could also be sites of conflict, even violence, with drunken patrons and volatile personalities such as Charles Mingus. LeRoi Jones recalled being assaulted by the massive, infamously hot-headed bassist, who was angered by something the critic had written, resulting in a brief scrap in front of the Five Spot. This kind of physical confrontation was relatively rare, however; most assaults were verbal, underscoring nightclubs’ public role.⁷⁴ Tensions between loquacious patrons and performers craving to be heard (as well as careful listeners’ hunger to hear them) were often bound up with conflicting claims on public space due to class or cultural discord. “The other night at the hungry i something happened that I’ve been waiting years to see,” wrote columnist Ralph Gleason in 1961. “A night club manager threw out a large party that was talking loudly during the show.” The well-heeled group “wearing funny hats” displayed “boorish” behavior usually found in “the corner saloon,” Gleason reported. Manager Paul Goldenberg demanded that they quiet down or leave, which was the “only right they

⁷³ Lind, “When Jazz Was King,” 8.

⁷⁴ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 269-70. Nat Hentoff reported a brief fight between two musicians in his 1961 study, as well as the necessity of jazzmen to maintain a front of “professional toughness” within the urban nightlife. One of the few examples of serious nightclub violence I found during research was a case in which a patron died after a fight outside the Black Hawk. See Hentoff, *The Jazz Life*, 24-5 and “Two Held in Fatal New Year Fight over Girl,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 2, 1950, n.p. clipping, Examiner Morgue, SFPL. Pony Poindexter also reported once having to fend off a racist attacker by hitting him with a chair while onstage in San Francisco. See Poindexter, *Pony Express*, 169.

have,” with the result that, “They left and the audience applauded Goldenberg.” Gleason decried “the fact that [when] some idiot has paid his way (expense-account style; it’s deductible) into a club when he’s loaded [it] makes him feel he has the right to insult (by his actions) the artists, the club and the rest of the audience.” The hungry i’s performance-focused policy reveals the limits of nightclubs as sites of public speech.⁷⁵ Yet such limits precisely fit nightclubs into the classic public sphere’s framework for civil discourse. In this case, certain performative rules applied, a social contract between entertainers and audiences in which the latter would only express itself in acceptable ways—as in the applause for Goldberg’s “performance.”

Performativity also extended to interactions between patrons or with the media, such as the traditional jazz “put-on.” These stylized practical jokes were ways of creating camaraderie and establishing trust among musicians and scenesters wary of the intentions of “squares” by marking outsiders, including reporters and sociologists, as the targets of elaborate and shocking tall tales. Those who recognized the joke were quickly accepted into the fold; those who didn’t often repeated as fact sordid stories of prostitution, drugs, the “mysterious” behavior of jazzmen like Thelonious Monk, or the outrageously exaggerated sexual exploits of Miles Davis. This made many of the period’s more serious reports suspect, and reinforced some racial stereotypes, but also established social distance between the mainstream and the jazz underground. The put-on tested both aspects of jazz “language”: the jargon of jazz hipsters and knowledge of the music itself,

⁷⁵ Ralph J. Gleason, “At Last: Night Club Bounces the Boors,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 28, 1961, n.p. clipping, Examiner Morgue, SFPL. Emphasizing the importance of space and dialogue between performers and audiences, Holiday reported that she could not sing while in prison due to the dearth of “feeling” necessary for her to perform. See Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 138.

which became a kind of social currency among aficionados.⁷⁶

The concept of jazz as a language is crucial for understanding the multifaceted communication that occurred within the nightclub. While its spaces certainly facilitated typical bar talk, such as the political discussions Monk and Gerry Mulligan enjoyed backstage at the Village Gate, the transformed talk between performers and audiences was equally important. In 1948, critic Sidney Finkelstein discussed the roots of jazz in folk forms, in the “language” of blues that expressed the full subjective joy and discontent of an oppressed or ignored people—a kind of political action going all the way back through resistance to slavery. Defining “folk” as a form that was passed organically through communities and changed with time, he argued that the blues’ bends and looseness of bar lines was “a ‘humanization’ of music” which jazz maintained, despite urbanization. Even Dixieland carried a core of “malleable” folk style, Finkelstein suggested, since folk is never pure, but rather is situated in its social context.

LeRoi Jones, writing a generation later in 1963, agreed that blues and jazz expressed Blacks’ social position and limited status in white society, while also serving a social function as a source of strength and creativity. With jazz’s entry into performance venues, however, it became “public” rather than folk, although its social function continued as a link between layers of a Black society stratified into a working class and a small bourgeoisie who sought assimilation with whites. “Jazz, as it emerged and as it

⁷⁶ Monk once found a way to remain hidden in the cellar dressing room of the Savoy club in Boston and when questioned about his whereabouts replied coolly, “I was walking on the ceiling.” Hentoff recalled another case in which a scenester named Miriam gleefully “created fables of her own grimly existential life as a prostitute” to a group of undergraduate sociologists. When the mild-mannered Black musician Junior Raglin sauntered by, “Miriam summoned him to the table, improvising, ‘I want you to meet my husband, but please try not to make him angry. You know how they are when they lose control.’ The boys hastily gripped Junior’s hand, and left.” Hentoff, *The Jazz Life*, 18-20, 25. San Francisco jazz scholar and impresario Herbie Wong recalled studying records and recording session line ups as a young man, comparing his dedication to jazz arcana with fellow students’ memorization of baseball stats. Author Interview: Herbie Wong, January 11, 2011.

developed, was based on this new widening of Afro-American culture,” Jones wrote, “because it makes use of that middle ground . . . where both emotional penchants can exist as *ideas* of perhaps undetermined validity, and not necessarily as ‘ways of life’.” Both Finkelstein and Jones concurred that while performativity isolated jazz musicians from the “public” in a way that organic folk did not, bebop was nonetheless a descendent of the folk form. Bop was “experimental,” tied to social structures, but also improvised and constantly updated by both groups and individuals.

But while Finkelstein proposed that the “assimilation” of Blacks did not limit their possibilities but rather expanded them, Jones criticized this view. He argued that the arrival of “modern” jazz, rejecting the classical pretensions found, for example, at Cafe Society, signaled a “separation” between Black folk culture and assimilationism. Bebop claimed the blues tradition of authentic blackness. But it also had to contend with its role as “art” due to white acceptance of jazz, which raised the issue of white use of Black style as a badge of nonconformity and status.⁷⁷ While it may indeed follow that to recognizably speak the language of the blues was impossible for whites due to their different social position, Jones failed to see the contradiction within his own argument: even if the social function of jazz for whites was *different* than for Blacks, it served *some* function nonetheless—as all cultural forms do. To suggest otherwise was to fall into a trap of racial essentialism, to reify racial difference as permanent and static, rather than dismantle it as a social construction and highlight its fluidity.

Both Finkelstein and Jones missed the role of the jazz club itself in this discursive process. In addition to live performances, nightclubs incorporated various media,

⁷⁷ Sidney Finkelstein, *Jazz: A People's Music* (New York: International Publishers, 1948, 1988), 48, 51-3, 58, 61-2, 139, 145, 147-53; Jones (Baraka), *Blues People*, 65, 80, 82-6, 140-1, 145, 148, 176-91.

including LP records and even cinema. Spots like the Cellar, Village Gate, and hungry i regularly included art showings alongside live drama, and sometimes lectures by luminaries such as writers Brendan Behan and I.F. Stone. The Five Spot once featured jazzmen improvising along with experimental films, and popular players such as Duke Ellington and Brubeck appeared in avant-garde and Hollywood films, bringing a note of familiarity to nightclub scenes.⁷⁸ But LP records were most significant, as they both introduced jazz artists to the public and filled the sonic space of nightclubs during bands' breaks. In 1955, *New York Times* critic Gilbert Millstein bemoaned the decline of big nightclubs such as the Copacabana, citing the arrival of LPs as one cause: "When you had 78s [which revolve 78 times per minute], you had to get up and change the damned things every few minutes. So you got bored and went out. This way, there's no compulsion for hours. It keeps people home."⁷⁹ Of course, the mid-decade downturn was temporary, driven as much by suburbanization as competition from LPs or TV. Soon, suburbanites returned to the clubs, seeking more tactile experiences of the music they first encountered on records.

Rather than undermining nightclub culture, LPs entwined with it, becoming a central point around which disparate groups found a common cause. Sociologists and other critics during the 1950s saw this as an area of concern, expressing fears that mass media would bring an unhealthy level of conformity—even the potential for

⁷⁸ Ralph J. Gleason, "A New Jazz Experience at The Cellar—Three One-Acts," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 1961, p. 16; Dick Nolan, "Roundabout," May 22, 1959, and untitled clipping, January 23, 1961, hungry i envelope, Examiner Morgue, SFPL; "Reminiscences of Art D'Lugoff," Columbia, 52; John S. Wilson, "Village Becomes Focal Center for Modern Jazz: Five Spot Cafe and the Half Note Spur Move Downtown," *New York Times*, October 27, 1960, p. 43. One experimental film featured Brubeck at the Black Hawk, "a club with atmosphere if ever a club had one." Dave Brubeck to Jerome D. Feinsinger, February 14, 1961, Series 1.C, Box 2, 1961 from DB, Brubeck Papers, UP. Ellington played a roadhouse band leader in Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959).

⁷⁹ Gilbert Millstein, "Lament for New York's Night Life," *New York Times*, May 22, 1955, p. 233.

totalitarianism.⁸⁰ Yet the reality for many jazz fans was more complex, with records and other media helping to form a national music community. Nightclubs were sites in which this virtual community became an identifiable public. They also satisfied fans' desire to experience the act of jazz improvisation in person—an urge that grew in part from the same fear of conformity and the sense that a live show was more “real,” more authentic.

An article by a naval officer and journalist who interviewed Dave Brubeck in the mid-1950s captured much of this phenomenon. The officer began by describing a restaurant in a small Japanese town where he was stationed. There the sound of Red Norvo, Stan Kenton, and Louis Armstrong records brought smiling nods of recognition to a local patron and himself, cementing their mutual understanding, even friendship, despite a language barrier that made their meeting “conversationless.” He then described first hearing Brubeck at the Black Hawk. Although distracted by an audience in which many were “more interested in talking than listening,” the officer was captivated by the Quartet’s “artistic filigree of sounds.” Between songs, a “drunk” stumbled up to the bandstand, declaring, “Hell! I bet you can’t even play ‘Stars and Stripes Forever’.” In response, Brubeck quietly began the Sousa tune, joined by the rhythm section and Paul Desmond’s alto sax. The band’s twenty-minute improvisation cemented the officer’s allegiance, as they “‘put down’ (denounced) the world of mediocrity, with artistic improvisation” and the old melody was “subordinated to original spontaneous themes contrapuntally weaved into the piece as a whole.” Moreover, the officer’s recognition of

⁸⁰ David Riesman, in his seminal study *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) noted the contradictory effects of mass culture, specifically citing jazz record collectors as both “other-directed” and individualist. This example, he argued, raised the possibility that “mass media can foster autonomy as well as adjustment, independence from the peer group as well as conformity to it.” Further, he argued, this conformity also had the result of fostering wider tolerance, as Americans came to see themselves as part of a national community, rather than more localized groups. This process, however, continually interacted with local interpersonal experiences. See Riesman, pp. 112, 148-57, 210-34.

this achievement became a symbol of status, underscored by his use of jazz-hipster jargon (duly translated for the uninitiated): “At different times during the performance Stars and Stripes Forever could be recognized; but intense concentration was necessary to ‘dig’ (appreciate). ‘Stars’ was just on a higher plane than usual.”⁸¹

Other jazzmen regularly discussed the importance of this kind of interaction, such as saxophonist John Coltrane’s statement that the Village Vanguard’s intimacy allowed him to “communicate” with the audience (despite the nightclub’s talking patrons and dropped cocktail glasses). Coltrane took this to its farthest logical conclusion, stating that “in listening, there is an act of participation,” almost to the point that the audience became “another member in the group.” This process was perhaps most interestingly illustrated by Monk, who often left the bandstand to listen with the crowd, gaining inspiration for his next musical exploration. Amiri Baraka underscored this plural process, declaring, “Jazz is Democratic in form, it basically is collective improvisation. It is about singular and collective spontaneity, and composition, both formal and *mise-en-scene*.” As Brubeck wrote to *Melody Maker* magazine in 1955, this was “the greatest thrill that a jazz musician can know and give his audience—inspired execution at an inspired moment of something he has never done before, will never do again, and no one else will ever be able to recreate—not even himself. This to me is the only real jazz—creation!”⁸²

Al Coda . . .

The jazz-folk sublime continued throughout the 1950s to have effects within the

⁸¹ R. Hedley-Norvell, Public Information Officer, Commander Naval Forces, Far East, “Jazz, Brubeck, and the Black Hawk,” Series 1D, Box 7, Folder 3, Brubeck Collection, UP.

⁸² Chris DeVito, ed., *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), 17-21, 105, 284, 288, 290; Dave Brubeck to Steve Race, June 15, 1955, Series 1.A, Box 1, Folder 36, Brubeck Collection, UP; Amiri Baraka, private correspondence to Michael Magee. See Michael Magee, “Tribes of New York: Frank O’Hara, Amiri Baraka, and the Poetics of the Five Spot,” *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 4 (Winter, 2001): 694-726.

nightclub itself, transforming identities and forming communities among those who felt transported by its musical styles. This socio-musical phenomenon contributed discursively to the rising call for African-American civil rights. It was also intertwined with the evolution of American bohemianism, as the Beat Generation gained momentum as a literary and social movement, and a renewed conversation about oppositional activism heated up in the radical bars and cafes of North Beach and the Village, revitalizing the Cold War public sphere.

Chapter 6

“Beatniks and Blabbermouths, Bartok, Baudelaire, and Bar Talk: New Bohemia, Community, and the Public Sphere”

A man preaching that which he feels to be truth from a soapbox is upon a throne; a king speaking from a throne that which he feels to be misleading is speaking from a virtual soapbox.

—Djuna Barnes (c. 1919)

Perhaps the only reason they survived . . . was that they were not alone. God knew how many more there were with a hothouse sense of time, no knowledge of life, and at the Mercy of Fortune.

—Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (1963)¹

Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being. . . . Human rebellion ends in metaphysical revolution. It progresses from appearances to acts, from the dandy to the revolutionary. . . . Beauty, no doubt, does not make revolutions. But a day will come when revolutions will have need of beauty.

— Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1951)

“Now the lowly saloon is seldom praised in our society,” wrote San Francisco jazz critic Ralph Gleason in 1961. “So let us here for a moment say a few words in the defense of this democratic institution.”² As an advocate for the egalitarian potential of jazz nightclubs, Gleason had good cause for his “defense of the lowly saloon.” For over a decade, Rebel Cafe nightspots had acted as informal institutions in North Beach, fostering a community of cutting-edge literary figures and intellectuals. In much the same way as the working-class saloons of nineteenth-century American cities had provided information and support for social networks, unionization, and employment, bohemian literary bars of the 1950s served the material and psychological needs of their poetic patrons. The result was a particular kind of nightspot, a “New Saloon” that fed the minds and bodies of the new bohemians who frequented them.

Similarly, the spirit of the 1930s left-cabaret survived into the 1950s, nurtured by the nightclubs and literary cafes of Greenwich Village and North Beach. Yet this spirit

¹ Djuna Barnes, *New York*, Alyce Barry, ed. (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1989), 199; Thomas Pynchon, *V.*, (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1963), 46.

² Ralph J. Gleason, “A Few Words in Defense of the Lowly Saloon,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 5, 1961, “This World” insert, p. 25.

was changing, transformed by hot and cold wars, losing its more partisan aspects. Rebels and cultural radicals often turned to the anarchist principles of those such as Paul Goodman or Kenneth Rexroth, invoking *communitas*, but also focusing inward, on their own consciousness. As the poet and antiwar activist Denise Levertov later put it, the goal was to seek liberation for the individual within group action, “to realize how much the apparently external problems have their parallels within us.” She asserted that in “dialogue with himself,” the artist clarifies “not answers but the existence and nature of questions.” Levertov openly channeled a current of thought that ran underground in 1950s bohemia: that oppositional culture could outline new ways of living, that the “peculiarly human” act of artistic creation was “in the most profound sense, a ‘social’ or ‘political’ action.”³ While debate certainly raged among bohemians over how obviously political their work should be, even the most open activists saw themselves less as *members* of political institutions than as individual *participants* in social movements—a shift away from the collectivist ideology of the Old Left.

On a practical level, the San Francisco-New York bicoastal bohemia—labeled by the late 1950s as the “beat generation,” “New Bohemia,” or, dismissively, “beatnik”—found ways to live outside the mainstream of American consumerist society. Individual tactics varied, but almost all relied on Rebel Cafe nightspots for mutual support, as bartending or waiting tables augmented income from art sales or small literary magazines. Across New Bohemia, nightspots were extensions of urban “pads,” the cheap lofts and coldwater flats furnished with little more than cinder-block-and-plank bookshelves filled with used paperbacks, a bare mattress, an “unpainted wooden chair,” and “a scarred drop-

³ Brett Miller, “*Chelsea 8: Political Poetry at Midcentury*,” in Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf, eds., *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 100-2.

leaf kitchen table.”⁴ Equally important, sites like the Cellar, the Coffee Gallery, and the Co-Existence Bagel Shop in North Beach, or the San Remo, White Horse, and Cedar in the Village, connected underground networks—literally and literarily.

These Rebel Cafe interactions made the New Bohemia a continuation of the early 1950s counterpublic. Nightspots were nodal points for subterranean wayfarers in a pre-digital age, where letters were received and phone messages relayed to restless young seekers who seldom kept a steady address. And when subterraneans did meet face to face, nightspots were crucial places of public discussion, where ideas about the artistic avant-garde and oppositional politics were hashed out, both formally and informally. Within the left-bohemian counterpublic, race, gender, and sexuality were talked about openly; traditional boundaries blurred as bohemians developed aesthetic affiliations and often replaced the private sphere of the family with “hip” cosmopolitan and ideological alliances. The result was a fully-functioning, if ephemeral, “intentional community,” an interregnum between the utopian experiments of the nineteenth century and the countercultural communes of the sixties.⁵

The most important part of this development occurred in North Beach, particularly in a literary bar simply called The Place. While the Beach has become popularly associated with Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and other Beat Generation writers, in the 1950s it was populated by a host of lesser-known poets and painters. A

⁴ Allen Brown, “Life and Love Among the Beatniks,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 22, 1958, “This World” insert, p. 4.

⁵ Timothy Miller, *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America, Volume I: 1900-1960* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Hilke Kuhlmann, *Living Walden Two: B.F. Skinner’s Behaviorist Utopia and Experimental Communities* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005). Miller offers a historical, chronological study of intentional communities without theoretical or analytical frames, seeking purely to document them. But he very usefully defines these communities by seven criteria: a common purpose tied to separation from dominant society; self-denial in the interest of the group; geographic proximity; personal interaction; economic sharing; real existence; and a critical mass of at least five members who are not simply familial or intimate. See pp. xx-xxii.

diverse group, they nonetheless formed a distinct milieu that celebrated the underside of modern America. New Saloons nurtured an interracial, queer, and bohemian culture which the Beats entered and used to solidify the literary style they had been crafting since the 1940s. North Beach was a platform from which the Beat movement launched, most notably with Ginsberg's reading of the poem "Howl" at the 6 Gallery in 1955.

The 6 Gallery was founded at 3119 Fillmore by a group of six poets and painters: Jack Spicer, John Allen Ryan, Wally Hedrick, Deborah Remington, Hayward King, and David Simpson. Along with The Place and other North Beach venues, it connected key players behind the scenes of bohemia. Converted from an auto garage, its back room featured a stage for poetry and jazz performances, including Remington's close friend Dave Brubeck. John Allen Ryan, a bartender at The Place and a poet who was prominent in the city's radical queer culture, was a major influence on Ginsberg and Beat poet Michael McClure. Spicer, along with the gay activist poet Robert Duncan, formed the center of this scene with politically-charged literary workshops, often at The Place, which attracted a younger generation of outspoken poets in the late 1950s, including Joanne Kyger, George Stanley, and Russell FitzGerald. Without recognizing this queer-bohemian community—who often represented the "beatnik" in the national press—it is impossible to fully understand the cultural evolution of the Rebel Cafe or the Beat movement.

Kerouac's and Ginsberg's different relationships to the Rebel Cafe illustrate two aspects of the Beat movement's social significance. Kerouac used saloons as transient places, vehicles that carried him along the "road" of literary and psychosexual exploration. His life and novels unmoored the Beats, and eventually their followers, from

previous traditions and expectations, but lacked contemplation. Ginsberg, on the other hand, recognized and used bohemian nightlife's sense of *place*. Moving to San Francisco in 1954 and immersing himself in the North Beach scene allowed him to see his previous experiences in Greenwich Village anew, as well as bohemia's and America's relationships to capitalism—which he portrayed in “Howl” as the all-devouring “Moloch.” In many ways this was a conscious reiteration of the literary past, as San Francisco functioned for Ginsberg much like Paris had for the expatriate writers of the 1920s. Ginsberg was the brains of the Beat operation, the movement's conscience, and “Howl” was an intense meditation on the nature of postwar marginalization, and the desire for liberation and community, that required both detachment and rootedness. As a result, the poem's celebrity made a nebulous community visible to itself, and this self-awareness coalesced it and made it real. Yet the media spotlight that brightened its sheltered spaces made it impossible to maintain. The Beats quickly overshadowed the bohemia that spawned them.

The voice of the Beat Generation broke into the broader public sphere in 1957. Following a rave review by the *New York Times*'s Gilbert Millstein, Kerouac's *On the Road* hit the bestseller list. The previous year, Allen Ginsberg had come to wide notice after the City Lights edition of *Howl and Other Poems* was banned as obscene by the San Francisco police, leading to a high-profile court victory for its poet-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The bohemians of the nocturnal demimonde became fodder for the popular press, now labeled “beatniks” by columnist Herb Caen after he overheard African-American poet Bob Kaufman in North Beach's 12 Adler bar playing with the words “beat”

and “Sputnik”—the Soviet satellite that sparked the Space Race after its October launch.⁶ But despite their allure as colorful journalistic subjects, beatniks were simply one of many cliques in the underground community of the 1950s.

At their most ambitious, subterranean radicals expounded a new “apocalyptic” consciousness, questioning a society that had produced the Cold War and the Bomb, seeking a millennial reversal of the social order. Bohemians sought individual, internal metamorphoses, and used intoxicants as a way of stripping away previously received notions, a kind of *creative self-destruction* and a sometimes perilous form of psychic exploration.⁷ These revolutionary ideas, expounded in poetry readings, art showings, and bar talk in subterranean nightspots, were then disseminated through independent media—from Grove Press and City Lights Books to Fantasy Records and the nation’s first listener-supported radio station, WPPA in San Francisco. Yet as bohemian works sparked controversy, this counterpublic expanded to national proportions, becoming largely indistinguishable from the culture industry as a whole.

The Beat movement was the final piece of the Rebel Cafe puzzle, connecting North Beach firmly with Village dissidents. Yet this expansion also disrupted the previously insulated bicoastal bohemia. What had been a mutually-supportive (albeit artistically snarky) community, often described by its denizens as a kind of therapeutic, alternative school of aesthetic anarchism, quickly became public. The New Bohemia therefore took on a function that could be described as “socially Freudian,” raising

⁶ Scott Lettieri, “Peering in at Specs,” *North Beach News* (Summer 2004), n.p., clipping in “Specs” File, San Francisco History Center Biography Collection, San Francisco Public Library.

⁷ My notion of “creative self-destruction” is adapted from Joseph Schumpeter’s characterization of capitalism, in which material advances rely on a continuous process of “creative destruction,” as new innovations eviscerate and replace old forms. Like Schumpeter, I recognize that this process has its limits which ultimately results in mere destruction, without the ability to overcome the weight of its own internal contradictions. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1975, 1942), 82-85.

America's underlying, unconscious instinctual drives to the surface, where the Pleasure Principle and the Death Instinct were examined freely, often through the lens of dark humor and satire—a sort of talk therapy at the level of public discourse. Conversely, the Rebel Cafe's association with the Beats, and the expansion of its ethos into the American mainstream by the 1960s, has obscured its place in the history of the 1950s.

Ultimately, bohemia was less revolutionary than it was simply rebellious. Rather than replacing the old order, it became a Rabelaisian politics of opposition; its carnivalesque critique was a performative stage of the more active social shifts that followed. This should not be dismissed as unimportant, however. New Bohemia offered significant social space for women, African Americans, gays, and lesbians years before the rise of second-wave feminism, the March on Washington, or the Stonewall revolt. These changes were continually contested, of course, from within and without, and participants sometimes relied on previous social hierarchies to aid their ambitions. Particularly for women, the threat of misogynistic violence posed a continual challenge, as did the social and medical risks of sex in a pre-pill, pre-Roe v. Wade world. Yet their claims on public space set a significant precedent, establishing the Rebel Cafe as an outpost of possibility for a new wave of personal politics.

THE NEW SALOON, "THE PLACE," AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Just as 1953 was a pivotal year for jazz culture and the Cold War, it was also momentous for the bicoastal bohemian community. That year, The Place opened in North Beach at 1546 Grant Street, a few blocks north of Broadway. Owners Knute Stiles and Leo Krikorian—alumni of the experimental Black Mountain College—opened the bar as an extension of their anarchist politics and aesthetic ambitions, a space for public discussion and art. In its seven-year run, The Place defined the tone of New Bohemia

probably more than any other nightspot, with its jazzy mix of radical bohemian, literary, and queer culture.

Stiles and Krikorian had solidified their friendship in left-bohemian circles in the late 1940s. After leaving Black Mountain, while Stiles attended the New School in Manhattan, they roomed together in Krikorian's "commune in the Bronx"—a shared space that welcomed other Black Mountain alumni. Attending anarchist meetings, Stiles connected with radical west-coast poets such as Philip Lamantia, Tram Combs, and Robert Duncan—who had also taught briefly at Black Mountain—and he followed Krikorian to San Francisco in 1949. Both Stiles and Krikorian flourished in North Beach's Black Cat-Vesuvio scene, yet each embodied a different aspect of subterranean nightlife: Krikorian was straight and largely apolitical, a photographer and a libertine; Stiles, gay and politically active, was a writer and a painter.⁸ Their differences complemented each other, and the tiny bar's atmosphere attracted a dedicated core of patrons.

In many ways, Krikorian was the archetypical Rebel Cafe owner, a real-life echo of the fictional saloonkeepers concocted by William Saroyan—whom he once met as a youth. Krikorian's parents, fleeing Turkish persecution in Armenia, immigrated to the U.S. in the 1910s and settled in rural California, near Fresno, where Leo was born in 1922. Like many of his generation, the New Deal was a daily reality in his household, with a brother and a sister each working as clerks for the WPA. Drafted into the army

⁸ "Stiles, Knute, Transcript of Interview by Ellingham," May 30, 1982, East-West House, 733 Baker St., San Francisco, pp. 1-3, 25, Papers of Writer Lewis Ellingham, MSS # 126, Box 4, Folder 7, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego; Leo Krikorian Interview, *The Beach*, dir. by Mary Kerr (CA Palm, 1995); Jack Lind, *Leo's Place: An Oral History of the Beats in San Francisco's North Beach* (Soborg, Denmark: Det Danske Ideselskab, 1998), 23-4. See also Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2003), 58-9.

during World War II, Krikorian trained as a photographer and studied with Ansel Adams after the war. The GI Bill allowed him to continue his studies at Black Mountain, but after his move to San Francisco, he shipped out as a merchant marine, hauling military equipment to Japan. Krikorian first opened The Place partnering with a fellow seaman who was prevented from owning the bar due to a police record as a pimp. Krikorian paid \$1,500 to buy the space, including the beer and wine license, but the bar did poor business at first. Stiles borrowed the money to buy out Krikorian's partner in March 1954.⁹

Krikorian went into the bar business to support his artistic interests, making enough to pay the \$40 rent for a room he shared with Stiles at the Montgomery Block building, where fellow artists cobbled together income from janitorial work or growing pot. Throughout The Place's run, Krikorian showed a penchant for mutual-aid and community. He offered cheap (or free) food and drinks (ten-ounce beers were twenty-five cents) and extended \$2 per month credit to locals. "They used to call me 'The Godfather of Beats,' because I used to help a lot of people out," Krikorian said. "I'd give them money, I'd feed them, buy them drinks." As one *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter vividly recalled, "Leo Krikorian . . . was a short, husky, ferocious-looking man . . . like he had just stopped killing a few Turks with a butcher knife. Leo made delicious pastrami sandwiches." Krikorian's bartenders described North Beach as a community where denizens "lived in little hotel rooms like the Monkey Block or the old Italian hotels, but

⁹ Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, S.D. No. 9, E.D. No. 10-93, Sheet No. 8-B; Jack Lind, "Paris, North Beach," *North Beach Magazine* vol. 2, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 10-11, 35; Krikorian Interview, *The Beach*; Stiles Interview, p. 1, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; "List or Manifest of Aliens Employed on the Vessel as Members of Crew," SS Marine Runner, sailing from port of Nagoya, Japan, January 14, 1952, arriving at San Francisco, California, January 30, 1952, National Archives # M1416:154.

they spent all their time at the Place, or the other bars,” and there was “a spirit of sharing.” The bar opened at 9 A.M. and through the day was a key hub for patrons that Stiles characterized as “poets of all sizes and ages, some painters, some photographers, some merchant seamen, some radicals, some conservatives” Many relied on Krikorian’s largesse or employment to make do. Despite customers passing a series of bad checks, the bar’s popularity allowed Krikorian and Stiles to eke out a steady living. As Stiles reported to the activist poet Tram Combs, in typically blunt terms, he at least made “as much money as some floozie clerking at the dime store.”¹⁰

Stiles’ entrepreneurial motivation grew from his politics, as “the anarchists were the only revolutionaries that interested me.” Writing to Combs in 1954, Stiles expressed his concern about maintaining North Beach radicalism, complaining that Vesuvio was becoming a tourist trap and that “12 Adler is now a dike bar, so I feel that another bohemian spot is a much needed thing.” Stiles had attended Kenneth Rexroth’s Libertarian Circle meetings in 1949, which set him on his activist path. “And actually I only got in on the last two meetings,” he recalled. “But it was a meeting, largely, of poets; and their attitude was that political resistance was impossible in the McCarthy period. And that they were looking for ways to bring about cultural changes in lifestyle. . . . [T]hat was really my motivation at The Place, in going into the bar business.”¹¹

Within anarchist circles, Stiles asserted, radicals proposed methods of altering bourgeois consciousness by introducing marijuana and peyote to the middle class. More

¹⁰ Krikorian Interview, *The Beach*; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 58, 24, 27, 43, 34, 31, 26; Knute Stiles to Tram Combs, March 24, 1954, Box 3, Folder 3, Tram Combs Papers, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego. “In those days everyone carried a bottle in a brown paper bag [to save money],” reported artist Nemi Frost, indicating bohemian barroom tactics, as well as the gender norms that still guided their policies, “and whoever the bartender was was amazed that three people could get so jolly on a single glass of beer. . . . Anyhow, he 86’ed me and he threw me out and let [my male friends] stay!” Nemi Frost Interview, East/West house, San Francisco, 1982, Box 6, Folder 9, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

¹¹ Stiles to Combs, March 24, 1954, Combs Papers, UCSD; Stiles Interview, p. 1, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

important, “there was a general feeling there had to be a change about sexual relationships.”

One of the things that was very much talked about . . . was greater candor about homosexuality. And greater interest in experiment even in heterosexual relations. . . . And one of the things that was talked about, for example, was introducing the ladies to swear words; it was generally felt that if we could come to a single language, rather than a specialized language of the male-oriented society . . . it would be possible to have the liberation of women. . . . So when I went into the bar business in 1954—April 1st, 1954—we started with the Dadaists.¹²

The “Dadaists” in this case were artists organized by the poet Jack Spicer into what he called the “Cacophony Band.” Stiles and Krikorian had connected with him through the San Francisco Art Institute, where Spicer taught courses in art and literature. By this time, Spicer and Robert Duncan—friends since their days together at UC Berkeley and in the Libertarian Circle in the 1940s—had already become the center of the San Francisco Renaissance, along with Rexroth, organizing poetry workshops and literary salons for young aspirants. With Spicer, Duncan, and Rexroth’s patronage, The Place became a “meeting place of the ‘out’-groups.” The bar’s clientele, Stiles recalled, soon included “lesbians and queers and revolutionaries and so forth . . . who were interested in poetry, revolution, what have you—pacifism.”¹³

Stiles and Krikorian designed The Place as a headquarters for sociocultural revolt and public discussion. It was the epitome of an “intimate” American literary cafe: a storefront venue with one plate-glass window, a bar on the right-hand wall with about a

¹² Stiles Interview, pp. 5-6, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

¹³ The Art Institute, originally called the California School of Fine Arts, was part of a long tradition of San Francisco avant-gardism and had counted Diego Rivera among its faculty in the 1930s. Duncan and Spicer each had their own radical backgrounds: Spicer’s father had been in the IWW and Duncan was a veteran of the anti-Stalinist Left in the late 1930s, participating in various Trotskyist and anarchist groups. Spicer sought out Duncan after reading his article on homosexuality in *Politics* (see Chapter 4). Both critiqued the Communists for their prudish views on sexuality, and Spicer was a strong proponent of the “democratization” of culture. Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), 49-52; Robert Duncan Interview, January 7, 1983, San Francisco, Box 5, Folder 16, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Stiles Interview, pp. 13, 19, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Stiles to Combs, March 24, 1954, Combs Papers, UCSD.

dozen stools, walls adorned with “daub-and-swab school” modern art, an upright piano, and a cramped balcony overlooking the barroom. This use of space was crucial. “The Place was small enough, so that if you got three or four people, why the fifth person could come in and immediately get into the dialogue, even if he was unknown, to the other people,” Stiles said.

And in fact Krikorian and I had that in mind . . . [with] the bench running all the way along the wall so that people sitting at a table would be also sitting at the next table. . . . In other words, . . . we arranged it in such a way that there wouldn’t be any single-tabled people, that people would all be kind of together. The smallness of The Place actually insured that the continuity of the dialogue—it was very hard for anybody to get lost. As a matter of fact if you really wanted to be alone, they went up in the balcony. . . . but it’s curious; there were times when there were 75 people there jumping up and down and carrying on.”

In true Rebel Cafe style, and apropos of a subterranean institution, its spatial connotations were also playful. As bartender John Allen Ryan recalled, “The Place was like a culture center. There was poetry in 14 languages in the toilet, pasted, written, painted on the wall.”¹⁴

Stiles and Krikorian’s presence at The Place exemplified another important aspect of the Rebel Cafe: the bartender’s role in social networks and the public sphere. Bartenders “set the tone” for literary cafes and guided patrons through social and political experiments. This was particularly the case in North Beach where they tended to be both venue owners and participants in the art scene, although with varying levels of subtlety it was also true for New York sites such as the San Remo, the White Horse, and the Figaro Cafe.¹⁵ “The bartender / Has eyes the color of ripe apricots,” Spicer wrote in “A Poem for

¹⁴ Allen Brown, “Life and Love among the Beatniks,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 15, 1958, “This World” insert, pp. 4-6; Stiles Interview, pp. 21-2, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 18.

¹⁵ The bartenders at the San Remo, for example, often crossed the line back and forth from protective of their patrons to hostile and violent. While James Baldwin remembers these tough Italian Villagers shielding him from a racist mob, Ronald Sukenick and Judith Malina each reported an incident in which co-owner and bartender John Santini brutally beat a customer unconscious on the floor of the cafe, as well as other

Dada Day at The Place, April 1, 1958.” Evoking the tensions between life-as-art and art-as-commodity, he continued: “Easy to please as a cash register he / Enjoys art and good jokes. . . . / He / We / Laugh. . . . It is not easy to remember that other people died besides Dylan Thomas and Charlie Parker / Died looking for beauty in the world of the bartender” Entwined in the social fabric of San Francisco and New York, literary bars became public extensions of the parties that raged in bohemian “pads,” which were often too small to accommodate more than a few revelers. As Stiles stated in a letter to Combs, running The Place was “like being host to a party which is never over.”¹⁶

Conscious of their capacity as public hosts, Stiles and Krikorian developed a division of labor that utilized their respective strengths and social skills, Stiles later recalled:

Krikorian and I agreed that I knew more people than he did so I would attend every night until we built up a clientele. And he would work during the day, do the clean-up and the buying; take care of the day crowd. And after about six months we arranged to have two-week intervals where he would tend at night, and I would tend at night on the second half of the month. In other words, for the first six months I was there seven days a week. . . . And I think very possibly the fact that I was there constantly meant that I got to know all of my customers very well. . . . And after that I started switching off with Krikorian: we were just as important as one another. But we had thought—and I think it is correct—that in order to bring in a crowd I had to be up front in the evening. At first. And actually after the habitués had gradually assembled I think Krikorian became very popular. Probably as popular as me in his way.

In 1955, Stiles sold his interest in the bar, moving to an anarchist colony in Oaxaca, Mexico, and then back to New York, the “center of the art market,” which he deemed necessary to “make my living as an artist.” But he maintained ties with Krikorian—who provided him a monthly stipend—and when Stiles returned in 1958, he bartended at his

examples of “tough” bartenders. See Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 246 and Ronald Sukenick, *Down and In: Life in the Underground* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987), 22-4.

¹⁶ Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, eds. (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 180; Stiles to Combs, March 24, 1954, Combs Papers, UCSD.

old haunt. This sort of personal touch was typical of Rebel Cafe venues, where owners and staff created a welcoming atmosphere of nonconformity, assuring patrons of relatively safe spaces to explore transgressive or radical ideas—although The Place was more openly radical than most. “I was really standing behind the bar just blathering anarchist propaganda,” Stiles admitted, chuckling. “Somebody else might have thought I was doing something else, but that’s what I thought I was doing.”¹⁷

SPEAKING OUT: THE PLACE AND PUBLIC SPEECH

Equally important to The Place’s public function was “Blabbermouth Night,” the idea for which bartenders Jack Langan and John Allen Ryan borrowed from a Chicago bar in the tradition of Rexroth’s Green Mask. Held every Monday, Blabbermouth Night was an open forum, requiring only that speakers’ orations be improvised. One scenester later remembered that, based on crowd reaction, “a magnum of champagne went to the best bullshit artist” contingent on the “wit and verbal persuasion of the contestant.”¹⁸ Some presented pre-written pieces, but the expectation for “Bohemians and tourists alike” was to talk extemporaneously on topics both serious and satirical—although the tendency was toward the latter. Yet this was no free-for-all. Instead, Blabbermouth Night was a supreme example of counterpublic discourse. The proceedings followed meticulous rules, which an area sociologist recorded in 1959:

The participants, leaning on a box labeled “Soap [for Cultural Sanity],” address the audience from a balcony. The “official” themes are posted on a blackboard behind the bar. Each speaker is allowed three minutes in which to present his ideas. More commonly, the themes serve as a take-off point for more immediate personal interests. The “formal” address is followed by a question period and a rebuttal, and a winner is declared. Sometimes the debates are real and even violent.

¹⁷ Stiles Interview, pp. 22-3, 25, 36, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 36.

¹⁸ Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, 58-9; Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 99; Ralph Gleason, “The Real Beatniks Flee Pasadena, North Beach,” *Independent Star-News*, April 4, 1960, pp.2-3.

In addition to the champagne, winners were awarded a “Blabberlistener” certificate, which stated the recipient could sit on The Place’s “Panel of Experts.” “Most of the speech-making on Blabbermouth Night was political in nature,” Krikorian insisted. “It wasn’t like somebody just getting up there talking, there would [be] rebuttals and the whole bar would get involved.”¹⁹

Blabbermouth discussions were informed by many of the same sources as the mainstream public, underscoring the satirical label, “Experts.” Topics ranged from the outrageously surreal to the profound. On a given Monday, you might hear speakers rail against Nixon or General Motors, ask “Where would the world be today if Joan of Arc had had a miscarriage?” and “Was Macbeth Beat?” or discuss “The superiority of the bagel as a contraceptive,” “American Imperialism,” and “The Iraq Rebellion.” The Place’s emcee created an atmosphere not altogether different from a comedy club, with routines that were highly reminiscent of Bay Area “New Comedians” like Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce. But at times Blabbermouth Night slipped into hip exclusivity, as speakers spouted self-referential jokes and gave “tourist squares” the put-on. Berkeley professor Thomas Parkinson, for example, presented “Do Not Dig Homosexual Poetry,” a spoof of Duncan and the “Spicer circle,” which affably caricatured them as “Archbishop Drumcan” and “Lady Superior Spice,” and garnered laughs with his punning suggestion that “we have nothing against homosexuals, nothing against homosexuals who write poetry, but we *do* have something against . . . poetry written by a small circle for a small circle.”²⁰

¹⁹ Brown, “Life and Love among the Beatniks,” 4; Francis J. Rigney and L. Douglas Smith, *The Real Bohemia: A Sociological and Psychological Study of the “Beats”* (New York: Basic Books, 1961), 5; Krikorian Interview, *The Beach*; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 38.

²⁰ Bohemians read local papers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* or the *New York Times*, as well as national magazines like *Newsweek* or *Time*, and left-liberal journals such as *The Nation* or *Partisan Review*. Television viewing was infrequent and largely limited to watching baseball games in bars. Radio, such as New York’s WBAI and San Francisco’s KPFA or KJAZ—which advertised in the local press—was the

On the whole, The Place met this call for inclusiveness, although the continual use of the word “fuck” (especially by women) brought police shutdowns, which itself exemplified the Rebel Cafe’s socially-Freudian function, as patrons excised neuroses through talk and playful performativity. “Your cubic correspondent wandered into The Place the other night,” reported the conservative *San Francisco Examiner* in 1958. “The joint is self-consciously shabby but comfortably relaxed. Filled with young people deep in talk, with the peculiarly tripping improvisations of the progressive piano style serving as background music.”²¹ Existentialism and the “death-wish” were common fodder. In both private conversation and the press, flippant statements that “Beach chicks surround themselves with death symbols,” wearing “long black stockings, black shirts, and black sweaters,” sat beside earnest suggestions that authentic nonconformity entailed “wanting—sometimes desperately—to die,” that “everything that’s wild and beautiful about N. Beach people,” included “the death-wish down-to-the-bottom urge.”²²

most common form of electronic media. Some of the more politically-conscious subterraneans, such as Allen Ginsberg, augmented the press with foreign journals and little magazines, offering more three-dimensional views. Ginsberg’s most rigorous political interlocutor was his father, the poet Louis Ginsberg. Through 1957-8, Ginsberg held a detailed correspondence with Louis, in which they debated the intricacies of the Cold War, illustrated this. Ginsberg specifically mentioned reading *The Reporter* and the *Observer* in London’s Ben Franklin Library, as well as *Partisan Review* and US newspapers. He also alluded to other sources, saying, “Read analysis of New Class & various articles . . . Also read (in London) Krushev and Mao Tze Tung’s [*sic*] speeches . . . Obviously mind-murder brainwashed culture & thought control—even in their own propaganda.” On another occasion: “A good deal of communist propaganda has reached me. Naturally some of the communist propaganda is quite reasonable. As is our own. . . . [George F.] Kennan’s new book, I saw reviewed this week, lays considerable responsibility for the development of east-west war on early U.S. aggression. . . . Which is an old argument the communists always make, & an argument that always seemed ridiculous in America.” Allen Ginsberg to Louis Ginsberg, January 14, 1957 and undated “Dear Lou,” Box 7, Folder 15, and March 2, 1958, Box 7, Folder 16, Allen Ginsberg Papers, MS# 0487, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. See also Allen Ginsberg, *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, Bill Morgan, ed. (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), 53, 97, 150, 212, and Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, The Beat Generation, and America* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1979), 221; Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 5; Clinton Robert Starr, “Bohemian Resonance: The Beat Generation and Urban Countercultures in the United States during the Late 1950s and Early 1960s,” PhD. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2005, 193, 227; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 38-9.

²¹ Dick Nolan, “Bulletin from Bohemia,” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 22, 1958, n.p., clipping in Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

²² Brown, “Life and Love among the Beatniks,” 4-6; Russell FitzGerald Diary, November 26, 1957, Box 9,

Bohemia's satirical side was captured by frequent Blabbermouth participant Joanne Kyger. On her arrival from Los Angeles, Kyger adopted a public persona, dubbed "Miss Kids," after her tendency to appear in local bars with an entourage, whom she continually exhorted with calls of "Kids, I got an idea!" Illustrating the social role of North Beach nightspots, in 1959 Kyger wrote to her future partner, Gary Snyder, describing a night out with Spicer and poet Russell FitzGerald in terms that showed The Place's humor, and its underlying pathos: "And they initially left me at the Place where Jack Spicer and Russell were who said for God's sake at last you've come Back and I sahd SHUDDUP I have to get drunk and I did / And I acted like Lucy from Peanut's all evening and was mad at everyone and Spicer of course goaded me on."²³

Blabbermouth Night offered this kind of sardonic self-expression to all comers. Reporting a scene soaked with Freudian elements, from the neurosis of repressed desire to the dark humor that released it, columnist Herb Caen wrote that "at last Mon. night's session, a girl with matted hair and glasses to match arose to announce: 'I really don't have anything to say, I just came here to be humiliated.' Out of the ensuing silence, a voice bellowed: 'Siddown!' 'Thank you,' she said meekly, 'now I've been humiliated.' She looked quite relieved." More transgressively satirical was one Blabbermouth who identified herself as "Big Cyn" and offered an account of arriving in North Beach's

Folder 1, Lewis Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

²³ Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 122-3; Joanne Kyger to Gary Snyder, February 27, 1959, Box 8 Folder 7, Joanne Kyger Papers, MSS #730, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego. On April 16, 1959, for instance, Kyger wrote to Snyder that their poetry meetings were moving from Stanley's to the East/West House to find a new scene, maybe with McClure, Whalen, and Dunn: "Spicer says only John Ryan left on the Beach, Leo will have to open a bar on Fillmore street. It's true. No one left in North Beach except the tourists. No more Miz Kids. End of an era says Pip. Thank God." She then ran into "Mr. Andron" in the Beach, who had once given her a tutorial on Marxism. See also John Wieners, *The Journal of John Wieners Is to Be Called 707 Scott Street For Billie Holiday 1959* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996), 13. Kyger and artist Nemi Frost carried on a correspondence through the late 1950s that exemplified this Freudian humor, reporting various shenanigans in North Beach, including an apparently symbolic dream in which Frost was thrown off The Place's balcony. See Nemi Frost to Kyger, undated (c. 1958), Box 7, Folder 14, Kyger Papers, UCSD.

community “utopia” with “three strikes against me”: “I’m German, I’m a virgin, and I’m a secretary.” After patrons responded with broad laughs and suggestions about how to solve her “problems,” they voted her that night’s winner. When Big Cyn stood to accept her award, however, she announced that he had a “confession” to make: “I happen to be French, a whore, and a painter.”²⁴ And the crowd went wild.

By 1958, The Place was a key anchor in both the bicoastal bohemia and North Beach’s queer community—an extension of the Black Cat’s radical tradition. The Place fulfilled the functions of the New Saloon, acting as a hub of oppositional networks and information. In 1955, when John Allen Ryan spent a season studying art alongside Stiles in Oaxaca, he continued to exchange poems with Allen Ginsberg, who had recently arrived in North Beach. “If you would like to see more of my scribbles,” he wrote, “see Ed Woods at The Place.” After Ryan’s return the following year, he wrote to Jack Spicer, who was planning his own return from a short stint in New York and was casting around for a job, telling him that “your notice has been posted at the 6 [Gallery] and the Place,” and the local “crew were in the Place Sunday as I was tending bar, and gave me to understand they would do what they can.”²⁵

Joyce Johnson later described a letter she received from Jack Kerouac just before *On the Road* was published, pleading with her to join him in San Francisco and ebulliently hyping The Place, saying, “You will love this mad joint. Nothing like it in New York.” The bar, Johnson noted, “had clippings about *Howl* on the bulletin board as

²⁴ Herb Caen, “Life in Lower Slobbovia,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 11, 1958, n.p., clipping in Examiner Morgue, SFPL; *Blabbermouth Night at the Place*, audio cassette recording ca. April 15, 1957, (Intelirap Records, 2002).

²⁵ John Allen Ryan to Allen Ginsberg, August 1, 1955, Box 5, Folder 15, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA; John Allen Ryan to Jack Spicer, March 20, 1956, Box 3, Folder 27, Jack Spicer Papers, BANC MSS 2004/209, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

well as painting by local artists and phone messages and letters that the bartender held for his customers.”²⁶ Yet, due to the prominence of the Beats, its public image was often filtered through Kerouac’s lens. He claimed it as “his” bar in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*, with descriptions that revealed less its hip-literary reality than his own nostalgia for the classic “American” saloon: “The Place is a brown lovely bar made of wood, with sawdust, barrel beer in glass mugs, an old piano for anybody to bang on, and an upstairs balcony with little wooden tables.”²⁷

While Kerouac waxed ecstatic about The Place’s incomparability, many regulars like Stiles and Spicer routinely traversed between the Beach and the Village, finding similar environs in the San Remo or Cedar. “Just when I was so eager to abandon New York,” recalled Johnson, “it seemed to turn before my eyes into a kind of Paris. The new cultural wave that had crested in San Francisco was rolling full force into Manhattan, bringing with it all kinds of newcomers—poets, painters, photographers, jazz musicians, dancers—genuine artists and hordes of would-be’s, some submerging . . . others quickly bobbing to the surface and remaining visible.”²⁸ Far from isolated cases, the Beats’ San Francisco sojourns were instead part of the larger trend toward a bicoastal bohemia that was interwoven with North Beach’s queer activist community.

“NON-GHETTOIZING” GAY: NORTH BEACH QUEER CULTURE AND THE BEATS

Following its state supreme court victory allowing openly gay patronage in 1951, North Beach’s Black Cat Cafe began to feature drag shows starring the future political activist José Sarria. As a consequence, nightspots such as The Place, 6 Gallery, and later

²⁶ Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), 156-7.

²⁷ Kerouac quoted in Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, 59; Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 283.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 156-8, 167.

the Cellar, the Coffee Gallery, and the Co-Existence Bagel Shop replaced the Black Cat as bohemia's main literary locales. In particular, Spicer's writers' circle, known to insiders as the *Spicerkreis*, essentially headquartered itself at The Place—to the extent that Spicer began to receive his mail there. The Place soon proclaimed itself to be “Where the Literati Linger in Bohemia's Hall.”²⁹ But queer San Francisco venues including the Paper Doll, the Mr. Otis bar, Gino and Carlo's, the Anxious Asp, Ann's 440, 12 Adler, and Miss Smith's Tea Room (which became the Coffee Gallery in 1958) remained intertwined with the bohemian public sphere as sites for bar talk and radical engagement.³⁰

Narrowly “Beat”-en views of North Beach have obscured these continuities between the Black Cat's queer-bohemianism of the 1940s and left-radical artists of the 1950s. Most notably, Nan Boyd's groundbreaking study of queer San Francisco draws a solid line between bohemia and the decade's emerging gay public sphere, especially after a 1956 moral reform campaign by Mayor George Christopher and the Alcohol Beverage Control Board once again put the Black Cat in legal jeopardy. Boyd argues that by the time of the crackdown, the cafe was divided from a bohemia defined by the Beats, whose “mystic and masculine culture” had little direct connection to the “gender-transgressive quality of queer culture.” She asserts that the Beats “ran counter to the homophobia of cold war America, but their celebration of masculinity remained too narrow and distinct

²⁹ Robert Duncan to Jack Spicer, August 26 and November 6, 1959, Box 1, Robert Duncan Papers, Berkeley; Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 16, 57-8; Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, 34; Quoted from the “Certified Blabberlistener” award, featured in *The Beach*, Leo Krikorian Interview.

³⁰ Tea Room owner Connie Smith signed over her beer and wine license following a series of legal troubles, including aiding in a humorously botched robbery attempt in which she told an acquaintance, Thomas Kaufman, that she would supply him with a toy gun and a cashier at Paoli's restaurant who was in on the heist. “Kaufman said he was given not a toy gun, but an automatic pistol,” reported the *Examiner*, which also noted that the cashier “wasn't in on the plot. His gun accidentally discharged in the place, and he shot himself in the groin.” See “Hunt Miss Smith in Holdup Plot,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 12, 1958.

from the more flamboyant and effeminate homosexualities ruminating in San Francisco's sexual underworld for it to have contributed to a broad-based refiguring of queer culture or community."³¹ This contention is problematic for two reasons. First, it misconstrues the relationship between the Beats and North Beach, in which gay activists like Stiles, Spicer, and Duncan were prominent—a connection not explored by Boyd. Second, it relies on a reductive definition of “gay” as an *identity*, manifesting in “flamboyant and effeminate” personas, to the exclusion of sexuality and affiliation—an ironic counterpoint to California law that recognized the rights of gays and lesbians to public space on the premise that it is impossible to identify them as long as they did not participate in sexual *behavior*.

The Beats were part of a gay-bohemian community that often, though not always, celebrated masculinity, but also asserted its own range of “homosexualities.” As the controversial publisher Irving Rosenthal—whose early-1950s stint in San Francisco included taking closeted friends to the Blue Angel, “a very gay bar” where affectionate patrons eased their “opening up”—later wrote to Ginsberg, “Howl is an angry poem, we have a right to our anger.” He concluded emphatically, in the Freudian parlance of his times, “I do not care whether Allen Ginsberg thinks there is a connection between his own cocksucking activities and his mother’s parasitism . . . But I know *I* am a homo which my mother manufactured, and I am perfectly willing to blow any not too repulsive male on the floor of the United Nations to prove it.”³² The younger poets of the *Spicerkreis* were equally vocal about their homosexuality, and included habitués of The

³¹ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 124-5, 144-5.

³² Irving Rosenthal to Richard Edelstein, July 6, 1952, Box 8, Folder 1, Irving Rosenthal to Allen Ginsberg, October 19, 1963 and May 1, 1964, Box 9, Folders 7-8, Irving Rosenthal Papers, Collection M155, Department of Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University.

Place such as George Stanley and Russell FitzGerald. Stanley recalled that their stance was tied to class consciousness, describing the Spicer circle's confrontational anti-bourgeois approach: "We suck cock, take it or leave it! And the next comment would be about baseball—traditionally masculine." Stanley did note divisions between the Spicer group and the Beats, saying, "The beatniks themselves, I think, were quite heterosexual. . . . [Allen Ginsberg] was famous enough to get away with it. . . . but among the followers of the beatniks it was *not* OK to be homosexual at all." Yet the "beatniks" of late-1950s North Beach also included those like FitzGerald, who occasionally cross-dressed and once boasted that "I have sucked over fifty different cocks since last easter" without raising an eyebrow among his compatriots.³³

Stanley added that anarchist scenesters rejected the notion of gay identities as separate from artistic and political ones, asserting, "It was OK to be homosexual . . . but non-ghettoizing, you know, it was the bohemian tradition, and we were more that way." Robert Duncan had long been publicly outspoken about his homosexuality, and privately used his poetry to process his ideas about universality and community. "Christianity tries to persuade that we can love more than one—love our fellow men—and at the same time makes it immoral," he wrote to Spicer in 1948. "If I am free from the Christian blight in any way, it's not in that, 'I have many Gods' [as] I tell myself in the poems. But [that] I can't realize it." Writing publicly about North Beach in 1959, Duncan declared that he sought a "community of values" and a "kinship of concern and a sharing of experience that draws us together," thus avoiding the "danger" of "the sinister affiliation offered by

³³ George Stanley Interview, San Francisco, 1982, Box 7, Folder 16, and Russell FitzGerald Diary, May 20, 1958, Box 9, Folder 1, Lewis Ellingham Papers, UCSD. See also Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 177-8.

groups with whom I had no common ground other than the specialized sexuality.”³⁴ The notoriously surly, sardonic Spicer (whose persona clearly inspired the better-known Beat poet Charles Bukowski) was less effusive about his sexuality, prone to terse statements about his “Prideful Love” and describing the San Francisco scene as “all very depressing.” Writing to a Berkeley compatriot, Spicer described a mutual friend whom “North Beach has swallowed . . . (the drunk world not the queer world) and nobody goes after Jonah into that whale.” Admitting his inability to help, Spicer concluded, “You’ll disapprove I know, but we have different ideas about the responsibilities of love.” Spicer recognized the need to mobilize politically around the issue of sexuality, however, and was an early organizer for the Mattachine Society, a gay rights group founded by former Communists such as Martin Block, whom Spicer knew through Berkeley’s Left social networks.³⁵

Of course, the homophobia apparent in Kerouac’s disdain for effeminate “faggots” in *On the Road* was real enough in beatnik circles, much as it was in the jazz community from which he took his inspiration. A 1959 sociological study of North Beach found several instances of bohemians who rejected gays as “very putrid, weak, and offensive,” while a San Francisco tourist guidebook that a friend jokingly gave to Jack Spicer similarly denigrated the blending of bohemia and queer culture. “One of the most colorful places for a real drunk in other days used to be the Black Cat,” the author complained.

³⁴ George Stanley Interview, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Robert Duncan to Jack Spicer, undated (c. 1947), Box 1, Robert Edward Duncan Papers, circa 1944-1966. BANC MSS 78/164 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Robert Duncan Interview, January 7, 1983, San Francisco, Folder 16, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Robert Duncan, “The Homosexual in Society,” in *Selected Prose*, Robert J. Berthoff, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1995), 48. By the late 1950s, however, Duncan was less active in North Beach nightlife, having settled down with his partner, the painter Jess Collins, in Stinson Beach and only coming to San Francisco to attend Spicer’s workshops. See also John D’Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 76-85.

³⁵ Jack Spicer to Robin Blaser, undated “Dear Robin” (c. 1954) and undated “Dear Robin” (c. 1957), Box 1, Folder 7, Spicer Papers, Berkeley; Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 46-9. See also Maria Damon, *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 142-201.

“The place changed hands and the new owner encouraged the fruit and the place went to hell.” In response, Spicer’s compatriot simply scrawled on the cover of the pamphlet, “*Bull Shit.*”³⁶

Yet even use of the term “faggot” reflected concern about gender transgression and effeminacy more than sexual behavior. Gay bohemians like FitzGerald, for instance, often referred casually to the “faggot table” at the Coffee Gallery or The Place, a spatial delineation that represented identity based on style more than sexuality.³⁷ The predominant mood in North Beach was tolerant, and celebration of unorthodoxy was common. As African-American painter Arthur Monroe later asserted, homosexuality just “didn’t matter,” while activist Jerry Kamstra noted the nightclub underground’s erotic fluidity, suggesting that “many of the artists were bisexual—or just sexual.” “The fact of the matter was, you could have sex any way you wanted it on the Beach if you were patient enough,” he declared, “and homosexuality was one preference that was accepted by the bohemian crowd. . . .” As Gary Snyder wrote to Ginsberg in 1959 about Robert Duncan, “He has totally accepted his homosexuality & there is nothing schizoid about him coming on faggoty & campy one minute or straight & intellectual the next; I get the feeling he has gotten himself pretty integrated & self-accepted.”³⁸ Even as this statement

³⁶ Henry Evans, *Bohemian San Francisco* (San Francisco: The Porpoise Bookshop, 1953), 16, from Allen Joyce to Jack Spicer, Box 2, Folder 23, Spicer Papers, Berkeley.

³⁷ Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 151. See also FitzGerald Diary, November 24, 1958. Similarly, Joanne Kyger, who had many close gay friends, would later say of Spicer that his conversations were outrageous and “you were not supposed to be serious, for one thing, and you couldn’t talk personally . . . there were certain boundaries . . . no personal emotions.” Under Spicer’s guidance “you found a kind of a language” with which to be a part of the project. He might have been “cruel,” Kyger asserted, but not “faggotty” or bitchy. Ebbe Borregaard and Joanne Kyger Interview, May 28, 1982, Bolinas, CA, Box 5, Folder 5, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

³⁸ Starr, “Bohemian Resonance,” 223; Jerry Kamstra, *Stand Naked and Cool Them: North Beach and the Bohemian Dream, 1950-1980* (No Location: Peer-Amid Press, 1980), 91, self-published photocopy in Bancroft Library Special Collections, University of California, Berkeley; Gary Snyder to Allen Ginsberg, January 21, 1959, Box 5, Folder 27, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

reflected a problematic emphasis on masculinity, it equally showed a concern for the full expression of sexuality as fundamental to Beat consciousness.

THE PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY OF THE NORTH BEACH COMMUNITY

Contrary to Nan Boyd's argument that the Black Cat marked the separation of gay and Beat scenes, North Beach nightspots served particular roles for intertwined social cliques. For example, Stiles recalled the way various social spaces affected his relationship with Spicer, which was often amiable when "we would see each other at The Black Cat . . . [or] meet on the bus going to North Beach, and we would immediately sit together and have a good conversation. On the other hand, I would say that we did not have good conversations at The Place. In fact . . . I was anathema." George Stanley noted that when he joined the North Beach scene in 1958, "The Place was still going," and that the "next bars to come into existence were Mr. Otis, the Anxious Asp, and Gino's." But he also frequented the Tower Cafe across from The Place, "the gay bars" like the Black Cat, and the Bagel Shop, Vesuvio, and the Coffee Gallery. "If there was, quote, 'nobody in the bars,'" he said, "we would go to Paper Doll's." Similarly, in October 1957 Russell FitzGerald noted in his diary that his usual haunts had left him depressed, so he walked up Telegraph Hill, seeking some solitude among the WPA paintings that adorned Coit Tower. On the way, he ran into Spicer, however, and "turned back to the Beach and conversation at the Anxious Asp."³⁹ Given the centrality of talk to literary bars, as these stories illustrate, the Black Cat's shift to cabaret-like *performances*, rather than its gay *patronage*, better explains the usurpation of its cachet by New Saloons like The Place.

³⁹ Stiles Interview, pp. 28-9, Stanley Interview, and FitzGerald Diary, October 20, 1957, Ellingham Papers, UCSD. Nan Boyd does not even mention Mr. Otis or Gino and Carlo's, an omission that further elides the connections between bohemia and queer culture. See also John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Starr, "Bohemian Resonance."

While the most serious discussions of poetic tradecraft took place during Spicer-Duncan workshops at the San Francisco Poetry Center or Public Library meeting rooms, the city's bohemian psychogeography—which included the former WPA project, Aquatic Park—was fundamental to exploratory talk. “Either Aquatic Park, or a bar, might be a place for the serious discussion of literature,” Stanley recalled, noting Spicer's competitiveness. “The poetry meeting was . . . more like a bull ring.” Joanne Kyger also remembered bars as particularly welcoming spaces for Spicer's verbose, Marxist-inflected writers' salons: “How he talked . . . This is where his poetry politics took place, a two-block long avenue [with] Vesuvio's, Mike's Pool Hall.”⁴⁰

Disproving Stiles' contention in 1954 that North Beach bohemia needed to free up social space taken by lesbian bars, Vesuvio and 12 Adler were absorbed into a growing scene that included artistic and queer culture alike—albeit anchored by The Place as a hub that connected various cliques. Artist Nemi Frost, who roomed for a time with Russell FitzGerald, recalled her distress at being “'86'ed” (banned) from The Place by the evening bartender for sneaking in a bottle of whiskey. “My whole social life was The Place, so I went down there in the daytime when Leo was there, and he liked me,” she recounted, “so that night I was reinstated.” Frost then described the variety of nightspots that made up North Beach's nonconformist psychogeography: “We used to go to Mike's Pool Hall, and we used to go to Vesuvio's—that was our little circuit. . . . It was home, it was where everything was happening.” As one “Beat Madonna” told a local sociologist, “her social life was ‘almost entirely centered about the Bagel Shop.’”⁴¹

Like The Place, the Co-Existence Bagel Shop was an informal institution,

⁴⁰ Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 116; Borregaard and Kyger Interview, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

⁴¹ Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 92; Nemi Frost Interview, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

complete with a massive bulletin board filled with fliers, letters, and notes from wanderers, to the extent that Beat scholar Bill Morgan termed it a bohemian “news center.” It was not uncommon to see a scruffy poet engage the crowd with various aesthetic or political rants, standing atop its upright piano—which sat across the narrow dark-wood shotgun room from the bar—eliciting spirited responses from the interracial patrons seated around small tables covered with beer glasses and chess sets. Other drinkers—men with goatees, women with heavy Egyptian-style eyeliner—carried on their conversations or turned back to a variety of reading material, from James Joyce to *MAD* magazine, sometimes to the sound of Pony Poindexter’s saxophone. At the nearby Coffee Gallery, men with mustaches and beards talked in front of a sign advertising “famous bands, singers, comedians.” Illustrating nightspots as places of out-group unity, Frost reported to Joanne Kyger in 1958 about a recent night at the Coffee Gallery, proclaiming, “it was a tableau of loveliness, with . . . everyone singing in a community sing.”⁴²

Lesbian-owned nightspots like the Anxious Asp were also mainstays of the bohemian scene. Originally opened in 1955, the Anxious Asp began as a cabaret in the vein of the hungry i. But Arlene Arbuckle bought the venue in 1958 and shifted toward a queer-bohemian staff and clientele. John Allen Ryan bartended there along with actor Guy Wernham, who “had tended bar at Vesuvio’s for awhile” and whom Stiles knew as “a customer at The Place.” A local magazine described the Anxious Asp’s “casual atmosphere,” while customers noted its sexual undertones: the restrooms were “papered

⁴² Morgan, *The Beats in San Francisco*, 50; Nemi Frost to Joanne Kyger, May 11, 1958, Box 8 Folder 7, Kyger Papers, UCSD; “Beat Narrative,” dir. Don Vigne (1960) and “Amazing Footage Featuring Christopher Maclaine,” dir. Dion Vigne (c. 1957-60), Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA; Jerry Stoll and Evan S. Connell, Jr., *I Am a Lover* (Oakland: Angel Island Publications, 1961), unpaginated.

with [pages from] the Kinsey Report.” According to Herb Caen, the Anxious Asp was a “true pillar of North Beach bohemia . . . with a mixed bag of patrons.”⁴³

The New Saloons of San Francisco were crucial to the formation of an oppositional community, places where various “out groups” found common cause—even when a focus on their own small social circles and divisions between cliques blinded them to the bigger picture. For instance, George Stanley used the local psychogeography to express another artist’s aesthetic distance from the Gino & Carlo’s crowd, saying that “he’s as far away from us as The Coffee Gallery.”⁴⁴ Yet Stanley himself later acknowledged the largely false division between queer-bohemians and the Beats, saying, “We were all beatniks, but we didn’t know it.” Much of this confusion grew from petty disagreements among Bay Area poets, whose bruised egos in the face of the Beats’ popularity after 1957 drove them to seek an independent artistic identity. As Rexroth, an early ally and mentor of the Beats, famously stated in 1958, invoking the bicoastal bohemia’s nocturnal geography, “Those two (Kerouac and Ginsberg) aren’t from San Francisco, they’re from the San Remo.”⁴⁵

This short-term revisionism denied a reality that was both more broad and nuanced: while Rexroth and the *Spicerkreis* ostensibly rejected the Beat writers as interlopers or intellectually sloppy, the two groups intermixed more than they cared to admit. Even as Spicer discouraged his young followers from being “influenced” by the Eastern mysticism of Beats such as Ginsberg and Snyder, they nonetheless shared poetry

⁴³ Herb Caen, “Onward & Upward,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 3, 1955, n.p. clipping in the Examiner Morgue, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library; John Allen Ryan Interview, pp. 12-14, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; “Night Life,” *The San Franciscan* December 3, 1958 (Fall-Winter), p. 5, Periodicals Collection, San Francisco History Center, SFPL; Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 83.

⁴⁴ Stanley Interview, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 199.

⁴⁵ Jerome Rothenberg and David Antin, “Interview with Kenneth Rexroth,” April, 1958, in <http://jacketmagazine.com/23/rex-rothbg-antin-iv.html> (accessed May 2, 2013). See also Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 101.

readings, as well as mutual friends like libertarian-anarchist poet Philip Lamantia. While Spicer favored political critique based on an “American” approach to poetry’s “magic,” he and the Beats both challenged repression in the US from a position of left-anarchism. Poet James Broughton described this dynamic, asserting that the Spicer group was “a more disciplined and more lyrically conscious group than the political publicity-busy invaders from the east coast,” but conceded that “there were mergings and overlaps and we all knew one another.”⁴⁶ What was basically a rear-guard turf war waged by the San Francisco poets became a moot point, as bohemians on both coasts shared publishers, such as New Directions and Grove Press, as well as overlapping ideas about poetry and politics. More important, the Beat movement developed a national (and international) following that knew little and cared less about fine distinctions between the Village and North Beach. Yet without examining the North Beach bohemian community’s influence on Jack Kerouac and, especially, Allen Ginsberg, any depiction of the Beat movement’s literary power is incomplete.

HOWL AT THE PLACE: THE BEATS AND THE NEW SALOON

While scholars have widely recognized the significance of Ginsberg’s *Howl* as a resounding early salvo in the battle for gay liberation, and for its influence on the 1960s New Left and Counterculture, few have traced its effects from the ground up within the queer-bohemian community of North Beach and the Village—as perhaps the ultimate expression of the Rebel Cafe milieu. While the Beats themselves certainly were, in the words of historian Howard Brick, “a marginal literary subculture in the mid-1950s,” *Howl* expressed a much deeper and broader urban sensibility that mixed jazz-

⁴⁶ Stanley Interview and Jim Herndon Interview, San Francisco, 1982, Box 6, Folder 12, Ellingham Papers; Charters, *Kerouac*, 256-60, 344; Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 107.

bohemianism, anarchism and the Left organizing tradition, nostalgic romanticism, queer culture, Freudianism, globalism, images of atomic apocalypse, creative self-destruction, and European cabaret.⁴⁷ Ginsberg endeavored to spark a socio-aesthetic movement, working at times like a literary agent for his fellow Beats and maintaining a mobile archive of their manuscripts and letters.⁴⁸ He infused his desire for artistic revolution with political potential, an extension of the postwar notion that change required a new consciousness, that, as UNESCO had declared, “it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” In many ways, Ginsberg adapted the Old Left’s organizing methods, developing social networks and ad hoc institutions, but fitting them into the Cold War context. Beat publications made the bohemian counterpublic nationally visible and were key mechanisms in the construction of a new American public sphere by 1960. But *Howl* was also deeply rooted in the subterranean spaces of Village and North Beach nightspots, demonstrating the relationship between national (even global) issues and local politics.

⁴⁷ See John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2nd edition, 1983), 176-82; Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 54; John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 268-71; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 45-54; Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 69. Sociologist Ned Polsky, whose critical study of Greenwich Village beats between 1957 and 1960 left him no fan of their work, nonetheless made the same point, stating, “*Howl* will remain important in our literary history as the most influential programmatic statement of a beat worldview. I deny merely that it is good poetry.” Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967, 1969), 175. Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian, with their focus on the Spicer circle and its haunts, note North Beach’s influence on Ginsberg. Yet even they set this in terms of poetic style, rather than the urban milieu as a whole. Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 276-7.

⁴⁸ Ginsberg gave fellow New York-San Francisco transplant Gerd Stern the manuscript of Neal Cassady’s autobiography, for example, while Stern was editor for Ace Books. (His late partner, Ann London, was at McGraw-Hill.) Stern promptly misplaced it, leading Ginsberg to refer to him even years later as a “goof.” See Allen Ginsberg to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, June 20, 1958, Box 5, Folder 2, City Lights Books Records, BANC MSS 72/107c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley and Gerd Stern, “From Beat Scene Poet to Psychedelic Multimedia Artist in San Francisco and Beyond, 1948-1948,” an oral history conducted in 1996 by Victoria Morris Byerly, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2001, pp. 11, 57.

The literary connotations of San Francisco's cafes and "existentialist" places like the Tin Angel and Co-Existence Bagel Shop—paralleling the Blue Angel and San Remo in New York—satisfied the Beats' nostalgic bohemian vision. This usable past appeared in their frequent references to Balzac, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Rabelais—intermixed with mentions of Dostoyevsky's "underground" ruminations, Proust's places of memory, Céline's subversive existential prose, and Spengler's apocalyptic, metaphysical philosophy of history. These literary forebears signified forlorn love and intoxication, as well as the symbiosis of travel and experience, that were fundamental to bohemian identity. "Right now I'm damned," wrote the lovesick Rimbaud. "My country appalls me. The best course of action: drink myself comatose and sleep it off on the beach." In a chapter titled "The Place," Proust spoke of "those learned people" whose "fatuous essays on Baudelaire . . . [and] Balzac" revealed their "mediocrity of mind." And he celebrated "those marvelous places, railway stations" as "tragic places also, for in them the miracle is accomplished whereby scenes which hitherto have had no existence save in our minds are about to become the scenes among which we shall be living." Céline, disillusioned by World War I and denouncing the Jazz Age as vacuous, responded in *Journey to the End of Night* that "Proust, who was half a ghost himself . . . became immersed in the Infinite, in the misty futility of the functions and formalities which twine about the people of society." Meanwhile, he found New York to be "an insipid carnival of vertiginous buildings," as he wandered its "monotonous surfeit of streets, bricks, and endless windows, and businesses and more businesses, this chancere of promiscuous advertising. A mass of grimy, senseless lies."⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Arthur Rimbaud, "Bad Blood," in *A Season in Hell* in *Selected Poems and Letters*, Jeremy Harding and John Sturrock, eds. and transl. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 145; Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of*

This literary mix of intoxicated romanticism, wanderlust, and dark social critique also suffused urban sensibilities in the postwar nocturnal underground. It was commonplace for 1950s journalists to refer to “girls with tight black sweaters and enormously weird eye makeup, men with belt-in-the-back caps and downy cheek fuzz” who “sip beer and talk about Bartok and Baudelaire” in the bars of North Beach and the Village. With a similar blend of bookishness and boozy existentialism, Kerouac wrote to Ginsberg in 1954: “But the greatness of Dickens is . . . a vast O what the hell Live It Up-ness . . . like Holmes at old parties raising beerglass. . . . It doesn’t matter, all’s the same. Our Balzacs and Dickens and Holy Dostoyevskys knew that.” Ginsberg’s journal entry in December 1960 was perhaps the ultimate encapsulation of this cultural medley, as he speculated simply, “Baudelaire would have liked Billie Holiday.”⁵⁰

Ginsberg’s bohemian quest led him from Gotham to San Francisco, “a very cultured city the rival of New York for general relaxation and progressive art life” and the place where he would write *Howl*, his expansive indictment of Cold War America. The poem reflected both the solidification of Ginsberg’s gay identity and his abhorrence of capitalism’s dehumanizing tendencies, a call for a “revolution” in global consciousness that charted a liberationist path between American inequality and Soviet totalitarianism. Writing to Kerouac in 1953, Ginsberg invoked “traditional dissenters” like Tom Paine, while insisting he didn’t “favor revolution or conquest of the U.S. by Red-East.” He

Things Past: Volume One: Swann’s Way: Within a Budding Grove, C.K. Moncreiff and Terence Kilmartin, transl. (New York: Random House, 1924, 1981), 694, 763; Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of Night*, transl. John H.P. Marks (New York: New Directions Books, 1934), 70, 203. For a thorough examination of Spengler’s influence on the Beats’ religio-philosophical “New Vision,” see John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

⁵⁰ John O’Connor, “The Beatnik Disease,” *The Vigilante*, Vol. 3 (Summer, 1960), 51 in Periodical Collection, SFPL; Kerouac to Ginsberg, December 22, 1954, Box 11, Folder 21, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia; Allen Ginsberg, *Journals Early Fifties Early Sixties*, Gordon Ball, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 168.

continued: “As for the American Revolution it *was* a revolution wasn’t it? . . . All I am saying is that the U.S. is in the hands of people like the publishers you hate and they are fucking us up in the rest of the world’s Spenglerian schemes. We should be feeding Asia not fighting her at this point. And if we actually do (for some mad reason) fight, it’ll be the end. The Reds are what Burroughs thinks they are—evil—probably. . . .” While he never fully defined this view politically, Ginsberg did occasionally adopt the mantle of “anarchism,” and insisted he wanted to raise the “Lamb of America,” proclaiming that “Big trembling Oklahomans need poetry and nakedness!”⁵¹ Appropriately, he chose The Place as the site of *Howl*’s first public reading. “There were a lot of poets in there,” Leo Krikorian recalled, “they used to read each other’s poetry . . . [because] you want to see what some[one] else thinks of it.” Ginsberg was among the poets who would “come into the Place and talk,” so he “tested it out” on familiar crowds before its official debut at the 6 Gallery on October 7, 1955.⁵²

In both direct and indirect ways, Ginsberg’s legendary 6 Gallery reading grew from his experiences in North Beach. The Place was a central hub of the 6 Gallery group, which artist and gallery owner Wally Hedrick described as “a social place where you could meet anybody, almost, any time of the day.” In conjunction with a local exhibition in 1955, Hedrick asked the budding poet Michael McClure, whom he met through Spicer’s workshops, to organize a poetry reading, which soon included Ginsberg, along

⁵¹ Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, September 5, 1954 in Ginsberg, *Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, 107-8; Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Gregory Corso, and Jack Kerouac to James Weschler, undated, “Dear Jim,” Series I, Box 9, Folder 17 and Lawrence Ferlinghetti to Ginsberg, March 16, 1961, Box 5, Folder 18, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia; Charters, *Kerouac*, 270, 275-7. In his own way, Corso echoed this ideal, stating that idol, Percy Shelly, was “revolutionary but he spilled no blood.” See also Ed D’Angelo, “Anarchism and the Beats,” in Sharin N. Elkholy, *The Philosophy of the Beats* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 227-42.

⁵² Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 177; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 49-50. See also Krikorian Interview, *The Beach*.

with Philip Whalen and the left-leaning Lamantia. Kenneth Rexroth, appropriately, was master of ceremonies.⁵³ But as Ginsberg's journals from the time show, more than the reading's concrete connections were formed in North Beach nightspots. The very sensibility that gave *Howl* the power to stoke controversy was a reflection of the poet's nocturnal wanderings in America's jazzy, queer-bohemian underground.

In 1952, following a letter of introduction from William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg had written to Rexroth, expressing his desire to come to San Francisco and get help reaching his poetic goals. "I have written a lot of stanzaic rymed [*sic*] poems and miss a certain kind of sensuousness of incantatory ryme, though it is almost always abstract," he announced. "But I never developed accentual prowess to the splendor of jazz freedom."⁵⁴ On his arrival in May 1954, Ginsberg shared a room in a cheap Broadway hotel with subterranean poet Al Sublette, where he could "see Vesuvius from his window." Amid a blur of nights on "Bohemian Broadway" with locals like Sublette and Neal Cassady, making what he called the "North Beach Rounds" in Vesuvio, Tommy's, Peggy Tolk-Watkins' Tin Angel, and The Place, Ginsberg began to compose a spate of new poetry. He wrote to his siblings that "I also hit the North Beach bars—their Village—and found more life even than NYC." He met "the same people as NY or their spiritual cousins," in a scene full of "art shows, jazz bands, hipster's parties, cellar

⁵³ Oral history interview with Wally Hedrick, 1974 June 10-24, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 12-18; Michael McClure, "Poetry of the 6," in *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* ed. Anne Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 370-7. Hedrick continued, "So we would go across town to The Place, and they would have their Blabbermouth Nights which were really Dada demonstrations. We didn't know it at the time, but it was just a rerun of Zurich, 1912 - 1914, where people could get up and say anything they want and then everybody'd pound on the tables and drink their beer and just generally raise hell."

⁵⁴ Allen Ginsberg to Kenneth Rexroth, undated (c. October or November 1952), Box 8, Folder 1, Kenneth Rexroth Papers (Collection 175), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

lounges filled with hi fidelity Bach” and “Communist murals in the tower (Coit).”⁵⁵

By this time, Spicer and Duncan had already established The Place as an institution where new arrivals such as Ginsberg and McClure could get a foothold on the scene.⁵⁶ Both Beat poets came to San Francisco seeking artistic opportunity, as well as love interests: McClure pursued his wife-to-be Joanna; Ginsberg—like Kerouac before him—panted after Neal Cassady. McClure found The Place to be the very embodiment of North Beach bohemianism, which now rivaled the Left Bank as a center for the avant-garde. “The first beautiful show of San Francisco art that I saw was in the North Beach bar—The Place,” he later recalled. “I was sitting at a little square-topped table in the smoky and crowded neighborhood artists’ bar . . . [and] I had the sense at that moment that I was in the right place at the right time. It was 1954 and I knew for sure that I wanted to be in cowtown Frisco smelling the dark, salt smell of the Pacific and hearing the Chinese and Italian voices on the streets and not in Paris drinking in the last drops of Existentialism.”⁵⁷ Although its patrons were certainly not immune to existentialism’s nihilistic tendencies (or undercurrents of romantic exoticism), The Place’s mix of dark humor and outspoken social protest was alluring to New York natives such as Ginsberg and Kerouac after their arrivals from transcontinental wanderings or ports abroad.

Ginsberg’s move to the West Coast, in fact, largely followed a trail blazed by Kerouac, the culmination of three year’s worth of goading. In a flurry of letters full of references to San Francisco’s art scene and hallucinogenic “mystery,” its radical literary and political past of “Saroyan hero[es]” and the ILWU’s “tough white seamen /

⁵⁵ Ginsberg to Kerouac, September 5, 1954 and Ginsberg to Edith Ginsberg and Eugene Brooks, July 10, 1954 in *Ginsberg Letters*, 101, 95; Allen Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties, 1954-1958*, Gordon Ball, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 58-9, 116-17, 193-4; Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 182-4;

⁵⁶ Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 55-6, 59, 80, 99-103.

⁵⁷ McClure, “Poetry of the 6,” in Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 370.

Scrapping snow white hats / In favor of iron clubs / To wave in inky newsreels,” captain Jack exhorted Ginsberg to join the merchant marine and make San Francisco his “home port” alongside himself and Cassady. “You must shuttle between New York and Frisco the rest of your life,” he wrote in 1951, “just wait and see; the cats are all here, the artists are all here, LaMantia is very polite and is coming over soon to show us how to eat peotl.” In May 1954, Kerouac once again wrote to Ginsberg, who had stopped in Mexico to visit William Burroughs and a radical artist colony, exhorting him to connect with North Beach’s subterraneans: “NOW LISTEN ALLEN, do not FAIL to look up, if possible, Al Subleete, at the Bell Hotel at 39 Columbus St.” Placing Sublette alongside Rexroth and Lamantia, Kerouac insisted he was “maybe the first hep Negro writer in America,” a “wordslingin fool” whose “vision” made him “a real POET in the sense in which it was known in Elizabeth’s time,” but whose drug-inspired spirituality was undercut by his penchant for “all the countless anxious intoxications of the jazz age and the machine.”⁵⁸

Kerouac decamped for New York just before Ginsberg’s arrival, but he continued to recommend avenues of experience within the bohemian psychogeography. Couching North Beach sites in familiar Village terms, he wrote in August that the “queers of Remo as you know are in the Black Cat there, on Kolumbus at Montgomery.” Through the summer and fall, Kerouac related sometimes misogynistic accounts of his frequently interracial sexual exploits and his nocturnal escapades in the San Remo, West End Bar, and Bleecker Street Tavern with “Subterraneans” such as Alan Ansen, Helen Parker, Gregory Corso, Gore Vidal, Paul Goodman, Judith Malina, Anatole Broyard, and Alene Lee—who waited tables at the bohemian Riker’s cafe. “I’ve been getting sillydrunk again

⁵⁸ Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, undated (c. March 1954), Box 11, Folder 20, undated, “Don’t sail with the NMU,” (1951), Folder 18, and undated, “Dear Allen” (c. May, 1954), March 30, 1954, July 30, 1954, Folder 21, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia.

lately in Remo and disgusting myself,” Kerouac wrote, even as he enthused about talking with jazz pianist Cecil Taylor at a “great new bar . . . the Montmartre.” Kerouac poured his late-night musings into his prose, insisting that “it would be a shame to waste all that experience.” His missives also detailed the mystical and aesthetic insights of subterranean bar talk—with Buddhist notions that “there is no time or space,” that “the mind imagines all things which are but visions” and “all life is suffering”—alongside discussions of Dylan Thomas and Dave Brubeck. While Ginsberg’s Marxism was an occasional source of friction, Kerouac looked forward to his friend’s brief return to New York to attend a wedding and arranged to meet and talk over his new worldview: “The profound ignorance of the modern world is Horrible. —‘The Horror’—is why I’ll have to take refuge in The Apocalypse of the Fellaheen, which I’ll explain to you come Dec. 15th when we meet at 8 P.M. in the Remo.”⁵⁹

HOWLING ON THE STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO

On the West Coast, Rebel Cafe venues provided Ginsberg an equally fertile milieu of culture and social connections. By November, he had become familiar with both the “Frisco Negro jazz” of Bop City and the cafes of North Beach. Collapsing the bar circuit into a single compound proper noun, a quasi-Joycean invocation of the bohemian scene, Ginsberg wrote in his journal about a friend’s “Jewish sentimental love verse of Broadway and the Black Cat Place Vesuvio’s Mikes 12 Adler.” His journal entries and poetry in this period reflect the signal role nightspots played in the formulation of his signature oppositional statement. Working as a marketing researcher by day, Ginsberg chafed under the regiments of business. “Anger at boss,” he wrote in

⁵⁹ Kerouac to Ginsberg, August 23, 1954, October 26, 1954, and December 7, 1954, Box 11, Folder 21, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia. See also Bill Morgan, *The Typewriter is Holy: The Complete, Uncensored History of the Beat Generation* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 52.

February 1955, soon after a “Célinish” row with Cassady. “Market Research Job. Depression. Speculation. Desolate loves. . . . I am a madman angry at self—2 selfs. . . . Alone in San Fran—enough. . . . God damn the false optimists of my generation.” Nightspots such as The Place, he found, were a remedy for the alienation of modern life, as well as lovesickness. Ginsberg took on a series of new lovers, including Sheila Williams, a jazz singer from the Brubeck crowd, and John Allen Ryan.⁶⁰

An evocative snapshot of this period was a poem Ginsberg recorded in his journal called, “In Vesuvio’s Waiting for Sheila”: “Here at last a moment in foreign Frisco / Where I am thoroughly beautiful / Dark suit—dark eyes no glasses, money in my wallet—Checkbook abreast—Toward an evening of fucking and jazz / . . . conversation of amateur concepts on my right with dark delight / anticipating leaning on the bar.” Vesuvio (along with Miss Smith’s Tea Room) had recently come under surveillance by the Alcohol Beverage Control Board for suspected “violations of the narcotics laws,” which may have added to Ginsberg’s anticipation. In October, he had recorded his impressions from a peyote trip with Williams and Cassady, replete with a vision of the fog-bound Sir Francis Drake Hotel as “the Death Head—The building an evil monster,” which soon became the basis for the “Moloch” section of *Howl*.⁶¹ Ryan, who in the summer of 1955 put Ginsberg up in his house on Bay Street, later insisted that the poet’s new style was lifted straight from his own, asserting that “one night at Gino and Carlo’s . . . there was a reading by Ginsberg, and I suddenly realized that I was listening to my own poetry.” Just before the 6 Gallery reading, Ginsberg himself acknowledged as

⁶⁰ Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties*, 64-5, 115-17; Morgan, *Beat Generation in San Francisco*, 142-3, 25-6; Ginsberg to Kerouac, September 5, 1954 in *Ginsberg Letters*, 101.

⁶¹ Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties*, 5-7, 60-1; George H. White to Russell S. Munro, August 31, 1955, Alcohol Beverage Control Board Appeals Case Files, Series 5, Subject Files 1938-1970, F3718:291.

much, comparing *Howl* to Ryan's "SF recollections in tranquility."⁶²

Another San Francisco bohemian area was Polk Gulch, south of the Beach. At its heart was Foster's Cafeteria, a late-night hangout for subterraneans like Lamantia and the site of a serendipitous meeting that set a significant series of events in motion. At Foster's Ginsberg met the painter Robert LaVigne, who introduced the poet both to his current exhibition at The Place and to Peter Orlovsky, who became Ginsberg's life partner. Taking a North Beach apartment with Orlovsky at 1010 Montgomery Street, Ginsberg continued to write furiously, inspired by love and art. He described LaVigne's paintings as a point of rupture in an otherwise bounded existence ("First! The Flower Inside, burst out"), all the while placing his nightlife experiences in literary terms. "Balzacian appearance going out with Sheila baldly appearing at The Place to back up her prestige in the desert colony of North Beach," he wrote. Another night he arrived home with "Tin Angel trumpets splashing in my eyes," followed by dreams of a poetry reading in a bar with "smoke, people, booths (Vesuvio cafe-like)." At The Place, Ginsberg also met Robert Duncan, whose disrobing performance in the play *Faust Foutu* at the 6 Gallery deeply influenced him to take seriously the "principle of nakedness."⁶³

Passages about The Place stand in stark contrast to the tenor of dissatisfaction with American life expressed in Ginsberg's poetry. In "Conversation 3rd Street to the Place," he rhapsodized about the street talk he shared during Kerouac's recent return to San Francisco, proclaiming in anarchistic, anti-militaristic, libertine verse: "O Sherman Tanks of Mexico / Your troubled sages shifting together / on uneasy feet / . . . I'm too

⁶² Lind, *Leo's Place*, 50; John Allen Ryan to Jack Spicer, undated "Dear Sikes" (c. September-October, 1955), Box 3, Folder 27, Spicer Papers, Berkeley.

⁶³ Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties*, 80-89, 105, 115-18, 125, 146-7, 179; Morgan *I Celebrate Myself*, 197. A previous tenant of the Montgomery apartment had been the activist poet ruth weiss. *Faust Foutu*, translated as "Faust Fucked," also starred Jack Spicer and Michael McClure. See McClure, "Poetry of the 6," 371-2.

young to die. / Ma Rainey kissing together under the bar. . . Goodnight Mrs. Dedalus . . .
 I've never seen such imaginary beauty / riding out of eyes—Allen / He was made out of
 blue license plates and white wine.—Jack.”⁶⁴ Amid the themes that saturated Beat
 writing—from allusions to James Joyce to African-American blues and their connotations
 of free sexuality—these lines clearly presaged the sense of release that flowed from *Howl*
 in the following months. But equally present is the culture of North Beach, oozing out
 between the cracks like the first tentative rays of predawn glow, too dark to distinguish
 but sensed nonetheless.

The 6 Gallery reading was this moment's culmination. Kerouac was too shy to
 read that night; instead, he acted as a sort of subterranean zealot, described in one report
 as “a kind of Greek chorus,” encouraging the audience and channeling jazz-club energy
 with wine-fueled shouts of “Go!” Playwright Jack Goodwin was keenly aware of the
 performative-communal significance of Ginsberg's reading, which he captured the next
 day in a letter to John Allen Ryan:

He shouted at the top of his voice for upwards of half an hour, and he had the common
 touch and the audience was with him all the way, he actually whipped them up into
 hysteria . . . aching for some kind of release. This Carrowac [*sic*] person sat on the
 floor . . . slugging a gallon of Burgundy, passing me the bottle now and then, and
 repeating lines after Ginsberg, and singing snatches of scat in between the lines; he kept a
 kind of chanted, revival-meeting rhythm going. Ginsberg's main number was a long
 descriptive roster of out-group pessimistic Dionysian young bohemians and their peculiar
 and horrible feats, leading up to a thrilling jeremiad at the end . . . There was a lot of sex
 and language of the cocksuckingmotherfucker variety in it; the people gasped and
 laughed and swayed, they were psychologically had, it was an orgiastic occasion.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties*, 193-4.

⁶⁵ Lind, *Leo's Place*, 53-5; Ryan to Spicer, August 11, 1955 and January 15, 1956, Box 3, Folder 27, Spicer Papers, Berkeley; John Allen Ryan Interview with Lewis Ellingham, August 11, 1982, San Francisco, Box 4, Folder 1, pp. 12 and 109, Ellingham Papers, UCSD. See also Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 163, 486 n. 26. Ryan was Goodwin's collaborator on his satirical opera, *The Pizza Pusher*, which starred Guy Wernham, bartender from Vesuvio and the Anxious Asp, and the artist Sargent Johnson. It was presented at the hungry i.

In this moment of “out-group” unity, *Howl* captured the bicoastal bohemian sensibility with its now-famous lines:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
 hysterical naked,
 dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry / fix,
 angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the
 starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
 who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the
 supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of
 cities contemplating jazz . . .
 Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunken-
 ness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon . . .
 who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze
 of Capitalism
 who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and
 undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down . . .
 who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof
 waving genitals and manuscripts,
 who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and / screamed with joy,
 who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of
 Atlantic and Caribbean love, . . .
 who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset . . .
 who wept at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of onions and bad
 music, . . .
 who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue . . .
 who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, . . .
 leaped on negroes, cried all over the
 street, danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph
 records of nostalgic European 1930s German jazz . . .
 who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism . . .
 who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed . . .
 What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up
 their brains and imagination? . . .
 Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jail-
 house and Congress of sorrows! . . .
 Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity
 and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch
 whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the / Mind! . . .
 Holy the groaning saxophone! Holy the bop apocalypse! Holy the jazzbands
 marijuana hipsters peace peyote pipes & drums!
 Holy the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements! Holy the cafeterias filled
 with the millions! . . .
 Holy New York Holy San Francisco Holy Peoria & Seattle Holy Paris Holy
 Tangiers Holy Moscow Holy Istanbul! . . .
 Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Allen Ginsberg to Kenneth Rexroth, undated (1952), Rexroth Papers, UCLA; Allen Ginsberg, *Howl* and “Footnote to *Howl*,” in *Collected Poems, 1947-1997* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 134-42.

An obvious descendent of the Cultural Front and the jazz-folk tradition, *Howl* was no simple retread of the past. As an expression of sentiment and guilt, an individualistic lament for lost days and lost loves, it did not fit neatly in either the Left or jazz idiom. Its shortcomings were characteristic of its time; to expect otherwise would be to assign a mystical-transcendental power to art that unmoors it from history. Ginsberg's casual racism and misogyny are clear enough to twenty-first century eyes. But in its time, it was a brave and liberatory proclamation of resistance and solidarity ("ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe"), and it resonated with untold thousands—men and women, Black and white, gay and straight.⁶⁷ Moreover, it was rooted firmly in *place*, in the bohemia of "Holy New York Holy San Francisco," even as it expansively encompassed the national and transnational—"Holy Peoria & Seattle Holy Paris Holy Tangiers Holy Moscow Holy Istanbul!" Biographically, *Howl*'s imagery was almost entirely drawn from his New York experiences, conjuring the tragicomic antics of Village subterraneans like Bill Cannastra and Lucien Carr.⁶⁸ But Ginsberg had to establish the *sense* of place he found in North Beach in order to look back, eastward and through time, to capture these impressions, and then transcend them.

"RE-MEMBERING MOTHER": COMMUNITY, PUBLICITY, AND THE NEW SALOON

Jack Goodwin's assessment of *Howl* as a jeremiad was insightful: Ginsberg's declaration of New York, San Francisco, Tangiers, Moscow, and Istanbul as "Holy" was more than mere praise. It was a modern prophet's proclamation, backed not by the power

⁶⁷ The poem's influence is both measured and sustained in current popular culture, from a casual reference to a yearly celebration of *Howl*'s 6 Gallery reading by a character in the television show *Six Feet Under*, to the recent eponymous film starring James Franco. On Ginsberg's feeling of "guilt" for acting callously toward Sheila Williams, for example, see Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 202. Williams went on to a tragic life of drug addiction and an early death while homeless.

⁶⁸ Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 128, 231.

of the Talmud's wrathful god, but the power of print. His prophecy was self-fulfilled by publicity. The poem marked a flash point, the moment when a disparate and divided bohemia became a recognizable community—soon to be an American social *bête noir* under the Beat Generation banner. When *Howl* was published in late 1956, along with a publicity blitz in New York supporting Ginsberg's ambition to "build the big united front" of Beat literature, this moment enveloped Greenwich Village as well as North Beach. Village poets like LeRoi Jones and Diane di Prima, who soon partnered to put out *Yugen* and *Floating Bear*, wrote to Ginsberg, praising his "honesty" and seeking connection. "I was moved by this poem so much because it talked about a world I could identify with and relate to," recalled Jones. "It was a breakthrough for me." Jones sent a letter to Ginsberg, by then in Paris, mixing sincerity with satire by writing on toilet paper, asking "was he for real." Ginsberg replied, also on toilet paper, saying that "he was sincere but that he was tired of being Allen Ginsberg." It was at this point that Jones "decided to publish a magazine."⁶⁹

This scenario illustrates the role print culture played in the establishment of the bohemian counterpublic and community, as Paul Goodman captured in a 1951 essay, "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950." An influential text for poets like Jack Spicer and New York's Frank O'Hara, "Advance-Guard Writing" described the relationship between print culture and "Occasional Poetry" which is integrated into everyday life, even as its avant-garde ambitions challenge previous norms.⁷⁰ Goodman asserted that the "essential present-day advance-guard is the physical reestablishment of community."

⁶⁹ Charters, *Kerouac*, 279, 401; Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984), 219-20.

⁷⁰ Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 35, 390 n. 82. Spicer admired the essay, despite his disagreements with Goodman when the latter had visited Berkeley and the Libertarian Circle in the 1940s.

This is to solve the crisis of alienation in the simple way: the persons are estranged from themselves, from one another, and from their artist; he takes the initiative precisely by putting his arms around them and drawing them together. In literary terms this means: to write for them about them personally. . . . But such personal writing about the audience itself can occur only in a small community of acquaintances, where everybody knows everybody and understands what is at stake; in our estranged society, it is objected, just such intimate community is lacking. Of course it is lacking! The point is that the advance-guard action helps create such community, starting with the artist's primary friends. . . . As soon as the intimate community does exist . . . the advance-guard at once becomes a genre of the highest integrated art, namely Occasional Poetry-the poetry celebrating weddings, festivals . . . and it poses the enormous problem of being plausible to the actuality and yet creatively imagining something, finding something unlooked-for.

Stressing literature's fundamental role in *communitas*, Goodman concluded: "An aim, one might almost say the chief aim, of integrated art is to heighten the everyday; to bathe the world in such a light of imagination and criticism that the persons who are living in it without meaning or feeling suddenly find that it is meaningful and exciting to live in it. . . . The community comes to exist by having its culture; the artist makes this culture."⁷¹

From 1956 through 1958, *Howl* and Kerouac's *On the Road* became models on which a younger generation of aspiring nonconformists based their ideologies and aesthetics, giving impetus to the late-1950s North Beach scene at the Cellar, Co-Existence Bagel Shop, and Coffee Gallery, and intensifying the Village scene at the White Horse, San Remo, and Cedar Tavern. As Ginsberg later recalled, this was exactly the

⁷¹ Paul Goodman, "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," *The Kenyon Review* 13, no. 3 (Summer, 1951): 357-380. Goodman's essay, while suffering from clumsy prose and muddled organization, was prescient in its description of literary controversy, which applied stunningly to *Howl* just four years later: "The audience reacted to the naturalistic offense with the specific sanction of censorship, on moral and political grounds. Yet this was obviously not a police-measure of defense, to protect the children, but a reaction of outraged sensibility; there had to be spectacular trials, to reaffirm the faith of the audience in itself. . . . Thus, to understand the golden age of advance-guard, we must bear in mind the contrary facets [such as] the profound dismay of the breakdown of 'civilization,' and the inner disbelief in the previous programs of institutional change. . . . For advance-guard always rouses anxiety. . . . [T]o 'pierce the character-armor,' like the Revolution of the Word, was to release the pent-up drives. . . . Conscious of estrangement, serious writers, in their self-portraits and choice of protagonists, have more and more been describing marginal personalities-criminals, perverts, drunkards, underground people-or persons in extreme situations that make them 'existent' rather than universal. . . . The audience must respond to it by trying to annihilate the outcry, as if it had not been heard, or to prevent others from hearing it."

kind of mutually supportive society that the 6 Gallery reading envisioned: “It was an *ideal* evening, and I felt so proud and pleased and happy with the sense of—the sense of ‘at last community’.”⁷² Equally important, Beat writing was the final link in a chain of people and places that fastened the Rebel Cafe’s bicoastal bohemia. In turn, the Rebel Cafe’s counterpublic sphere expanded and became absorbed into the national culture, as its print culture spawned fascination with an alternative underside of American and its nightspots connected curious tourists with the subterraneans.

Beat notoriety, however, began with a decidedly local conflict: the prosecution of City Lights Books for publishing and selling *Howl*. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, impressed by the 6 Gallery reading, published the poem in paperback, selling it in his store initially without incident. But Ferlinghetti used a British printer and was therefore subject to confiscation and obscenity charges by customs officials, who held the book’s second edition of 500 copies in March 1957. The California District Attorney declined to press charges, but the attendant publicity piqued the interest of San Francisco police, who arrested City Lights manager Shig Murao in June and filed obscenity charges against Ferlinghetti. Interestingly, it was the police juvenile division which led the charge under the assertion that “the books were not fit for children to read.” The subsequent trial in September and October was a cause célèbre, with a fierce defense by the ACLU’s Al Bendich, who called Kenneth Rexroth, English professor Mark Schorer, and other literary notables as expert witnesses. Taking this testimony and the poem itself seriously, Judge Clayton Horn ruled in favor of the defense, declaring that *Howl* “cannot be held ‘obscene.’”⁷³

⁷² D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 177.

⁷³ Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 242; Edward de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity*

The significance of the *Howl* verdict went beyond merely allowing Murao and Ferlinghetti to avoid fines or prison time. The trial shifted the function of the poem from one of community cohesion to a *public* statement of opposition. “I never thought I’d want to read *Howl* again but it would be a pleasure under these circumstances,” Ginsberg wrote to Ferlinghetti as the trial was pending. He continued, stripping away the poem’s multiple layers of meaning and revealing how action by the state changed its function in the public sphere, infusing it with political potency: “It might give it a reality as ‘social protest’ I always feared was lacking without armed bands of outraged gestapo. Real solid prophetic lines about being dragged off the stage waving genitals and mss. . . . I wonder by the way if the communist propaganda in America will further confuse the issue, the police, the judge & even ACLU. I really had some such situation as this in mind when I put them in, sort of deliberately saying I am a communist to see what would happen . . . burning bridges (not Harry) you might say.” Ultimately, Judge Horn’s decision relied on the same logic, stating, “*Howl* presents a picture of a nightmare world . . . [and] is an indictment of those elements in modern society destructive of the best qualities of human nature.” He concluded, addressing the operation of language itself within social conflict and hinting that authenticity was also a factor: “Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemisms? An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words.”⁷⁴

The *Howl* incident therefore illustrates the problem with Goodman’s notion of

and the Assault on Genius (New York: Random House, 1992), 333-7.

⁷⁴Allen Ginsberg to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, June 10, 1957, Box 5, Folder 1, City Lights Books Records, BANC MSS 72/107c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere*, 337-8. Ginsberg’s pun refers, of course, to the radical 1930s communist ILWU leader Harry Bridges.

communitas, which inherently demanded that a community be *exclusive* in order to remain voluntary. The poem's protest, for example, spoke little to the broader San Francisco community, as represented by the police, which was at best ambivalent about North Beach bohemians. Further, Goodman's notion of community failed to address the conflicts *between* various groups, when a broader collection of fractious communities recognize themselves as a "public."⁷⁵ The *Howl* trial, and the release of *On the Road* in September 1957, thus worked at two separate but intertwined levels: to solidify the North Beach-Village bohemia; and to interpellate a national public that had varying levels of interest in, or *opposition to*, this community.

The trial was followed quickly by Gilbert Millstein's *New York Times* review of *On the Road*, which further expanded Beat publicity. Sales of Kerouac's novel unsurprisingly dwarfed *Howl* (prose generally being more popular than poetry) as careful editing of offensive language and explicit sexual content allowed Viking Press to distribute the book widely. Yet the City Lights edition of *Howl and Other Poems* sold 50,000 copies by 1960, mostly at poetry readings and counterparts to Ferlinghetti's store such as 8th St. Books in the Village. It became transnational with reprints in Europe and was further disseminated by Grove Press's *Evergreen Review* magazine, which printed the poem and established its publisher, Barney Rosset, as a free-speech lightning rod in the process. One of Ginsberg's readings was released as a record album by the Weiss brothers' Fantasy Records and slick national magazines such as *Look* and *Life* ran stories on the Beat movement in North Beach—the obscenity trial and *On the Road*'s San

⁷⁵ For an excellent critical account of how the idea of *communitas* developed in the 1960s, see Brick, *Age of Contradiction*, 98-123.

Francisco settings leaving the impression that this was mostly a west-coast phenomenon.⁷⁶

Life's coverage in November 1959 exemplified public disapproval. Paul O'Neil's sneering, condescending article (complete with a staged photo of a "well-equipped pad" featuring bongos, bebop records, beer cans, and "Beat baby, who has gone to sleep on floor after playing with beer cans") careened from backhanded praise of Ginsberg and Burroughs to the valid criticism that the movement's "unplanned and unorganized" rebellion against materialism lacked the political force of Tom Paine or the Wobblies. While the piece was hobbled by myopic views on race and outright misinformation (stating, incorrectly, that a sociological study found 80% of beatniks to be mentally ill), *Life* acknowledged the widespread appeal of the bohemian critique. *Life* recognized that the Beats' "nonpolitical radicalism" rested on the fact that "their verse is written to be read aloud before audiences," while "Talk—endless talk—forms the warp and woof of Beat existence." Noting that the movement had spread to unexpected locales like Dallas and Atlanta—even as far as "Paris, Athens, Manchester and Prague"—O'Neil concluded that it was, in the "Age of Supermarkets" and "Togetherness," the "only rebellion around."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Lawrence Ferlinghetti to Allen Ginsberg, April 13, 1960, Box 5, Folder 17, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia; Morgan *I Celebrate Myself*, 304; de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere*, 338-9.

⁷⁷ Paul O'Neil, "The Only Rebellion Around: But the Beats Bungle the Job in Arguing, Sulking and Bad Poetry," *Life*, November 30, 1959, pp. 114-130. See also "The San Francisco Bohemians," *Look*, August 19, 1958 and Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 41, 69, 86, 93, 102, 107, 112. Rigney and Smith were reluctant to openly declare a given percentage of bohemians "mentally ill," so their figures are up for interpretation. By one calculation, 60% fit into broad categories suggesting inability to fully function in society. However, their own case studies undercut this view, with several individuals included in this number, particularly women, proving simply to be nonconformists, not clinically ill. More telling numbers were that 22% were deemed the "most emotionally upset," with 14% having ever been hospitalized for mental illness. Another 10% were in therapy, making 32% the highest possible number of documented cases—although only a few of those displayed behavior that could be deemed socially dysfunctional. The numbers in Polsky's study of the Village were even more obscure, making an accurate comparison impossible. He did report that "most beats are decidedly neurotic," but that "their intelligence and native

Both the nature and effectiveness of this rebellion was at the heart of debates about sociopolitical change in the 1950s. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), theorist Herbert Marcuse compared bohemia's social role to a museum, preserving the notion that beauty "links Nature and Freedom, Pleasure and Morality"—a challenge to the United States' technocratic society and military-industrial corporate state. Arguing that "the aesthetic dimension occupies the central position between sensuousness and morality—the two poles of the human existence," Marcuse sought to "eliminate the distortion of the aesthetic attitude" by releasing it from the "unreal atmosphere" of bohemia, to infuse Beauty into everyday life. This move, he suggested in both Marxist and Freudian terms, could meliorate the ills of modernity—exploitation, alienation, and the negative effects of sublimation of sexual instincts—freeing the social "Eros" by establishing new institutions that recognized sexuality and aesthetics as everyday realities. Paralleling the libertarian-anarchism that was central for Rebel Cafe radicals, Marcuse asserted that in a "truly free civilization, all laws are self-given by individuals" and that "the will of the whole" fulfills itself only "through the nature of the individual."⁷⁸

If Marcuse overestimated the liberating potential of aesthetics, he also underestimated the ability of bohemia to play a sociopolitical role. Acting on their own desires to make beauty, play, and liberated sexuality part of daily life, North Beach and Village bohemians created a model of possibility for the broader society. What *Life's* reporter could not have foreseen—understandably puzzled as he was by bohemian rejection of hard-won postwar affluence—was how deeply the ethos he tried to dismiss

talents are likely to be superior when not average, and their neuroses usually do not incapacitate them." Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*, 154.

⁷⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, 1966), 176-9.

resonated with American youth. By the thousands, men and women in their late-teens and early-twenties headed for North Beach or Greenwich Village to join the movement—including a teenage Tom Hayden, who two years later helped write one of the founding documents of the New Left, the Students for a Democratic Society’s “Port Huron Statement.” After reading *On the Road*, Hayden had headed to North Beach and soon someone in Berkeley put a “political leaflet” in his hand, sending him on a path toward radical protest and political leadership.⁷⁹ Few Beat converts achieved such notoriety, but many were nonetheless transformed by their subterranean experiences in ways large and small.

Bohemian nightspots were central to changing notions about community, as a new kind of voluntary association blurred the lines of social class and complicated notions of “the public.” For bohemians, psychic considerations trumped economic ones and the boundaries between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of commerce and politics faded almost beyond distinction. As one psychosocial assessment from a 1959 study of North Beach concluded, its milieu acted as a “therapeutic community,” intertwining the global rise of psychoanalysis with a tradition of nonconformity going back to the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ As literary scholar Anne Dewey has argued, Robert Duncan articulated this concept in a series of essays and poems, which proposed art as a communal “kingdom rather than individual creation,” in which “ideal community locates agency in a power and authority independent of the individual and the historical family.”

⁷⁹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 54.

⁸⁰ Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 176-83, 181; Royce Brier, “Beatnik Problem Just Like Ours?” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 6, 1959, p. 34. Connecting his concern that the beatnik style of Freudian analysis was leading to solipsism to a report by a Sudanese psychiatrist, Brier betrayed his assumptions about U.S. imperial dominance. “What is disturbing is that we are now exporting our introspection from the Western world,” he wrote, “and no telling what will happen when all the Africans and Asiatics start pursuing self-knowledge.”

The poet, Duncan wrote, replaced biological parents with “the Mother of those who have destroyed their mothers [and] . . . created their own mothers” and the “Father of roots and races, / Father of All, / Father who is king of the dream palace.” Poetry, he argued, was “re-membering the Mother,” an act that reclaimed the individual from the “mass democratic State” through “the community of a mystery within the larger society.”⁸¹

Duncan, who more readily accepted the Beats than Jack Spicer, proposed that the structure of bohemia rested on two strata: urban “cafe life,” and the “bohemian household,” with its “immediacy to all the arts” and a “constant flow” through a “network of people, this constant interchange.”⁸² Again, *The Place* best illustrated this dynamic, even eroding the distinction between the two halves. Krikorian considered customers to be “like family,” and on Thanksgiving in 1958 even offered a free dinner. “Sure we had our squabbles,” said John Allen Ryan, “but it was one big family. It was artistic, intellectual – and boozy. The bars in the Beach were people’s living rooms.”⁸³

Greenwich Village bohemians were less effusive in their descriptions, yet a similar familial ethos of mutual aid existed there in the 1950s and bohemian cafe life was rooted in the local urban fabric. As Village Gate owner Art D’Lugoff recalled, “I used to make the rounds of the bars—Julius’s for those fat hamburgers on toast, the San Remo, the Kettle of Fish, and the White Horse.” Judith Malina, who spent nearly every night in the San Remo as she and her husband, Julian Beck, struggled to establish the Living Theatre, relied heavily on credit extended by bar manager John Santini. “If we lost our

⁸¹ Anne Dewey, “Public Authority and the Public Sphere of Politics,” in Gelpi and Berholf, *The Poetry of Politics*, 112.

⁸² Robert Duncan, “Conversations with Robert Duncan during the month of December 1978 relating to Poetry in the Bay Region,” interviewed by Eloyde Tovey, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, pp. 149, 159, quoted in Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 169.

⁸³ Lind, “Paris, North Beach,” 35; Russell FitzGerald Diary, November 27, 1958, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 17-18.

credit at the Remo,” she confided to her diary in 1952, “what would become of us?” Malina further confessed, after meeting left-activist Michael Harrington at the White Horse, that the tavern’s intense political discussion left her longing for her San Remo “family.” For regulars, echoed Ronald Sukenick, “the Remo was really like the living room hearth” but with “a lot of heavy drinking going on.” These sentiments and social networks also reached far beyond the borders of the Beach or the Village, or even the nation. “We were like an extended family,” recalled the Beach’s Eileen Kaufman, “from coast to coast and all thru Europe and certain grapevine isles and countries throughout the world.”⁸⁴

Beat Generation publicity expanded bohemia’s role, even as it threatened its integrity. Leo Krikorian recalled that The Place was often a landing pad for new arrivals in North Beach. “When they published *On the Road*, that started guys to try hitchhiking, you know. They’d come in with their suitcases and they’d check them in until they found a place to stay. First stop in San Francisco was the bar,” he said, chuckling. Hinting at the joint’s community function, he concluded, “A lot of them didn’t have any money—but then I didn’t buy the Place to become rich. I opened the bar to socialize.”⁸⁵ Just weeks after the *Times* review of *On the Road*, Joyce Johnson wrote to Ginsberg that New York was seeing a similar influx in the wake of the Beat brouhaha. “Allen, three months ago there was a wild rumor that you had returned and were living secretly in New Jersey,” she wrote. “HOWL is being sold in the drugstores now and the West End is full of young,

⁸⁴ Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1992), 130-1; Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 218, 222-3, 226, 299; Sukenick, *Down and In*, 19; Brenda Knight, *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1996), 103.

⁸⁵ Krikorian Interview, *The Beach*; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 13.

would-be hipsters who laugh and say ‘Well, I’m on the road,’ or ‘Think I’ll go to Frisco today’⁸⁶

Kerouac had previously written to the infamous poet of the same phenomenon in North Beach, reporting that there were “big rumors around town here that you were seen several times on the street and in The Place, as tho you were Hitler.”⁸⁷ Kerouac continued excitedly, revealing the bar as a community institution whose social dynamic was now bedeviled by publicity. He described the City Lights arrests—denouncing the local “dumb fat Irish cops” as leading America into becoming “like Germany, a police state”—and crowing about himself and fellow poets Philip Whalen, Gregory Corso, and Gary Snyder being published. But with equal enthusiasm, he declared that he first read his poems “to Ronny Loweinson [*sic*] in Place,” invoking the *Spicerkreis* headquarters to establish his bohemian bona fides. On a different level of celebrity, John Allen Ryan sardonically (and scatologically) wrote to the rambling Jack Spicer, “You are famous and Legendary here, and are referred to often in the can at the Place.”⁸⁸ Even *Life* recognized this dynamic. Proclaiming North Beach the “capital of Beatdom,” next to a photo of the Coffee Gallery, *Life* unconsciously echoed C. Wright Mills’ notion of power-elite nightspots, calling “The Co-Existence Bagel Shop and The Place” its “Stork Club and ‘21’.”⁸⁹

North Beach bars were more than the subjects of *Life*’s articles, they were the points of access into a community that was wary of “squares”—and was also happy to

⁸⁶ Joyce Johnson to Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, Series I, Box 1, Folder 12, October 28, 1957, Peter Orlovsky Papers, MS#0954, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁸⁷ Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, undated, “Dear Allen and Peter” (c. June 1956), Box 12, Folder 2, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*; John Allen Ryan to Jack Spicer, undated “Friday” (1956), Box 3, Folder 27, Spicer Papers, Berkeley.

⁸⁹ O’Neil, “The Only Rebellion Around.”

put on hapless journalists. In 1959, Joanne Kyger wrote to Gary Snyder about a recent interview with a *New York Post* reporter: “He used the entire conversation which Mike McClure and Bob Levigne [*sic*] had at the Place after you had left us that day and after we had turned on at my house. It is Putrid. He doesn’t use names but the characters are obvious. He calls me a Faggot’s Moll.”⁹⁰ When the *San Francisco News* sent reporter George Murphy to The Place, Spicer, George Stanley, and poet Ebbe Borregaard were less than cooperative, resulting in a portrayal that was typically condescending (if also tongue-in-cheek):

MURPHY: Tell me about Bohemia. . . .
 BORREGAARD: This conversation stinks. . . .
 MURPHY: How about some more ale. It’s on the expense account.
 STANLEY, SPICER, BORREGAARD: Okay.
 MURPHY: Okay. (orders). Now, what’s a Bohemian?
 SPICER: A man who thinks what he’s doing creatively is the only thing in his life.
 BORREGAARD: It stinks, but it’s right.
 MURPHY: Is a Bohemian somebody who doesn’t conform?
 SPICER: No. If you didn’t conform, you wouldn’t be a Bohemian.
 STANLEY: Sure, look at you. You’re wearing a necktie—the only one here. You don’t conform.
 You’re not a Bohemian.
 MURPHY: Are you proud of being a Bohemian?
 BORREGAARD: It stinks.⁹¹

This kind of press coverage exposed North Beach in multiple ways. It revealed its insular community to the public, leaving its reluctant denizens feeling uncomfortably uncovered, fearful of ridicule or persecution. But such reports also exposed the myth of beatnik nihilism, revealing bohemia’s own norms and expectations as *alternatives* to mainstream norms—anarchism in a sociopolitical sense, not the brute anarchy of lawlessness imagined by shrill critics.

The local press was usually more sympathetic. One North Beach intimate

⁹⁰ Joanne Kyger to Gary Snyder, March 23, 1959, Box 7, Folder 14, Kyger Papers, UCSD.

⁹¹ George Murphy, “What’s a Phony—and What’s True?” *San Francisco Examiner*, September 26, 1957, p. 6, clipping in Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

compared the Beats to the Okies in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, suggesting, "They were hated because they were guilty of the most unforgivable sin of all. They were un-economic." He then noted mainstream patrons' paradoxical attraction to bohemian nightspots:

How can a barren, dimly lighted bar with battered furniture and nothing to offer except beer and wine compete with the plush uptown clubs . . . and win? . . . Men toot horns, read poetry, give you interesting conversation, and it's all for free. . . . You have nothing they could possibly want. It is sort of humiliating, isn't it?"

Unsurprisingly, given the Rebel Cafe's literary bent, press accounts sometimes came from within the scene. Mark Green, who wrote variously for the *Village Voice* and the *Denver Post*, was a bartender at the Co-Existence Bagel Shop until it closed in October 1960. He covered North Beach in a local paper and characterized its nightspots in positive terms, depicting the Anxious Asp's "atmosphere," the Coffee Gallery's "ad-libbing" actors and jazz, Vesuvio's "intellectual longshoremen, Beat poets and psychiatrists," and Katie's on Green Street as "the last place in town with 15 cent beer and characters to match."⁹²

This dual role as artist and local laborer was more common than not in bohemia and Green's experiences underscore nightspots as de facto mutual aid societies. Contrary to the widespread notion that the beatnik's highest aim was, in the words of sociologist Ned Polsky, to "avoid work," their main goal was to balance necessary gainful employment with artistic endeavors and the quality of their "lifeways."⁹³ In fact, the issue was confused by the very way critics like Polsky framed the sociological "problem."

⁹² Fritz Bosworth, "Some Call It North Beach," *today's San Franciscan* 2, no. 2 (May 1, 1959), pp. 17-19 and Mark Green, "The Scene with Green: North Beach," *S.F. Territorial News*, Vol. 4, #16 (May 1961), p. 2 in Periodical Collection, SFPL.

⁹³ Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*, 154. Even network television portrayed this image by 1959 with the Maynard G. Krebs character on "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis," who responded to any suggestion of employment with an alarmed, "Work?!" Yet even Krebs was a sympathetic character, acting as a sometimes usefully reticent foil to Dobie Gillis' overly-ambitious schemes.

Only writers, musicians, or artists who were *already* widely-known were counted among the legitimate Beats; those working more casually (or not at all) in order to *develop* their skills and careers (which any artist knows is a full-time job) were dismissed as unproductive shirkers. Most commonly, this development took the form of intense periods of work and saving, followed by time dedicated to the arts. As Green wrote to his sister in 1959, “I have lined up a Xmas job at the Emporium, the largest dept. store here as a salesman in the book dept. That along with what I’m making at the Bagel Shop should give me \$100 a week for a brief period which should help me finally catch up financially.” He continued, showing a preference for his chosen community over career advancement, yet expressing ambition and dedication to his craft:

Budd Schulberg was in town again a few weeks ago and offered me a job on a newspaper . . . but I turned it down. I am just beginning to start and find myself . . . and besides I am growing very fond of this town . . . I’ve written about 50 poems in the last few years . . . [and] what I would call a ‘journalistic word piece’ on the San Francisco scene. . . . I’ve queried the Village Voice in N.Y. . . . about doing a column from the Coast called “West Coast Beat” . . . I don’t know what their reply will be, but it would be a good deal if they o.k. it, prestige wise anyway.

As the *Village Voice* itself demonstrated in a 1955 poll, such occasional work was paired with disciplined frugality. While income from “picture sales, parental subsidies, and odd bookings” amounted to less than \$50 a week, “many of the interviewees spent less than two dollars a day on food.” Enterprising artists were able to find apartments as cheap as \$50 a month. In an extension of the Rebel Cafe’s Popular Front tradition, New Saloons also helped artists fill in the financial gaps. Willem de Kooning, for instance, whose curriculum vitae included both the WPA and teaching at Black Mountain, enjoyed the common practice of running a tab at the Cedar during the lean years before he was

fully established in the art world.⁹⁴

Shipping out as a merchant marine was also a frequent tactic and bohemians relied on social networks to pave the way with maritime unions which offered both employment and subterranean status. As Kerouac wrote to Ginsberg in 1951, “Don’t sail with the NMU [National Maritime Union] . . . carry your ass over to the Marine Cooks and Steward’s Union at 148 Liberty street, New York . . . and cut in there real sharp . . . and you will have [a] great Negro and radical union . . . NMU and SUP are all trying to swallow it up because they’re jealous; so the charge of Communist is leveled at MCS: while they’re only the most powerful little union in America and on the West Coast and Harry Bridges is solid a mile behind them out there, and everybody on the Coast blows [like a jazz player].” After *Howl* was first published, Ginsberg did indeed ship out to Alaska, which funded his subsequent trip to Europe and North Africa.⁹⁵

Along with work in nightspots, itinerant labor maintained bohemia’s self-sustaining economy. Sufficient to support thrifty lifeways, this tactic was a real-world application of the anarchist-libertarian schemes of Paul Goodman and Rexroth’s Libertarian Circle. Anarchists called for worker control of production—which itself would be geared toward meaningful work and quality of life, rather than a consumerist “Standard of Living.” Although admittedly utopian, Goodman’s most famous work of

⁹⁴ Mark Green to Sally Green, November 9, 1959, Correspondence: General Correspondence, 1959-1976, Box 1, Folder 2, Mark Green Papers, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, DC; John Wilcock, *The Village Square* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1961), 14-15; Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 362.

⁹⁵ Kerouac to Ginsberg, undated, “Don’t sail,” (1951), Box 11, Folder 18, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia. Characteristically, Kenneth Rexroth later took credit for suggesting this tactic, asserting, “people on the West Coast work. . . . And I said [to Ginsberg], ‘Ship out. Do you realize that when they go into the Bering Sea, you are in hot water? . . . That means double pay. You come back with more bread than you know what to do with!’” Interview: “Kenneth Rexroth (1969),” in *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*, David Meltzer, ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 232. See also Charles Modecke Interview in *The Beach*.

urban planning, *Communitas* (1947), proposed several concrete plans. One revolved around a dual subsistence/market economy, in which mandatory minimum public service of seven years provided the option of a lifetime minimum income or education for use in the free market. This “neo-functionalist” scheme aimed at both decentralization and efficiency. “Efficiency for what?” he asked rhetorically. “For the way of life as a whole.”⁹⁶ Goodman’s proposals had obvious appeal for bohemians and artists, who frequently applied its principles, albeit unevenly. Gaps in the bohemian economy were filled by tourist dollars, while individuals used a patchwork of government support, from unemployment insurance to the GI Bill. “But there have always been rent parties, too,” insisted the *Village Voice*, recalling the area’s tradition of mutual aid and pluralism, “and headlines, and homosexual bars, and bearded magazine vendors touring the bars with back issues of esoteric literature.”⁹⁷

In New York, print culture directly supported bohemian lifeways, as work at various small presses intertwined with nightlife. LeRoi Jones, for example, published freelance articles on jazz before completing his foundational study of African-American music, *Blues People*, in 1963, while his partner Hettie Jones helped support their family by working as a subscription agent at the *Partisan Review*.⁹⁸ And according to radical poet Ed Sanders, the Grove Press offices at 759 Broadway, just north of Washington Square, were part of the Village “street scene.” Beats like Ginsberg often dropped by, and Grove publisher Barney Rosset hung out at the Cedar with the abstract expressionists and his first wife, the painter Joan Mitchell. Following Rosset and Mitchell’s breakup in 1952,

⁹⁶ Kingsley Widmer, *Paul Goodman* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 42, 46-9.

⁹⁷ Wilcock, *The Village Square*, 16.

⁹⁸ Hettie Jones, “How I Became Hettie Jones,” in *The Greenwich Village Reader: Fiction, Poetry, and Reminiscences, 1872-2002*, June Skinner Sawyers, ed. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 588.

bohemian writer John Gruen introduced him to another young woman at the Cedar—a recent arrival from Germany with “a Dietrich look about her”—who became the second Mrs. Rosset. In return, Gruen was hired as Grove’s publicity agent, allowing him to move up from his job at Brentano’s bookstore.⁹⁹

This cross-pollination included other Village bars as well. Scenester Ronald Sukenick, blasting cultural critic Mary McCarthy’s infamous 1950 *New York Post* article on the San Remo which “simultaneously popularizes it and puts it down,” asserted that she missed the bar’s cutting-edge cultural vitality:

The San Remo underground . . . besides being a new generation, which is always difficult for the preceding wave to make out, just may have been too low for a high intellopol like McCarthy to see clearly. If she could she might have spotted, for example, Paul Goodman in the Remo, musicians John Cage, George Kleinsinger, and Miles Davis . . . artists William Steig and Jackson Pollock, Julian Beck and Judith Malina of the Living Theater, social activist Dorothy Day, and writers as diverse as James Agee, Brossard, Broyard, Ginsberg, Corso, Kerouac, and many others who . . . were doing something, even if it was something Miss McCarthy wasn’t aware of.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, *The Nation* and *Village Voice* journalist Dan Wakefield recounted that the White Horse Tavern was where he met Michael Harrington, James Baldwin, and Norman Mailer as they talked about Marxism and “being no part of the Eisenhower world or life.” And in *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac enthused about the effect this scene had on him, including Mailer at the White Horse “sitting in the back talking anarchy.”¹⁰¹ Village nightspots thus connected oppositional stalwarts and fostered community for those on the margins. “There is a kind of communality down here after all, the good side of tribalism,”

⁹⁹ While both the marriage and Gruen’s tenure were short-lived, Grove went on to be a crucial force disseminating cutting-edge writing through the 1990s. *Obscene*, dir. Neil Ortenberg and Daniel O’Connor (2007); John Gruen, *The Party’s Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York’s Artists, Writers, and their Friends* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 41-9. Barney Rosset himself was long a part of socially-conscious left networks. He embraced Left politics as a youth in Chicago and, after World War II, made a film on civil rights called *Strange Victory*.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Sukenick, *Down and In: Life in the Underground* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987), 34-7.

¹⁰¹ Dan Wakefield Interview, Box 1, Folder 94, Maurice Isserman Research Files for *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington*, TAM.239, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University.

said Sukenick. “[T]he underground provided a place where they could survive.” As a San Remo regular, Goodman saw firsthand the Village’s anarchist ethos as he focused his ideas in *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), a highly influential text for the New Left.¹⁰²

BOHEMIAN BATTLES OF THE SEXES

Of course, one of the New Left’s failings, like that of Goodman and saloon culture as a whole, was inattention to gender inequality. It is no coincidence that the Beat Generation’s most notable names were men. Women simply had less access to the culture industry. And scholars such as Barbara Ehrenreich are correct to point out that male Beats often took for granted women’s supportive labor. Yet, as she also rightly suggests, this “male revolt” against the “breadwinner ethic” was intertwined with feminism in the 1960s. Moreover, such criticism often suffers from too much attention to Kerouac’s misogynistic fiction, missing the historical reality that bohemian communities were relatively gender egalitarian. While solid data are hard to come by, late-1950s sociological studies by Ned Polsky and Francis J. Rigney offer some quantitative support for beatnik culture’s impressionistic views. Rigney found that bohemian men and women worked at almost identical rates and in largely the same classes of work. Interestingly, nearly half of bohemians worked in nightspots, as bartenders, wait staff, or musicians. Those who didn’t work were evenly split between government support, support by a partner, or by family. Rigney’s study coincides with accounts that suggest support was mutual and shifting, with income earners taking turns when opportunities arose, allowing partners to pursue artistic or family interests.¹⁰³ Rigney’s blind spot toward queer culture

¹⁰² Kerouac quoted in *The Greenwich Village Reader*, 418-19; Sukenick, *Down and In*, 35, 75; Author interview with Todd Gitlin, October 14, 2009, New York, NY. See also “The Prevalence of Paul Goodman,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1966, John Gruen, *The New Bohemia: The Combine Generation* (New York: Shorecrest, 1966), 86, 126, and Students for a Democratic Society, “Port Huron Statement,” 35.

¹⁰³ Rates of work for men and women were around 65% with 70% in blue collar, 30% in white collar jobs.

meant that he offered no data comparing straight and gay couples, but the trend among those like Michael and Joanna McClure held just as true for Robert Duncan and Jess Collins or Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky.

Single women also used the Rebel Cafe's artistic and intellectual milieu to redefine themselves and gain a sense of belonging. Greenwich Villager Alice Denham, for instance, after a divorce in the mid-1950s, became a writer despite the gender discrimination of literary circles. She found inspiration in Continental sensibilities, and a place for herself in the literary-bohemian psychogeography, comparing New York to Paris of the 1920s and quoting Simone de Beauvoir, who asserted, "Art is an attempt to found the world anew on a human liberty: that of the individual creator." Denham also mixed existentialism and Freudianism, recalling that, among her bohemian clique in the late fifties, "We were all busy creating ourselves."¹⁰⁴

Yet Denham struggled to support herself by writing alone and often had to fall back on modeling for *Playboy* and other magazines between journalistic assignments, appropriating sexualized male-dominated norms for her own ends.¹⁰⁵ Sexual liberation also carried particular risks, as unwanted pregnancy could threaten women's tenuous economic independence. Many chose abortion as a solution, even though it was both medically and legally risky. Elsa Gidlow, Joyce Johnson, Elise Cowen, Honey Bruce

Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 21-3; Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*, 149, 145-54, 171-5. By comparison, in 1960, 38% of all American women and 83% of all men worked outside the household. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey: 1960, online <http://www.bls.gov/home.htm> (accessed July 18, 2013). Both studies suffer from small sample sizes (around 300 for Polsky, only fifty for Rigney) and assumptions about race, class, and gender that skew their interpretations by making white, middle-class men the standard by which they judge bohemia. Few women or non-Euro-Americans are given a voice, although Rigney was better in this regard, offering a slightly more sympathetic view than Polsky. See also Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 265, 330-1.

¹⁰⁴ Alice Denham, *Sleeping with Bad Boys: a Juicy Tell-All of Literary New York in the Fifties and Sixties* (No Location: Book Republic Press, 2006), 59-60, 57-8.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 113-32. Denham's *Playboy* experience combined the two, as she insisted that she would only pose if the magazine accompanied the photos with one of her short stories.

(partner of comedian Lenny), Bob Dylan paramour Suze Rotolo, and jazz singer Anita O'Day are among the many who reported stories of back-alley abortions that were often full of pain and danger. Denham herself concluded one harrowing description resignedly, saying, "I'd almost killed myself to regain my autonomy."¹⁰⁶

While women frequently tackled these crises alone, partners and friends sometimes shared the burdens, as seen in a haunting account Joanne Kyger related to Gary Snyder in 1959. "It is against the law to put United States Birds in a cage," she began impressionistically:

All sorts of emotional upheavals the past week. Mertis, the dummy decided to have an abortion and had it done in a most unsatisfactory manner and got sick and infected and finally had to be sped to the hospital where they said she would have died but for them. And it also seems that Mertis had told Lew's Dr. who had visited her that day earlier that she had had an abortion . . . and he reported it. So after having saved her life the hospital sent detective[s] in . . . and they gave her a great cross examination. . . . and she told me aside that Lew's Dr. had told her to save the largest part of the foetus when she was passing it . . . and would I please get rid of it because she was afraid of what she called Circumstantial evidence . . . and Christ what a mess in this jar of blood and I kept flushing and flushing the toilet to get all the blood rinsed down the toilet and out of the jar and kept gagging and retching and thinking this SHOULD'N'T have happened. And I believed or kept dreaming, that I was responsible. . . . What a dreadful horrible unrespectful way to treat life flushing it down a toilet half my soul went down w/ I'm sure.

Lew indignant at the way they had cross examined Mert got drunker and drunker at home and finally flipped out . . . House like a tomb, every time the door bell rang we thought it was detectives . . . Lew says he is sick and lonely. And he cries a great deal and drinks a great deal.

Smell of blood all over the house for days. She left a trail when they moved her from the house. . . . Mertis is back now and better. But she has to see a lawyer.

Similarly, Alice Denham's experience left her both permanently ingrained with an aching memory of loss and determined to support the legal right to choose. "Wounded in the

¹⁰⁶ Elsa Gidlow, *Elsa: I Come with My Songs: The Autobiography of Elsa Gidlow* (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1986), 255-6; Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 106-10, 136-7, 236-7; Albert Goldman, from the journalism of Lawrence Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!* (New York: Random House, 1971), 58-70, 286; Suze Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), 280-1; Robert Gottlieb, ed., *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 185-99; Denham, *Sleeping with Bad Boys*, 177-9. See also Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 82-97.

battle of the sexes, I felt like a gaping foot soldier, dying in the mud, in fury as well as pain,” she forcefully declared. “To be so used, to be meat to society. No one should have to endure this.”¹⁰⁷

Further, bohemia was not immune from violence, including the physical and psychic violence of rape. “Incredible drunk last night. John Ryan’s pad with Harvey Harmon and Bob Koffman [*sic*] and ‘Pete’,” wrote Russell FitzGerald in his diary in 1957. “Irene Tauemer [*sic*] was almost raped and very much beaten.” Although such overt cases were rare, the threat of sexual assault lurked in North Beach and the Village as an aspect of the impersonal nature of the modern city. Further, alcohol could fuel masculine aggression, as seen in North Beach resident Sue Marko’s recollection of “Bad Talking Charlie,” a sculptor known for his tendency to “terrorize the neighborhood.” “He nearly raped me one night,” she attested, “he walked me home from the Place and into the bushes I go, and if I hadn’t been a strong person . . . he almost succeeded, but I fought him off and screamed. It was awful.” The San Francisco streets, with their itinerant seafarers, could be dangerous for the uninitiated, as Francis Rigney reported concerning the rape and murder of a newly arrived bohemian in 1958. Although the perpetrator was a psychotic seaman, the newspapers sensationalized the tragedy as a “beatnik” killing.¹⁰⁸

Also perilous, and probably more common, was rape after a date or bar pickup. Kerouac had admitted such an incident to Ginsberg soon after they met in 1945. “Once I was in bed with a girl . . . I had picked her up in a bar and she promised me she would come across,” he confessed. “When we got to bed she fell asleep and couldn’t be

¹⁰⁷ Joanne Kyger to Gary Snyder, June 9, 1959, Box 7, Folder 15, Kyger Papers, UCSD; Denham, *Sleeping with Bad Boys*, 179.

¹⁰⁸ Russell FitzGerald Diary, October 1, 1957, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 79-80; Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 160.

awakened. . . . I spent the whole night wrestling around with her limp rag of a body, as she snored. It is a horrible experience . . . You feel remorse the next day, ashamed of your desire. . . .” Kerouac further recognized that the hyper-masculine climate of urban nightlife simultaneously fostered his betrayal and made it verboten to discuss openly: “There was no one I could tell the story to who wouldn’t in return blow a lot of hot air my way . . . It’s almost as though my neurosis were not ingrown, but that it was the result of the air, that atmosphere around me.”¹⁰⁹ As Kerouac’s admission indicates, these crimes were seldom reported, making their frequency a matter of some speculation, as silence increased the likelihood of their repetition and therefore the danger of urban nightspots.¹¹⁰

Yet, for women who learned the cultural codes of urban life, the public nature of bars and cafes could offer shelter as well. Maya Angelou recalled her favorite New York boite, Tony’s Restaurant and Bar, as “a sanctuary” in the late 1950s—not too dull “nor so boisterous as to promise company combined with danger to unescorted women.” Angelou relied on advice she had received from a female mentor as a seventeen year-old on her own, “that a strange woman alone in a bar could always count on protection if she had treated the bartender right.”¹¹¹ It is a testament to the liberating potential of bohemian nightspots that, despite the challenges, a vast majority of women’s accounts recall Rebel

¹⁰⁹ Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, September 8, 1945, Box 11, Folder 14, Ginsberg Papers, Columbia.

¹¹⁰ While more research is certainly needed, Lisa Lindquist Dorr has found some indication of the frequency of such incidents: “An oral history of women who ‘went away’ to give birth secretly and relinquish their children for adoption noted that 7 per cent of the more than 100 women interviewed reported that their pregnancies resulted from what we would now term date rape.” Dorr also notes that the culture of masculinity was a significant force, suggesting, “College sex offenders tended to come from homes . . . ‘where fathers have openly bragged of amorous adventures, where mothers only half-heartedly concealed their own sex dissatisfaction’.” She further cites sociological studies indicating that over 50% of women in the 1950s experienced “offensive episodes at some level of erotic intimacy” while on dates. See Lisa Lindquist Dorr, “The Perils of the Back Seat: Date Rape, Race and Gender in 1950s America,” *Gender & History* 20, no.1 (April 2008): 27–47.

¹¹¹ Maya Angelou, *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 713.

Cafe places with great affection.

Such examples indicate bohemia's ambivalent feminism, as misogyny was matched by women's determination to claim an equal public position, clear support for what Joanne Meyerowitz has called the 1950s "bridge" between first- and Second-Wave feminism. Meanwhile, as Wini Breines and Richard Cándida Smith have argued, Beat notions of male authenticity raised fears of family responsibilities, which they equated with bourgeois conformity and limited freedom. "This fear of ties," Cándida Smith writes, "was the dark side of a philosophy that stressed personal vision and connection with the abstract forces of the cosmos over social relations."¹¹² Even as male Beats envisioned women as both mysterious muses and stabilizing forces, women themselves contested this containment, mobilizing their own notions of authenticity that rejected the mainstream.

Letters between Joanne Kyger and Gary Snyder during his first trip to Japan to study Zen Buddhism, continuing a courtship that had begun at The Place in 1958, illustrate the uneven process of bohemia's changing gender norms. Kyger's correspondence reveals her concerns about social pressures, punctuated by fierce (and characteristically colorful) demands for autonomy and self-expression. "I wanted to indulge in just simple woman's emotions, well they aren't simple, but . . . really its just wanting to Do something for a man, not any man. Well, it's pretty damn hard in this day and age," Kyger wrote. "God knows what women thought they were doing when they demanded the right to vote . . . and [then] I thought fuck you Gary if I have to hide what I feel." She later scrutinized these contradictions more directly, seeing them as extensions

¹¹² Joanne J. Meyerowitz, "Introduction" and Wini Breines, "The 'Other' Fifties: Beats and Bad Girls," in Joanne J. Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1994), 11, 3; Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 257-63, 264.

of social and generational change. “I find I have always avoided trying to grow into [a] mature woman for fear from my mother,” she said. “I suffer guilt about sex & even going to Japan. Something strange happens in my chest when I think Mother I am a real lady now & can have babies. . . . Shit such big talk! Progression is poor & slow. Fuck the world.” Kyger also indicated how the North Beach scene complemented her own burgeoning but conflicted sense of independence and sexual expression, writing, “Faggots company, also, let me indulge in the feminine, since they love it, in a way I hadn’t been able to do before.” Concluding her thoughts on relationships and gender roles, Kyger wrote, “You don’t know how much I would like to Indulge in being feminine & having a house and home. . . . But I’ve realized, men & women shouldn’t compete but fit together.”¹¹³

Snyder responded with a mix of gendered flattery (“Kyoto is pretty & so are you”) and recognition of Kyger’s full social status. Insisting that he had channeled his sexual desire toward her, he declared, “but good heavens, poor girl, I don’t mean to impose a year of celibacy onto you; no need to feel guilty / I don’t think you ever have to feel inadequate sexually.” Using Beat terms that simultaneously suggested mutual respect and liberated sexuality, Snyder wrote, “Rules are no good & adultery as usually practiced is a goofy middle-class not-making it dodge.”¹¹⁴ He underscored their unconventional relationship with a mix of sex talk, praise for Kyger’s poetic and intellectual skill, and confessions of his internal conflicts over traditional male dominance. “Well now listen Joanne Elizabeth at least you ought to give me a semi-equivocal answer about whether or

¹¹³ Joanne Kyger to Gary Snyder, March 27 [1959], Box 7, Folder 14, Kyger to Snyder, June 26, 1959, Box 7, Folder 15, Kyger to Snyder, August 17, 1959, Box 7, Folder 16, Kyger Papers, UCSD.

¹¹⁴ Gary Snyder to Joanne Kyger, June 10, 1959, “March about the 19th” [1959], and April 1, 1959, Box 7, Folder 14, Kyger Papers, UCSD.

not you'd consent to being my wife," he wrote, reacting to her frequently sardonic letters. "But I don't demand it because dammit whatever I've got is yours & if that's not what you want then fuck you . . . don't make a joke out of it." Snyder then wrote a page-long list encapsulating his thoughts:

Well now what do I want of you . . . I want you to cook & sew & keep house & I'll work too / I want you to get high at parties & amaze everyone & amaze me & amaze yourself . . . / I want you to write poems & read them in your voice aloud / . . . I want you to do everything I say / I want you to say fuck you Gary Snyder / . . . I want you to have a baby & nurse it . . . I want you to make love to everybody you like / I want you all to myself / I want you to be unafraid / . . . I want you to learn things & love your own intellect / . . . I just want you to be & me just be & not demand anything of each other—I want us to live together & get along a long time.

"As for Gary Snyder," he wrote, tacitly recognizing this socially-fraught tangle, filtered through the lens of foreign difference, "it probably wouldn't bug you that he seems to want one that talks, walks, & lives like a man. . . . These transformations work both ways. What do [you] believe a woman has to offer . . . & in what does essential femininity consist? 3 days ago I bought almost 100 lbs. of mountain firewood from an old woman who carried it down on her back for \$.45."¹¹⁵

"WORK?!": LIFE AND LABOR AMONG THE BEATNIKS

Such male bohemian acknowledgement of female labor's value was rare. Given the value of their critique of American bourgeois ideology, their lack of attention to structural inequality was also shortsighted. Even if women and men were *employed* at the same rate did not ensure equal *pay*, for instance—an important factor for a population that lived on a financial knife-edge.¹¹⁶ Granted, as many of the period's critics pointed out, beatniks could often turn to parents or other family members for help in desperate

¹¹⁵ Snyder to Kyger, July 14, 1959 and August 1, [1959], Box 7, Folder 16, Snyder to Kyger, October 8, [1959], Box 7, Folder 17, Kyger Papers, UCSD.

¹¹⁶ As noted in Chapter 3, California law prohibited women bartenders unless they owned the establishment—a discrepancy that garnered nary a peep from bohemian night-people.

times. Only 32% of Rigney's subjects and 35% of Polsky's were from working-class backgrounds, so the notion of bohemia as a middle-class phenomenon of "New Poverty" is mostly correct—a relatively privileged young population choosing "lifeways" that were simply ways of life for working people. Yet even this critique had its limits. As Polsky's study showed, many of the late-1950s beatniks were young, from their middle teens to their middle twenties, making an apt comparison to college students or apprentices.¹¹⁷ Through this lens, occasional work and focus on the development of craft or vocation would be within the norm.

In fact, this view of bohemia as a formative life-stage was near-ubiquitous among its denizens, who saw its streets and nightspots as alternative institutions of learning. "Black Mountain was always an undercurrent," recalled Ebbe Borregaard about interactions at The Place. Joanne Kyger replied, further emphasizing the role of nightspots: "I went to North Beach practically every night—it was like a school . . . albeit on the street. . . . Poetry and jazz was happening down in the Cellar. . . . Some kind of dialogue between Jack and Robert, with us as a student audience." George Stanley recalled that Spicer actively encouraged this approach, telling him that if he wanted to be a poet to "drop out of the university." As a result, Stanley left Berkeley while, on the Beach with Spicer, "Most of our time was spent arguing." Even Leo Krikorian declared that running The Place was "quite an education." In the context of the Cold War, especially given Spicer's own refusal to sign a loyalty oath at Berkeley in 1950, which first propelled him into the subterranean milieu, this radical academy bore more than a

¹¹⁷ Polsky, *Beats, Hustlers, and Others*, 144, 148-9. Polsky's epigraph to his Beat chapter implicitly acknowledges this aspect, but he fails to do so in the body of the text. Quoting Erik Erikson, he wrote, "The true meaning of ideology for identity formation . . . can be fathomed only by descending into those transitory systems of conversion and aversion which exist in . . . adolescence."

hint of left-anarchism. One New York transplant, noting North Beach's left leanings, multicultural influences, and sexual freedom, recalled it simply as a place of "learning and liberation."¹¹⁸

The Village, suggested Mary McCarthy, also "had all the earmarks of a student quarter." As LeRoi Jones later attested, "My adolescence extended through bohemia." This aspect of New Saloon culture had a particular impact on Michael Harrington, who recalled his first politicizing experiences in the late 1940s "in the back of the room at Little Bohemia," a bar in his native St. Louis, "where they talked about art and psychoanalysis and the motherland of Greenwich Village." When he arrived in New York in 1949, his introduction to the city's leftist intellectual community of "voluntary exiles from the middle class" was through the San Remo and White Horse Tavern —what he termed the "united front of the Village." The scene had "the atmosphere of a campus" in which he developed his political views through the process of bar-talk with a spectrum of nonconformist interlocutors: "straight and gay; black, white, and interracial; socialist, Communist, Trotskyist, liberal, and apolitical; literary, religious, pot-smoking, pill popping, and even occasionally transvestite."¹¹⁹ For Harrington, the diversity and intellectual stimulation of Village bar culture was fundamental to his notable political activism with the Catholic Workers and the League for Industrial Democracy—yet

¹¹⁸ Borregaard and Kyger Interview, Stanley Interview, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Lind, "Paris, North Beach," *North Beach Magazine*, 11; Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 32-3; Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, eds. (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), xv; Lind, *Leo's Place*, 28.

¹¹⁹ Wilcock, *The Village Square*, 16; Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984), 454; Michael Harrington, "The Death of Bohemia," in *Greenwich Village Reader*, 458-66; Michael Harrington, "A San Remo Type: The Vanishing Village," in *The Village Voice Anthology (1956-1980): Twenty-five Years of Writing from the Village Voice*, Geoffrey Stokes, ed. (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1982), 151.

another bridge from the Old to the New Left.¹²⁰

Russell FitzGerald—whose diary of North Beach life in the late fifties reads like an uncanny laundry list of Rebel Cafe traditions, culture, social networks, and sensibilities, with references to *The Great Gatsby*, the “death wish,” subterraneans as “family,” New Poverty, and the importance of *Howl*—also became dedicated to blending his artistic ambitions with progressive politics. On September 7, 1957, FitzGerald recorded in his diary that “in the last few weeks I have tried to absorb and analyze the ‘SF Renaissance’ literature by reading and talking and drinking and looking. The Howl trial was very amusing in many ways.” Between what he saw as the prosecution’s stupidity and the defense’s pretensions, he felt that “the total effect of this past week’s session was rather inspiring. Perhaps this effect was due only to the fact that I am still remotely hopeful that howling loudly enough may wake up enough people to help.”¹²¹

Throughout, New Saloons acted as sociocultural touchstones and incubators for new ideas. “Recognition was the fun in reading *The Subterraneans*,” FitzGerald wrote of Kerouac’s novel in 1958. “If, though living in community, ‘the Subterraneans’ remain homeless, loveless and faithless, doesn’t this make The Place in which they live a spiritual ‘house.’ A bordello without customers where frustrated homospirituals play boring games with each other by imagining that each is beautiful. The picture presented is (like homosexuality though *actually* profound) an image of the human condition in its

¹²⁰ Although the ILD was the institution through which Students for a Democratic Society first congealed, Harrington was quick to denounce Tom Hayden and his cohorts, mistakenly pegging them as too soft on communism. Tellingly, Harrington’s biographer suggests, “Had Michel and Tom Hayden sat around a table in the back room of the White Horse in June 1962 to hash out these issues, they might have found that they agreed more often than they disagreed. . . . But the meeting hall at Port Huron was not the back room of the White Horse. The setting aroused instincts in Michael more akin to those he used to feel in the dusty YSL loft where he sharpened his rhetorical skills in the 1950s. Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 236-7.

¹²¹ Russell Fitzgerald Diary, September 7, 1957, Box 9, Folder 1, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

American incarnation. My work is my home.” Combining artistic musing with a search for the foundation of a new social consciousness, Fitzgerald infused the left-libertarianism that flowed through New Saloons with insights from Beat literature. “Putting together the revelations of social disorder in ‘GO’ and ‘Howl’ and in [*Rebel without a Cause* author Robert] Lindner’s works, I suddenly find my self despicably and isolationistically ignorant,” he reflected. FitzGerald concluded that the personal was the political, that liberation rested on continual resistance to the broader, dehumanizing aspects of mass society and the State: “The hated subject of politics begins to seem agonizingly important. Politics in the sense of social ethics and not organization . . . The sight of a nation leading the world into an ever deepening hell of materialism and greed and unholiness, dwarfs personal problems. . . It presents itself finally as a ‘cause’—anarchy.”¹²²

OFF THE BEACH AND OUT OF THE VILLAGE . . .

At the end of the 1950s, the kind of activism that defined the 1930s had disintegrated and the 1960s New Left movements were still in an embryonic stage. But New Bohemia was more than a precursor to the Counterculture’s intentional communities; it had deep roots in the past as well, representing a vague nostalgia that went far beyond a longing for Depression-era solidarity or even nineteenth-century bohemianism. It was a quasi-return to a preindustrial barter economy of the kind found in the late eighteenth-century American Northeast before the desire for manufactured items drew farming families into national or global markets. But it was also a revision of the artisan ideal and its public sphere in which reclaimed manufactured household items—the detritus of the Affluent Society—replaced homemade ones and a voluntary family replaced the private

¹²² FitzGerald Diary, March 26, 1958 and September 7, 1957, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

sphere's patriarchal one. Black Mountain writer and Cedar Tavern habitu  Fielding Dawson later penned an impressionistic memoir that captured hints of this ethos, as he recalled nights with "LeRoi and Gil in a booth and joined them and bummed drinks in a continuity of wisecracks, bitter laughter, loud cries in the Dozens which I was never good at." These allies populated his wedding party, completing a public affirmation of the ceremony as "Hettie Jones kissed me, LeRoi shook my hand and smiled." Of the Cedar, Dawson said simply, "I know this place. It's my home."¹²³

Bohemian artists, focused on the development of their craft, relied on a complex mix of commerce and mutual support, all within a neo-Freudian framework that maintained a *social* Mother-Father as the new fountainhead of identity. As the *Village Voice*'s John Wilcock noted in 1961, nostalgia had been intertwined with bohemian eccentricity going back to the turn of the century. But he also recognized that nostalgia hid these continuities, as participants found themselves blinded by the bright flash of sudden change. "There is still a magic in Greenwich Village," he wrote, "a strong atmosphere of creativity, and a perverse pride among its inhabitants in such minor curiosities as that West 11th Street crosses West 4th. Those who return after many years and can no longer find the magic might well consider that they have taken it with them. The Village, like any abandoned lover, can offer bitterness, too."¹²⁴

Ultimately this tradition served the purpose of rebellion, not revolution. Bohemia allowed entry to outsiders, if cautiously, making the Rebel Cafe as much about ameliorating the pressures of the modern world as it was about changing them. The New Saloons of North Beach and the Village were just one half of the newly-solidified

¹²³ Fielding Dawson, *An Emotional Memoir of Franz Klein* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 52, 56, 94.

¹²⁴ Wilcock, *The Village Square*, 16.

bicoastal bohemia, however. Jazz clubs were also central Rebel Cafe sites, places where the bop apocalypse was put into action.

Chapter 7

“Bop Apocalypse, *Freedom Now!*: Jazz, Civil Rights, and the Politics of Cross-Racial Desire”

I too, hear America singing / But from where I stand / I can only hear Little Richard / And Fats Domino. But sometimes, / I hear Ray Charles / Drowning in his own tears / or Bird / Relaxing at Camarillo / or Horace Silver doodling, / Then I don't mind standing a little longer

—Julian Bond, Founding Member of SNCC, *The Student Voice* (1960)

We are musical anarchists.

—Nick LaRocca of the Original Dixieland Jass Band, *Time* (1957)

“Dizzy Gillespie for President!” read the bumper stickers handed out by Jean Gleason at the 1964 Monterey Jazz Festival. The wife of *San Francisco Chronicle* music critic Ralph Gleason, Jean had volunteered to manage the presidential campaign of John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie, and the sale of bumper stickers, along with buttons and balloons, benefited CORE and Martin Luther King’s SCLC. Staffers circulated a petition to the California Secretary of State demanding Gillespie be placed on the ballot as an independent candidate and organized a “John Birks Society” (a not-so-subtle jab at the reactionary Right). The previous year, when the idea first caught fire, African-American comedian Dick Gregory sent a telegram to Gleason saying, “I am sure you know that Diz has my vote but I would like to make one suggestion. . . . How about Miles Davis for Secretary of State?” Gillespie ran with the idea: Ray Charles heading the Library of Congress? Louis Armstrong as Secretary of Agriculture? Malcolm X as Attorney General?¹

Meanwhile, members of the American Federation of Musicians picketed outside a New York nightclub called the “Discotheque for LBJ” with chants calling for a Dizzy presidency. The musicians’ beef was not actually with President Johnson, but the fact that

¹ Dizzy Gillespie, with Al Fraser, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979), 452-61; Art Seidenbaum, “No Place for Squares: Jazz, Sun Heat Up Monterey Peninsula,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1964, p. G-1.

the club, tasked with raising funds for his campaign, had patrons dancing to records instead of live musicians. “Records don’t vote,” read one picket sign. But the musicians nonetheless recognized the symbolic (and satirical) meaning of Gillespie’s campaign. “It’s so important to stop Goldwater, so I will vote for Johnson,” said bassist Bill Crow. “But in my heart, I know Dizzy’s right.”² Gillespie himself genuinely feared a victory by conservative Republican Barry Goldwater and threw his support to the President just before election day, citing his position in a poem: “I never thought the time would come when / I’d vote for Lyndon B. / But I’d rather burn in hell, than vote for / Barry G.” With a nod toward Goldwater’s perceived atomic militarism he later recalled, “Everyone agreed we had to look out for Dr. Strangelove.”³

Jean Gleason acknowledged the humor in Dizzy’s campaign, but also said that “underlying it was this serious belief that he’d make a great candidate.” Offering a window onto Gillespie’s appeal, she added, “I think that he is highly intelligent, a much more highly intelligent man than anybody that’s been in the White House; also very cognizant of world problems. . . . I don’t think he ever got on the ballot, but he certainly did have write-in votes, mine among them.” The Black press also captured the underlying seriousness of the campaign, running Gillespie’s announcement alongside stories that lambasted *Time* magazine for its “gradualist” approach to civil rights and calling for an end to federal funds for segregationist Mississippi (which then, as now, collected more in federal support than it paid in taxes).⁴

All of this points to an intertwining of nightclub culture and politics that would

² “Jazzmen Picket LBJ Night Club: ‘Dizzy Gillespie for President’,” *The News-Palladium* (Benton Harbor, MI), November 3, 1964, p. 9.

³ Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 457.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 459; “Ray Charles Versus Box Office Records,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 25, 1963, p. 13.

have been unimaginable when Gillespie first came to prominence as a bebop trumpeter during Roosevelt's presidency. Through the course of the 1950s, Rebel Cafe nightclubs contributed to the modern Civil Rights Movement in two ways. First, they literally enacted the integrationist imperative that dominated the Movement through the mid-1960s. Jazz clubs were sites of cross-racial exchange and interaction, and helped foster communities in Greenwich Village and North Beach that were among the most integrated in the country. Second, the universalist ethos of many jazz performers, club owners, and patrons supported the Movement's call for racial justice and "freedom." Perhaps most important, many in the jazz-folk community, like Gillespie, directly participated in the Black Freedom Struggle, either as activists or financial supporters of organizations such as CORE, SCLC, and SNCC—the young advocates of participatory democracy whom Howard Zinn famously dubbed "The New Abolitionists." Jazz nightclubs illustrated multiple levels of sociopolitical change, as culture intersected with formal politics.

Rebel Cafe jazzmen Dave Brubeck and Charles Mingus were particularly noteworthy for their contributions to the Black Freedom Struggle. Also significant were the bohemian poets and writers whose nightclub recitations, sometimes accompanied by jazz, were forceful salvos against dominant social norms—as were their experiences as nightclub patrons, which informed their work. In addition to the more widely-recognized Kenneth Rexroth and Jack Kerouac, bohemians such as LeRoi and Hettie Jones, Diane Di Prima, and Joyce Johnson emerged from the nightclub underground as vigorous voices for liberation. For the Beat Generation, jazz musicians, and audiences alike, in dialogue with each other and the wider public, nightclubs continued to be laboratories of democracy. Even within this community, bound together by the jazz-folk sublime,

definitions and methods of liberation differed, leading to contestations over the very meaning of “freedom.” As some scholars have justifiably argued, white audiences often looked to the “spontaneity” of jazz and its associations with blackness to buttress their own feelings of liberation, liberality, and political largesse. Yet this analysis ignores the deep commitment that many Euro-American liberals and radicals felt to the cause of civil rights, as later evidenced by their willingness to face danger beside their African-American allies in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and the murders of activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner.⁵ At least in part, the cultural roots for such commitment lay in the universalism of the jazz-folk sublime. Jazz was more than simply the soundtrack of rebellion. Its ethos, and the cross-racial interaction it encouraged, contributed to slow and tentative erosion of racial caste in America. Although, just as in New Saloons, this change was uneven and still subject to deeply embedded divisions and social hierarchies, the jazz club nonetheless participated in sweeping sociopolitical changes of the 1950s.

FIVE SPOT CAFE SOCIETY: RACE, GENDER, AND THE JAZZ-FOLK SUBLIME

While clubs such as the Village Vanguard, the Open Door, and Cafe Bohemia had set the stage, the Five Spot Cafe truly solidified the Village jazz-bohemian scene in the late 1950s when it began hosting jam sessions with neighborhood regulars. Seeing the growing audience for this kind of small “music room,” the Village Vanguard changed to a primarily jazz format in 1957—the same year the Beat Generation broke into the mainstream.⁶ But while the Vanguard turned to reliable acts like Dizzy Gillespie, the Five

⁵ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9-10, 118; Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 229.

⁶ Jesse H. Walker, “Theatricals,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 3, 1959, p. 11; “Village Vanguard Newest Jazz Club,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 1, 1957, p. 15; Lorraine Gordon, as told to Barry

Spot attracted John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, who pushed the boundaries of jazz improvisation. “By the time Monk and Trane got there,” LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) recounted, “The Five Spot was the center of the jazz world!” For the musicians, the club offered a “job,” but also the chance to test their own ideas against others’ innovations. “For months, grimly skeptical jazzmen lined up at the Five Spot’s bar,” wrote music critic Nat Hentoff about Coleman’s debut. “They made fun of Coleman but were naggingly worried that he might, after all, have something to say—and in a new way.”⁷

One of the first jazzmen to perform there, French horn player David Amram, who would soon collaborate with Jack Kerouac on the short film, *Pull My Daisy*, described the club as “a funky bar in the Bowery that . . . welcomed everyone—artists, moving men, postal workers, winos, and off-duty firemen.” “Late at night,” he continued, “poets and actors would sometimes join us, reciting poetry or improvising verse with music. This was never planned. Our era was always *in*-clusive, not *ex*-clusive. Jazz was about sharing and spontaneity.” As historian Robin D.G. Kelley has noted, most of the early Five Spot habitués were, like Amram, white and male, and included many of the Cedar Tavern crowd such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. But joining the fold along with white writers and poets like Kerouac, Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Frank O’Hara were Black

Singer, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 201. Gordon noted that her husband “began reinventing the Village Vanguard as a jazz club exclusively, more out of necessity than anything else. Max was finding it increasingly difficult to book the comics and nightclub performers who had carried the Vanguard.” Yet the club continued its cabaret tradition, featuring satirists like Irwin Corey alongside jazz greats like Chico Hamilton. See also “Rise of the Music Rooms,” *Time*, May 27, 1957, Vol. 69, Issue 21, pp. 44-5. *Time* stated that “the music rooms have taken away the nightclub audience, but nobody is exactly sure why. The 20% federal cabaret tax plainly had something to do with it (instrumental music only, without dancing or floor show, is not considered entertainment under the law, hence is tax-free).”

⁷ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 229; John S. Wilson, “‘Village’ Becomes Focal Center for Modern Jazz: Five Spot Cafe and the Half Note Spur Move Downtown,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1960, p. 43; Chris DeVito, ed., *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), 18-19; Nat Hentoff, *The Jazz Life* (New York: The Dial Press, 1961), 226.

musicians such as Ted Joans and avant-garde jazz pianist Cecil Taylor. Taylor's classically-trained style also embraced the influence of Dave Brubeck and Thelonious Monk, who began playing the club in mid-1957, as did Charles Mingus. The Five Spot's audiences soon reflected the Village's changing demographics: mostly white, but increasingly including African Americans, such as LeRoi Jones. The area's complexion continued to move further away from its Italian and Jewish ethnic past. "The Terminus didn't know who the artists or musicians were—the scene was self-made," recalled the club's hat-check girl, Helen Tworkov. "It was all underground word of mouth."⁸

The Five Spot's bohemian coterie also counted a growing number of women, such as writers Anne Waldman, Diane di Prima, and Jones's soon-to-be spouse Hettie Cohen, who challenged 1950s norms in various ways. For this new generation of nonconformists, the Five Spot was a point of connection and a central landmark in the bohemian psychogeography. Waldman later recalled that David Amram would "take me around to some of the clubs," and that she "met painter Larry Rivers at the Five Spot." As Kerouac published works such as *Mexico City Blues*, Waldman saw the underground life it represented unfolding before her eyes: "What I appreciated as a young teen girl growing up on MacDougal Street in Manhattan's West Village, was this poem's . . . obvious relationship to jazz, to dharma. . . . [T]hese very tangible 'Beat' literary poets were now walking my streets."⁹ The Five Spot became so entrenched in the Beat psychogeography as a radical mixed-gender site that Ginsberg found it materializing in his subconscious. "I look, sometime in the same dream, to see what's playing at the Five

⁸ David Amram, *Offbeat: Collaborating with Jack Kerouac* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002), 5; Kelley, *Thelonious Monk*, 227-8; Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 25, 1957, p. 16.

⁹ Ann Waldman, "Lineages and Legacies," in Ann Charters, ed., *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 593-6.

Spot, Jazz Reichian revival hall,” he wrote in his journal in 1957. “See woman dressed like hermaphrodite in dancing fancy dress. . . . Elise [Cowan], whole front belly down the leg showing through, Velvet flouncing up street . . . teaching dancing there—that’s what became of the old time Trotskyite girls.” Memoirist and model Alice Denham associated the club with the visceral impact of music and interracial romance. “Down into the low roar of the Five Spot to hear the great Thelonius Monk,” she wrote. “[My date] and I sat at a tiny table for two in the dark urban forest beneath a pinpoint lamp. . . . The new innovative jazz, bebop or modern, charged me up like Bartok’s scintillating dissonances.”¹⁰

For Hettie Jones, Five Spot jazz was “another, new language . . . as old as the spirit I felt in myself, a music I could trust.” With it came the chance to jell an untried kind of community consciousness. “I suddenly knew a score of new people,” she recalled. “I think of us trying to laugh off the fifties, the pall of the Cold War, the nuclear fallout—right then, the papers were full of it—raining death on test sites in Nevada. I think we were trying to shake the time. Shake it off, shake it up, shake it down.” She continued with a long view of jazz-bohemia’s interracial terrain:

In the United States white people have historically made their way to places like the Five Spot in times like the late fifties—New Orleans, St. Louis, Chicago all had their scenes, whites went to the Harlem Renaissance, too. But it’s important to the particular history of what would later be called the New Bohemia that going to the Five Spot was not like taking the A train to Harlem. Downtown was everyone’s new place. . . . The jazz clubs were there among all this. And all of us there—black and white—were strangers at first. . . .

Black/white was still a slippery division to me. In Laurelton the rabbi had said Jews were a different people, but my schoolmate Mulligan’s priest assured her that I was another race. . . . I knew America was the only place in the world where Jews weren’t dead; but I didn’t *feel* American . . .

However, I entered the Five Spot, and all these other new doors I opened with Roi, as another image—one-half of the blackman/whitewoman couple, that stereotype of lady and

¹⁰ “4 AM, March 18, 1957,” in Allen Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties, 1954-1958*. Gordon Ball, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 84-5; Alice Denham, *Sleeping with Bad Boys: a Juicy Tell-All of Literary New York in the Fifties and Sixties* (No Location: Book Republic Press, 2006), 103.

stud. . . . That summer *Dissent* magazine published Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro." There I read that jazz was orgasm, which only blacks had figured out, and that white "hipsters" like me were attracted to the black world's sexy, existential violence. But the only violence I'd ever encountered, the only time I'd heard bone smashing bone, had been among whites in the South. The young black musicians I met didn't differ from other aspiring artists . . . All I wanted to do at the Five Spot was *listen*.

The following year, after moving farther north to the Chelsea neighborhood, Hettie began to pine for the East Village and insisted that LeRoi find them a place where she could once feel connected with friends, longing for "the Five Spot and the Fourth Avenue bookshops."¹¹

Hettie Jones's reminiscence certainly oversimplifies the interracial history of American nightclubs, and perhaps idealizes her experiences, using Black jazz as a way to authenticate her own bohemian sophistication. But it nonetheless indicates the importance of Village nightspots as public spaces, both for community formation and as landmarks on the maps of memory. Concluding her memoir in 1990, Jones described going to the roof of her building to survey the neighborhood as she had just surveyed her own past. "The view from up there is changed," she lamented, "a fourteen-story building looms in the sky where the Five Spot used to be."¹² That the Five Spot was singled out in multiple memoirs was doubtless the result of selective memory, but it is also a useful representative of dozens of similar places. Village nightclubs such as the Jazz Wagon and the Half Note prospered in the late 1950s, and patrons had comparable experiences to those at the Five Spot. In 1956, Charles Mingus wrote to Langston Hughes in terms that showed both the difficulty of maintaining a jazz community and the everyday role that nightclubs played. "Sorry I'm so long in getting this to you but I've been out of town with my group," he wrote. "I'm opening at the Cafe Bohemia. . . . Hope you get a chance

¹¹ Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1990), 34-6, 115.

¹² *Ibid*, 233.

to come by.”¹³

Thelonious Monk found his first steady gig in years at the Five Spot and the club became a de facto home away from home, with his wife attending almost every night. Kerouac also noted the “intimacy” of the Five Spot and decried its relocation when the Terminus’ landlord sold the building in 1962. As Hentoff noted in his 1961 survey, *The Jazz Life*, nightclubs offered opportunities for both personal and social transformation. “When you walk into a jazz club,” he wrote, “you never know what combinations of emotions, some perhaps long dormant, will be reawakened and reset before the night is out.” While Hentoff was justifiably cautious in his praise for jazz’s racially progressive potential, he nonetheless noted that “it is one of the very few areas in American life where whites and Negroes, otherwise residentially segregated, have been able to form relatively casual friendships.” He continued: “Even full-time white liberals still seldom know Negroes apart from their roles in committees or Negro organizations. As for the average American, I expect a wide sampling might indicate that a revealingly huge majority have never had a Negro, other than a domestic, inside their homes. Jazz clubs, however, have become islands of at least acquaintanceship between Negroes and whites.”¹⁴

INTERRACIAL COMMUNITY AND THE JAZZ-FOLK SUBLIME

In retrospect, Hentoff’s language seems problematic, with its assumptions of “average Americans” as white and its integrationist aims, which tacitly discounted autonomous Black institutions in favor of assimilation into the nation’s proverbial white “home.” But in 1962, it must be remembered, Black Power was still four years away

¹³ Charles Mingus to Langston Hughes, July 31, 1956, Box 57, Folder 19, Charles Mingus Collection, ML31.M56, Library of Congress Music Division, Washington, DC.

¹⁴ Amram, *Offbeat*, 94; Hentoff, *The Jazz Life*, 15, 21-2.

from taking hold and the dominant strategy of activists, both Black and white, was integration. Perhaps nowhere in the US did this ideal find its most notable application than within the jazz-bohemian community, where racial politics was the stuff of lived experience. Charles and Marlene Inman, who moved to San Francisco in 1952 when Charles went to work for Orrin Keepnews's Prestige Records, became entrenched in the city's jazz scene, regularly attending shows at the Black Hawk, the Tin Angel, and after-hours jams at Bop City. The couple found both aesthetic and social gratification in jazz: nightclubs were "electric" because of the close proximity with performers, and they felt they "belonged" within these small audiences. The Inmans acknowledged racial divisions within the jazz community (most notably recalling Miles Davis's well-known distrust of the "white man"), yet they also formed a close friendship with Davis's saxophonist, Julian "Cannonball" Adderly. Adderly found success as a solo act in 1960s San Francisco and became a fixture at the Inmans.¹⁵

This integrationist logic extended into proto-political grassroots activism. The Inmans flouted school districting that acted as a form of de facto segregation, allowing local African-American students to use their address, which enabled them to attend schools with better facilities that were otherwise just out of their reach. Further, they took one teenager into their home for two years as she finished high school, while her mother suffered through "a difficult time." Although Charles's employment as a record distributor made the Inmans a less-than-typical example of middle-class white America, neither were they part of the bohemian set. Instead, their nightclub excursions and friendships, including Peggy Tolk-Watkins and critic Ralph Gleason, sat beside a life in

¹⁵ The saxophonist soon returned the gesture, hosting the Inman's daughter for an entire summer's visit after she developed a close friendship with the Adderly children. Author Interview: Charles and Marlene Inman, January 7 and June 19, 2011, Sutter Creek, CA.

the Affluent Society, indicating how jazz's effects on social consciousness could extend beyond the borders of bohemia—which themselves often blurred.¹⁶

Despite the fact that integration often substituted paternalism for the restructuring of resources, it was still decidedly controversial in the 1950s—a period in which the President could suggest that southern segregationists “are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negroes.” For those in the oppositional underground, jazz was intertwined with as deep commitment to interracial relations. The jazz world has long been one of the few American social spaces in which interracial marriages and partnerships flourished without much condemnation. Relationships such as Charlie and Chan Parker's or Billie Holiday's with Benny Goodman (and perhaps Orson Welles) were not uncommon, even as a majority of states maintained laws prohibiting “miscegenation.” Declaring the “soulfulness” of Kenneth Rexroth's Chicago cohort Dave Tough, Dizzy Gillespie suggested that the drummer's interracial marriage had political implications: “Dave Tough married a black woman and took her everywhere he went. This happened long before the era of Martin Luther King and the sit-ins in North Carolina at the lunch counter. I think that period was the beginning of this current age of civil rights.” Parker reportedly had similar (if more visionary) ideas about his own marriage, proclaiming it was “my way of showing the world that there's no such thing as white and black.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid. Much like Marthe Rexroth, the Inmans frequently took their kids to Sunday afternoon shows at both the Black Hawk and, later, to Bill Graham's Fillmore West.

¹⁷ Billie Holiday, with William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1956, 1984), 50-1, 94; Gillespie, *To Be or Not . . . To Bop*, 164; Robert George Reisner, *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), 62. Eisenhower quoted in Günter Bischof and Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: A Centenary Assessment* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 89.

North Beach had fewer partnerships with this level of notoriety in the 1950s, but Bob and Eileen Kaufman's exemplified many lesser-known interracial couples. For the Kaufmans, jazz at the bohemian Coffee Gallery was a fundamental part of their public life as writers and poets. "When I met Bob Kaufman, King of North Beach," Eileen declared, "my values changed overnight." She continued, evoking social spaces of the nightclub, "There was no partition for the entertainment section, and jazz was played throughout the place any time the musicians fell by. Spontaneity was the key word in our life style in North Beach. This is what made it 'the scene,' for one never knew in advance just who might show to read a poem, dance, play some jazz, or put on a complete play." Bob highlighted this Beaten fabric in "West Coast Sounds—1956," as he intoned, "San Fran, hipster land, / Jazz sounds, wig sounds, / Earthquake sounds; others, / Allen on Chestnut Street, / Giving poetry to squares / Corso on knees, pleading, / God eyes. / Rexroth, Ferlinghetti, / Swinging, in cellars, / Kerouac at Locke's, / Writing Neal / On high typewriter." While many relationships like the Kaufmans' were admittedly stormy, they would have been almost impossible without the shelter of a sympathetic community. "Well, I felt at home with the Beat Generation," Eileen later recalled. "I felt at home in Paris with the Bohemians, I felt at home."¹⁸

Jazz life was fundamental to LeRoi and Hettie Jones as well. Longtime friend Joyce Johnson later recounted the Jones' winding life-journeys from Newark and Long Island to the Village, where they met working at *Record Changer* magazine in 1957. Johnson described Hettie's college years, when she deviated from the traditional path laid out by her suburban parents. Her "new passion was jazz, and jazz might lead to God knows what." "And for Hettie," she continued, in terms that reveal both the problematic

¹⁸ Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 279-80, 321, 619.

nature of 1950s racial construction and the jazz underground's potential for identity transformation, "black came to seem the color of a great deal more that was realer than what she'd known, some purer definition of experience, some essential knowledge that the white suburbs denied their children."¹⁹

The jazz community offered models that eased the couple's way forward, despite the fact that their marriage left Hettie "orphaned" by the rejection of her parents. "The following summer at the Newport Jazz Festival," Johnson wrote, "she'd see the children of other interracial couples and think Yes, she and Roi would have children; all that was possible, too." LeRoi, writing as Amiri Baraka after adopting Black Nationalism and ending his interracial relationships in the mid 1960s, also remembered the era's social complexities and the significance of the bohemian community: "We both took up marriage like hesitant explorers on the shore of some unknown country. Yet we were unprepared for the inner conflicts that such a union portends in America, and only slightly better prepared—though shielded to some extent by residence in the Village—for the traditional outer ones." Johnson concluded that, although "such a marriage later fell out of political fashion among militant blacks and became subject to that ostracism, too, . . . it should also be seen—even by LeRoi Jones at this remove—as an act of singular courage."²⁰

Writing to an aunt in 1961, Hettie conveyed both the social pressures on her marriage and the role the jazz community played in legitimating it. The aunt's visit to their home showed that "you still feel I exist as a human being," Hettie wrote.

You see, Roi and I are really not a unique phenomenon. There are hundreds of interracial marriages in this country and abroad that nobody thinks about, or knows about, and this

¹⁹ Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 213-16.

²⁰ Ibid. See also Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, xxiii-xxiv, 279-80.

is happening more and more each year as the old barriers break down . . . Because when two people put aside all custom and precedent, when they do something that is frowned upon by most of the rest of the people in the world, they do it because they *must* do it . . . And . . . we both realize that without the other neither one of us would be quite *real*, no less happy or unhappy.

Concluding that “every mother adores her children, I suppose, and I am no different in that respect,” Hettie defended LeRoi and the couple’s jazz-bohemian milieu by mobilizing the language of traditional gender roles. Insisting he was “a very great man,” she asserted that “even now, at 27, he is the ‘darling’ of all the so-called ‘avant-garde’ of painters, writers, musicians” and that “right now he is trying to wake up enough to meet someone interested in making jazz records—it’s nearly Midnight and the man wants to go hear some music at one of the downtown clubs—so you see he works at night, too.”²¹

JAZZ AND THE REBEL-CAFE COUNTERPUBLIC

The Five Spot, like many other clubs, was a key node in the nocturnal underground’s widening social networks. Influential British author Kenneth Allsop first met Rexroth there during a poetry and jazz reading. These connections were also paralleled by San Francisco clubs. “So there I was in the Cellar,” wrote poet Peter Orlovsky to his partner, Allen Ginsberg, “came in with Ferlinghetti, we were talking for 3 hours . . . the music blasting loud, rock an’ roll type excitement music . . . [Michael] McClure there behind Rexroth . . . Bob Donlin was there, we were digging the music, the Silent drummer who sits there playing, with tilted head and eyes rolled up toward heaven.”

²¹ Hettie Jones to “Aunt Lee,” undated, “Weds. night” (c. 1961), Box 11, Folder 12, Hettie Jones Papers, MS#1513, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library. See also Jones to Mother, undated, (c. 1959) Box 54, Folder 3. Jones responded to her mother’s concern after having read the *Life* magazine article on the Beats. Jones insisted that, even though she and LeRoi are “rebellious,” they keep a “respectable” home, and that while it includes a guitar and “bongo drums” it also counts sizable collections of books and classical records. She insisted that her mother would like Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue*, noted that poet Michael McClure left a New York trip early because he missed his “wife and baby” in San Francisco, described LeRoi in Brooks Brothers suits, and compared his poetry to Shakespeare. She concluded by pointing to his education, with an MA in literature, which she was sure bested the journalist at *Life*, which itself “might want to exaggerate so that it could get people to its articles.”

In *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, Baraka recalled the Five Spot as one of his entry points into the Village literary scene, where he went to hear Langston Hughes and the “great populist” Jack Micheline read poetry backed by Charles Mingus. Following Baraka’s estrangement from Hettie Jones, it was also a place where he reconnected with African-American love interests. And Mingus met his wife Sue at the Five Spot, making them another of the Village jazz scene’s interracial couples.²²

Moreover, writers Calvin Hernton, David Henderson, Tom Dent, and Lorenzo Thomas, who formed the Black nationalist Umbra group in the 1960s, first met in the coffeehouses and jazz clubs of the East Side. Like Hettie and LeRoi Jones, the Umbra poets drew inspiration from the Five Spot as a site for jazz-poetry and a respite from the racism that still marred the Village. “Poets, we behaved in the tradition of the jazz jam session; spontaneity and improvisation were our guides,” Calvin Hernton pronounced. “The impact that Umbra had on the Lower East Side was registered, in one instance, through and by the friendly relations of admiration that many of the ‘old folks’ of European descent accorded us after a while. The neighborhood became truly a rainbow neighborhood.”²³ Thomas recalled that collaboration on jazz and poetry “was special in terms of the level of artistic achievement, but it was also typical of the kind of interdisciplinary and interracial artistic exchange available on the Lower East Side in the early 1960s.” And he discussed the positive role of white liberals in pushing for “fair play,” stating, “The relative lack of racial animosity—at least among the artists—was a

²² Kenneth Allsop, “Beaten,” in Cesar Grana and Marigay Grana, eds. *On Bohemia: The Code of the Self-Exiled* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 220; *Charles Mingus: Triumph of the Underdog*, dir. Don McGlynn (1998); Peter Orlovsky to Allen Ginsberg, undated (c. 1958-9), Box 4, Folder 41, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA; Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 219, 280.

²³ Calvin Hernton, “Umbra: A Personal Recounting,” *African American Review* 27, no. 4 (Winter, 1993): 579-584. See pp. 581-2.

notable feature of life on the Lower East Side.” Dent further noted the importance of the late 1950s jazz bohemia in the group’s formative years: “We also reveled in the jazz that we brought with us—Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, Thelonius Monk, Bill Dixon, Eric Dolphy, Sunny Murray, Elvin Jones, and John Coltrane, in the Old Reliable bar, in Slugs, and in the Five Spot, which was already in the neighborhood before we arrived and where we . . . would sit directly in front of the many horns of Rolland Kirk as he played our unspoken and yet nightly request at closing time, ‘Round About Midnight’.”²⁴

As the Umbra poets’ experiences indicate, the Five Spot was part of a cabaret milieu that included the Vanguard and Art D’Lugoff’s Village Gate, where the visibility of Black culture and the jazz-folk sublime gave voice to African-American concerns. Liam Clancy remembered the Vanguard and Village Gate as part of a jazz-folk scene that included Josh White, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Thelonious Monk, and Odetta. Nina Simone, whose haunting piano ballads epitomized the jazz-folk sublime, also noted D’Lugoff as a central part of her life in the Village. Simone found a vibrant public space there, along with fellow musicians and intellectuals such as Coltrane, Baraka, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and *Raisin in the Sun* playwright Lorraine Hansberry (who based the titular character of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* on D’Lugoff). “Politics was mixed in with so much of what went on at the Gate that I remember it now as two sides of the same coin, politics and jazz,” Simone wrote in her memoir, *I Put a Spell on You*. “Comedians like Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby and Woody Allen opened for the players and it was all part of the same thing—the music and the comedy, the jazz and

²⁴ Ibid; Lorenzo Thomas, “Alea’s Children: The Avant-Garde on the Lower East Side, 1960-1970,” *African American Review*, 27, no. 4 (Winter, 1993): 573-578.

the politics, it all went together.”²⁵ Her jazz-folk sensibility even had a thread of connection to the roots of radical cabaret, as she made Weill and Brecht’s “Pirate Jenny” one of her standards.

Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” was most significant, an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement and a powerful protest that was heir to Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” yet devoid of its undercurrent of silent suffering. Instead, it was an outspoken claim on the dignity of Black womanhood. “The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam / And I mean every word of it,” she sang in 1964 to a New York audience.

Alabama's gotten me so upset / Tennessee made me lose my rest / And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam / . . . Picket lines / School boycotts / They try to say it's a communist plot / All I want is equality / For my sister my brother my people and me / Yes you lied to me all these years / You told me to wash and clean my ears / And talk real fine just like a lady / And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie / Oh but this whole country is full of lies / You're all gonna die and die like flies / I don't trust you anymore / You keep on saying “Go slow!” / “Go slow!” / You don't have to live next to me / Just give me my equality / Everybody knows about Mississippi / Everybody knows about Alabama / Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam²⁶

While nightclubs were sometimes untrustworthy sources of support (both morally and financially) for such an uncompromising performer, Simone found a steady ally in D’Lugoff. “I was always treated properly at the Gate,” she recalled. “Art treated performers as equals, as people worthy of respect. . . . Art became a friend and invited me over to his house for dinner many times. He understood that respect was important: when it was due he gave it, and got it back in return.” D’Lugoff later claimed to have introduced Simone to Lorraine Hansberry, who had a profound effect on the singer’s

²⁵ Clancy, *The Mountain of the Women*, 108, 199, 256-9; Nina Simone, with Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 67-70; “The Reminiscences of Art D’Lugoff,” *Columbia*, 48-9. D’Lugoff’s brother Bert was one of the producer’s of Hansberry’s play, as well as her personal physician. See Robert Nemiroff, “The 101 ‘Final’ Performances of *Sidney Brustein*,” in Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 1995), 175, 207.

²⁶ Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam” on *in Concert* (Phillips, PHS 600-135: 1964); See also Ruth Feldstein, “‘I Don’t Trust You Anymore’: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March, 2005): 1349-1379.

political views. And in 1965 Simone and D’Lugoff traveled along with Langston Hughes to the civil rights demonstrations in Selma and Montgomery, Alabama—which were largely responsible for pressuring Lyndon Johnson to push through the Voting Rights Act—where she performed for marchers with Odetta, Harry Belafonte, and Dick Gregory.²⁷ Simone remained outspoken about racial justice throughout her career. And she frequently beamed with pride that her music, which developed within the Village Gate’s cabaret atmosphere, was a sort of unofficial soundtrack for SNCC organizers, noting that “everywhere they went to meet fellow workers they found my records.”²⁸

Alongside its dissemination through mass media, the jazz-folk sublime remained rooted in particularities of place and space. Village and North Beach communities experienced social interaction and affective cultural productions made concrete by the Rebel Cafe’s contours, its physicality and sensuousness—a highly contentious process, made all the more so by the enigmatic nature of musical messages. The tensions around race and gender were not simply washed away by waves of sound. But jazz-folk performances sometimes cracked the transparent wall of these divisions. In his 1962 novel *Another Country*, James Baldwin described the debut of Black jazz singer Ida Scott at a Village nightclub, writing that the music was infused with “a quality so mysteriously and implacably egocentric that no one has ever been able to name it.” Baldwin continued, conjuring the elusive dialectic of live performance and social transformation: “This

²⁷ Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 71, 101; Ivan Black to Charles McHarry (press release), March 26, 1965, Box 9, Folder 12, Ivan Black Papers, JPB 06-20, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Marc Myers, “Interview: Art D’Lugoff,” *Jazz Wax*, October 13, 2008; Robert Healy, “Wallace Silent as Marchers Enter City,” *Boston Globe*, March 25, 1965, p. 1. For a thorough and nuanced look at the protests, and the fight to bring the enforcement of federal reforms to the local level, see J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2002).

²⁸ Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, 95; “Nina Simone,” in LaShonda Barnett, ed., *I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on Their Craft* (Philadelphia: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2007), 152-3.

quality involves a sense of the self so profound and so powerful that it does not so much leap barriers as reduce them to atoms—while still leaving them standing mightily, where they were; and this awful sense is private, unknowable, not to be articulated, having, literally, to do with something else; it transforms and lays waste and gives life, and kills.”²⁹

“YOU BECOME THE OBJECT YOU CAME TO SEE”

Nightclub environments affected the interactions between performers and patrons, ranging from the Five Spot’s intimate 150-person capacity to the Cafe Au Go-Go’s “gargantuan cellar” and the Village Gate’s “Spartan seats.” Too much emphasis should not be placed on these differences, however. All of these venues were small enough that close interaction between audience and performer was the rule—so much so that musicians’ common complaint was that patrons’ conversations interfered with the music. It is understandable why performers sought concert halls’ stricter decorum, but this says little about the cabaret’s social function.³⁰

Patrons actively sought the confluence of talk and melliflence, sociability and entertainment. Their presence in the nightclub and displays of appreciation for artistically ambitious styles were a kind of social currency, but also an opportunity to ease into novel social relations and identities, to explore sexuality, as well as to publicly address conflicts. As one North Beach journalist steeped in the Coffee Gallery’s “atmosphere of more or less near-anarchy” lamented, an evening in most nightclubs meant too many tourists and drunks and not enough careful listeners. Yet he continued to seek his nocturnal ideal: “A

²⁹ James Baldwin, *Another Country* (London: Corgi Books, 1962), 197.

³⁰ Dizzy Gillespie, both expressed his weariness with nightclubs as mere “places where they serve whiskey” and recognized that clubs like New York’s Jazz Gallery could be transformed into miniature concert halls, where patrons “could hear good jazz in a different kind of format.” Harold H. Hart, *Hart’s Guide to New York City* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1964), 877, 918-19; Gillespie, *To Be or Not . . . to Bop*, 448.

house of jazz. Jazz! With its cloak of colors. A sound painting of feelings and emotions! Inspired! Uninhibited! And above all, happiness!” The reality, of course, was that some nights were so packed, it was impossible to appreciate the music. As critics on both coasts observed, jazz spots enjoyed a varied patronage, from the “pseudo-jazz intellectuals who see a weird motive in the playing of every note” to “beards, bulky sweaters, and Brooks Brothers suits . . . shuffling around the room, table-hopping, mens-rooming, and telephoning.”³¹ Such comments were typical of the milieu’s masculine social coding, as female jazz fans frequently passed through these facetious critiques unnoticed.

Jazz club decor was often bohemian. The Cellar cultivated a “modern laissez faire atmosphere in which jazz and allied arts flourish best” and the Five Spot’s “dimly lit room,” with the bar running along its length opposite the stage, had red walls “covered with posters and flyers for artists’ showings and gallery openings and for jazz concerts dating back a year or so.” As captured in Martin Williams’ 1964 article, “A Night at the Five Spot,” interactions in these spaces were layered with meaning among the club’s motley crew:

A couple come in and are escorted to a table near the bandstand. She is wearing a mink, and he doesn’t look old enough to have bought it . . . Roland Hanna, looking like a kindly but officious banker who is about to explain an overdraft to a befuddled dowager, enters the clubroom through the kitchen . . . and chats with his bass player . . . He sits down on the piano bench and warms up . . . The crowd continues to buzz and chat. But when Hanna is interpolating a phrase from “Solar” . . . the banker is a forgotten person. There is applause as the pianist segues into a bass solo, and it is followed by a sudden burst of irrelevant laughter from someone enjoying a private joke at the bar. . . . [as] a long drum solo, has the eyes and ears of the crowd. At the end of the bar, a middle aged woman looks on admiringly, as if she knew exactly what was happening. She has a copy of *The New Yorker* and a half-empty martini glass on the bar in front of her. To her right,

³¹ Del J. Boubel, “Jazz Knight,” *SF Territorial News*, July 15, 1961 and August 15, 1961, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library Periodicals Collection; Martin Williams, “A Night at the Five Spot,” (1964) in Robert Gottlieb, ed., *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), *Reading Jazz*, 683.

her escort looks noncommittal. . . . A few feet down the bar, a young man who has been nursing a beer for about an hour says to his companion, “How about that rent strike in Harlem?”

The Five Spot’s small capacity guaranteed that this jumbled *mélange*—the simultaneously brilliant and blasé stuff of American democracy in action—could be boiled down into a single concoction, a unitary experience of sight and sound.³² Such an overly-simple display of democratic complexity was comforting to young audiences seeking spaces where they felt that they belonged to something or someone. Meanwhile, the labor of the jazzman, who “enters the clubroom through the kitchen,” was easily missed among the din.

Especially creative or powerful performances intensified the trend toward unified audiences—even offering the possibility of transcendence. The astonishing style of Thelonious Monk, the “High Priest of Bop,” could focus even a diverse audience’s attention. “Monk comes through the kitchen door and moves toward the stand,” continued Martin Williams. “A burst of hard applause covers his opening notes, but almost immediately the room is silent.” For Hettie Jones, the language of jazz was best captured by Monk at the Five Spot, where, through the club’s open door, “the music rushed out, like a flood of color onto the street.” Monk’s music “explained” her nonconformist longings as she “heard a new sound, or heard sound in a new way.” Connecting this visceral-aural experience with the desire for community and transcendent experience, she continued: “One night, after the last set was over, someone—not Monk himself—began to play ‘Greensleeves’ on the piano. He played tentatively at first, and

³² Ralph J. Gleason, “A New Jazz Experience at The Cellar—Three One-Acts,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 1961, p. 16; Williams, “A Night at the Five Spot,” 680-3; John S. Wilson, “Village Becomes Focal Center for Modern Jazz: Five Spot Cafe and the Half Note Spur Move Downtown,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1960, p. 43.

then, as the harmonies settled, with chords that took the simple line into an elegant statement, a hymn. . . . A hush fell over the emptying club, and on either side of me spaces opened, and I could see the same feeling in all of us, at once both apart and together, absorbing the clear, absolute notes.”³³

Fellow jazzmen John Coltrane and Charles Mingus similarly affected their audiences—expanding consciousness, even as they potentially inflamed the libido. Bohemian activist Jerry Kamstra recalled the socio-sexual effects of hearing Trane at the Black Hawk when he arrived in San Francisco in 1955: “I had a girl and I was on leave from the Air Force and we sat in the back row until the cocktail waitress came over and threw us out. She said it wasn’t right that we were dry humping while serious musicians were up there on the stand doing their licks. I was a little amazed that anyone could see us since the club was so dark, and was also incredulous that dry humping wasn’t allowed, since the music emanating from the stand really turned me on. . . . I was rather proud that I’d been initiated in the Black Hawk while listening to John Coltrane.” Kamstra eventually returned to the club to hear Charles Mingus and while “sitting out in the cool dark audience . . . Mingus wrapped himself around his bass and thundered hate and anguish in waves out across the floor. It was my first taste of anger precipitated through a musical instrument and it left its mark on me, realizing as I did that horns and basses and drums speak in a language you have to study to understand.”³⁴

Amiri Baraka also recognized jazz’s shift in consciousness, “a new tongue and vision for a generally more advanced group in our generation” of politically active African Americans:

³³ Williams, “A Night at the Five Spot,” 684; Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, 34.

³⁴ Jerry Kamstra, “San Francisco Jazz in the Old Days,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 1, 1972.

Blues is the basic pulse and song, the fundamental description and reaction. . . . Jazz, as Langston says, is the child, the blue/black prodigy of the earth mother/father, that wants to take its inherited sensitivity . . . and presume to claim (to know and understand) all that exists in America black brown red yellow or white. Jazz, the most advanced music of the African American people . . . wants to describe the whole of this society, its multinational reality, to that society itself, and propose alternatives to the very society (from the fundamental *sound* of the culture, its publicly stated matrix of creativity and profundity.) Jazz challenges Europe because Europe cannot even get in America without jazz' help. And then jazz want to take the real credit—it be legitimate American music, when Brahms and them is only visitors (get its arrogant drift?).

“Bebop,” he recalled, “was a staging area for a new sensibility growing to maturity.”

Reflecting the spirit of the rising Civil Rights Movement, Baraka connected the sounds of the jazz club with political struggle: “The power and beauty of that music was something again. And now there was so much of it coming out and everybody was talking about Freedom.”³⁵

San Francisco journalist Ralph Gleason concurred, saying of the Cellar’s Beat-inflected jams, “It is the language of youth—the language of the real jazz age.” As Baraka argued in his classic study, *Blues People* (1963), the inclusion of improvisation in professional performances, rather than primarily in traditional private community settings, was fundamental to the formation of a visible African-American public. White audiences and performers, Baraka argued, had to acknowledge their debt to Black culture, legitimizing it in the broader public sphere.³⁶ It would of course be naive to assume that audiences absorbed progressive notions about democracy and community simply by listening to live jazz (although jazz-folk lyrics sometimes overtly carried those messages). But within a larger discursive process, in which performers like Mingus and Brubeck publicized their sociopolitical views in articles and interviews, audience identification

³⁵ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 77-8, 83, 270.

³⁶ Ralph J. Gleason, ed., *Jam Session: An Anthology of Jazz* (London: The Jazz Book Club, 1961), 229; Jones (Baraka), *Blues People*, 82-6, 145-51.

with them could have real, notable effects.

When fans wrote to Brubeck saying that a show at the Black Hawk or Basin Street East “converted” them “to the cause,” they—perhaps unwittingly—declared themselves allies with his project to make jazz a force for liberation. One such supporter, a YMCA director, sweepingly declared, “Jazz effects [*sic*] every facet of our daily lives including religion, politics, work, expressions of the human personality, etc.”³⁷

Describing a 1960 visit to the Black Hawk to hear the Modern Jazz Quartet, renowned for their dignified dedication to their music as “erudite . . . serious art,” one journalist crystallized this ethereal communal and ideological mix:

If I’m going to write about something like this, I usually take someone else along, because I am really more interested in other people’s reactions than in my own. This time I went alone. This time there was no question about who was representing who. This was us, modern America, being portrayed to ourselves, by ourselves on the very best terms. Around the world they may not think as much of T.S. Eliot or Ernest Hemingway or American movies or Abstract Expressionist paintings as they might, but everybody thinks our greatest contribution to the arts of the world today is our best jazz.”³⁸

This intense identification, formed within the cramped and smoky spaces of the nightclub, could indeed transcend the barriers of both ideology and geography, challenging racial and cultural stereotypes in symbiosis with mass media.

MINGUS: THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

As an embodiment of jazz’s musical and social rebellion, Charles Mingus loomed large: a physically imposing man known for both his quick temper and capacity for tenderness. Mingus’s music, with its aggressive rhythms, time changes, complex forms,

³⁷ One fan, “studying for the priesthood,” was active in this campaign, sending black-market jazz recordings to a pen pal in East Germany who sought them as symbols of “freedom and individuality.” He requested an autographed photo for his friend “behind the Iron Curtain,” which Brubeck sent. Dorothy Radulski to Dave Brubeck, July 14, 1958, Series 1.C, Box 1, 1958 P-L, Wally Pyip, Jr. to Brubeck, January 24, 1960, Series 1.C, Box 2, 1960 L-R, and Richard J. Shmaruk to Brubeck, April 18, 1960, Series 1.C, Box 2, 1960 S-Z, Brubeck Collection, UP.

³⁸ Clipping fragment, March 13, 1960, Black Hawk envelope, Examiner Morgue, SFPL; Walter C. Daniel, “Musically Speaking,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, January 17, 1958, p. 19; “Modern Jazz, Lambert Combos At Blue Note,” *Daily Defender*, January 29, 1959, p. A-19.

and soulful expressionism, encapsulated both the muscular side of the jazz-folk sublime and what jazz scholar Eric Porter called a “Romantic” approach that insisted jazz “was the product of one’s spirit and emotions” in opposition “to the marketplace.”³⁹ Born in 1922, Mingus grew up with a complicated relationship to race in America. His mother was of Anglo, Black, and Chinese descent and his paternal grandmother was white. (Family legend had it that she was a cousin of Abraham Lincoln.) Mingus’s father, a career military man, was light-skinned and blue-eyed and “passed” through much of his adult life. Mingus biographer Brian Priestly suggests that Mingus’s darker skin was a source of tension and that his father discouraged him from associating with even darker “blacks” during his youth in Los Angeles. The bassist’s ambivalence about World War II reflected this turbulence: Mingus rejected Japanese internment, but patriotically tried to enlist in the army, although he did not serve due to a failed medical exam. Throughout his travels and travails in the jazz world, Mingus was involved in conflicts due to his skin color. According to saxophonist Tony Scott, he lashed out—sometimes physically—to prove his “negritude.” This concern was palpable in Mingus’s 1971 autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, in which an antagonist refers to him as a “half-yella schitt-colored nigger”—a phrase which he originally proposed as the book’s title.⁴⁰

For Mingus, it was necessary to live in the underworld, beneath the underdogs, in order to put the complexities of American society into his music. Beginning in October 1955, Mingus featured socially-conscious material such as “Haitian Fight Song,” which

³⁹ Eric Porter, *What’s This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 102.

⁴⁰ Brian Priestly, *Mingus: A Critical Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), 1-3, 18, 50; Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*, Nel King, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 52, 298; Janet Coleman and Al Young, *Mingus/Mingus: Two Memoirs* (Berkeley: Creative Arts, 1989), 4. Although the book was unpublished until 1971, it was largely written between 1954 and 1962, in collaboration with Louis Lomax, and therefore significantly reflects Mingus’s pre-1960s views. See Shelton, “Jazz Man Is Changing His Beat.”

he recorded live at the Cafe Bohemia with Max Roach on drums, later saying it could have been called the “Afro-American Fight Song.” In 1956, he published a poem, “Suite Freedom,” in which references to McCarthyism underscored antiracist calls for civil rights:

This mule ain't from Moscow; / this mule ain't from the south, / But this mule's got some learning . . . / Mostly mouth-to-mouth / . . . This mule could be called stubborn—and lazy / But in a clever sort of way, / This mules been waiting and planning . . . / For a sacred kind of day. . . that burning sticks— / Or crosses— / Is not mere child's play. . . / But a mad man / In his bloom.

During a Cafe Bohemia show in 1957, Mingus improvised the seed of perhaps his most powerful protest song, “Original Faubus Fables,” the centerpiece of his 1960 album, *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*. In response to the bassist's impromptu query about who was “ridiculous,” drummer Dannie Richmond shouted back, “Governor Faubus”—a denunciation of Arkansas's segregationist leader around which they structured the song. Mingus's stage patter also revealed a performative element, as seen at a show in San Francisco where he berated a white band member for having caused trouble on a nonexistent southern tour. When corrected, Mingus simply responded, “Don't mess with my act!”⁴¹

Mingus therefore makes a fascinating counterpart to his fellow jazz-activist Dave Brubeck. Each espoused jazz as liberation, but while Brubeck saw this as a positive freedom—a freedom *to* call for pluralism and self-expression—Mingus demanded freedom *from* economic and racial oppression. In *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus illustrated the conflicts between artistic integrity and paternal responsibility in the narrowed avenues of African-American opportunity:

⁴¹ Priestly, *Mingus*, 64-5, 78, 41-2, 86-7; Porter, *What's This Thing Called Jazz*, 128. See also *Down Beat*, January 11, 1956.

“But Mingus, how about them crumb-crushers of yours when their little stomachs get to poppin’ and there ain’t nothin’ in their jaws but their gums, teeth and tongue, what you gonna do? Play for money or be a pimp?”

“I tried being a pimp, Fats. I didn’t like it.”

“Then you gonna play for money.”⁴²

Over the course of his career, Mingus performed in his share of mob-owned clubs and sometimes cultivated their associations as a part of his persona, a form of street-cred. In reality, however, he mostly courted relations with independent owners such as Mike Canterino of the Half Note Cafe on lower West Side, who offered him with a standing invitation. Mingus described the Half Note (fictionalized as the “Fast Buck” in his memoir) as “a musical home, a place to play for people who really seem to want to hear” and where the owner “calls [me] son and his two sons call [me] brother.” In 1957, Mingus backed-up Langston Hughes’s poetry reading at the Village Vanguard, and Art D’Lugoff included him in Billie Holiday’s famous Village Loews concert. His appearances at the Five Spot completed his immersion in New York bohemia. This was not without conflict, of course: Mingus famously engaged in multiple physical confrontations, including a fistfight at the Bohemia in 1958, and one of his appearances at the Vanguard ended in an argument with Max Gordon over money during which the bassist brandished a knife and smashed a light fixture.⁴³

Yet this volatility was backed by ambition, and a gregarious side that garnered him faithful (and sometimes useful) friendships. During a brief stint at San Francisco’s Bop City in 1950, Mingus’s displeasure with an interview with Ralph Gleason led him to

⁴² Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 191.

⁴³ Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 348; Priestly, *Mingus*, 43, 83, 88-94; Jesse H. Walker, “Theatricals,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 25, 1957, p. 16; Lorraine Gordon, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, 223-4. Lorraine Gordon emphasized her account of Mingus’s larger-than-life appetites by describing him eating a package of raw hamburger in the Vanguard’s kitchen one night, suggesting that it may have had something to do with his death from Lou Gehrig’s Disease. It did not, and whether or not this story is true is less important than her choice to include it in her memoir, among the many other things she could have discussed, showing the continued power of Black jazzmen as mythical figures as well as musical geniuses.

write an angry letter denouncing the critic in *Down Beat*. By 1955, however, Mingus and his wife Celia were regularly corresponding with the Gleasons, who discussed their kids, music, and jazz festivals, with hopes that they could visit the Mingus family and “make the Newport scene.” After settling more or less permanently in New York in 1951, Mingus also started a close friendship with Nat Hentoff, whom he described as “one of the few white guys you could really talk to”—a rare word of praise for music critics, who the bassist otherwise skewered as talentless hacks who sit “talking to each other. Don’t hear a thing.”⁴⁴ Writer Janet Coleman remembered Mingus as a complicated but caring friend who both offered (facetiously) to “put me out” as her pimp and dressed down the comedian Lenny Bruce for using the word “cunt” while the three hung out at a Village bar. Despite four failed marriages, Coleman insisted, Mingus maintained a “utopian” view of romantic relationships that she found “old-fashioned, macho, idealistic and reassuring.”⁴⁵

Conversely, Mingus’s reputation as an irascible performer who berated fellow musicians and audiences in equal measure was so entrenched that some nightclub crowds went away disappointed if the bassist simply played politely, denying them the opportunity to participate in the show. Taken alongside his autobiography, which infamously recounts numerous sexual exploits of preposterous proportions—like the claim that he slept with twenty-three women in one night in a Mexican bordello (described in graphic detail)—Mingus’s persona betrayed more than a hint of the put-on. His memoir is unsettlingly misogynistic, reflecting a common trend of hyper-masculinity

⁴⁴ Celia and Charles Mingus to Ralph Gleason, September 26 and June 29, 1956, Ralph Gleason to Charles and Celia Mingus, September 14, 1955 and August 14, 1956, Box 57, Folder 19, Mingus Collection, LOC; Priestly, *Mingus*, 43, 46; Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 294-5.

⁴⁵ Coleman and Young, *Mingus/Mingus*, 29-30.

within the jazz world. But it is also a complex work of modernist literature, written in prose that Coleman likened to “jazzy Joyce,” clearly calculated to confront the reader with social transgression, to create the effect of dissonance that paralleled his ingenious musical work—which he insisted must be seen as a form of composition at the highest level. “There is no jazz, there is no classical,” he told the *New York Times* in 1962, “there is only music.”⁴⁶

An oft-repeated episode during a Mingus show at the Five Spot contained many of the contradictory elements of the bassist’s social role, spotlighting sources of tension within the Rebel Cafe with various threads of put-on, racial tension, performativity, misogyny, homophobia, and even improvisational composition. Beginning with Mingus’s demand that a woman in the audience stop talking, he continued, berating the entire crowd:

You, my audience, are all a bunch of poppaloppers. A bunch of tumbling weeds tumbling ‘round, running from your subconscious. . . . Minds? Minds that won’t let you stop to listen to a word of artistic or meaningful truth. . . . You don’t want to see your ugly selves, the untruths, the lies you give to life. So you come to me, you sit in the front row, as noisy as can be. I listen to your millions of conversations, sometimes pulling them all up and putting them together and writing a symphony. But you never hear that symphony.

“All of you sit there, digging yourselves and each other, looking around hoping to be seen and observed as hip,” he concluded. “You become the object you came to see, and you think you’re important and digging jazz when all the time all you’re doing is digging a blind, deaf scene that has nothing to do with any kind of music at all.” Mingus then turned his tirade back on the gossiping African-American woman at the front table, hissing facetiously that “I might dedicate to the mother who brought along a neighbor and talked three sets and two intermissions about the old man across the hall making it with

⁴⁶ Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 4-5, 176-8; Coleman and Young, *Mingus/Mingus*, 4, 26; Shelton, “Jazz Man Is Changing His Beat.”

Mrs. Jones' son . . . giggle giggle.” The woman, however, refused to be cowed and retorted that she “has to listen to jazz all day long” and “lives on [the stuff],” therefore earning herself the right to talk through the performance if she wished.⁴⁷

As the musicologist Scott Saul has argued, this “jazzy mother” revealed how “the music was threaded into her daily routine and would remain environmental and prosaic.” “Even more potently,” he continues, “she asserted that the nightclub was not just a shrine to its musicians; it was also a watering-hole and gathering-place for the community . . . that stressed consumer sassiness rather than artistic chauvinism. . . . The fight in the nightclub was a battle over the power of self-revelation—who might circulate their story over the din of someone else’s, who might incorporate someone else’s story into their own.” Equally important, however, was Mingus’s accusation that Five Spot patrons had “become the object you came to see,” a phrase that had a dual meaning within the nightclub underground. First and most obvious was the club as a social space where one’s position as an aficionado or bohemian scenester was on display, overshadowing its role as a musical space. Yet Mingus’s rant was met with shouts of approval, as the audience called out, “Bravo!” “Tell ‘em Charlie!” “Someone has been needing to say that for years!” and “Most of us want to listen.” This response highlights the participatory undercurrent of live jazz, in which community aspects and “self-revelation” became fully intertwined with the act of improvisation. Mingus himself wrote about this esoteric process in an unpublished draft of his autobiography, suggesting that “informed audiences” knew that “I felt as Bird that if I didn’t begin to write at the moment of my

⁴⁷ Scott Saul, “Outrageous Freedom: Charles Mingus and the Invention of the Jazz Workshop,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Sep., 2001): 387-419. See also Diane Dorr-Dorynek, “Mingus . . .” in *The Jazz Word*, ed. Dom Cerulli, Burt Korall, Mort Nasati (1960; New York: Da Capo, 1987), 14-15.

creative urgency I'd be no more."⁴⁸ At this secondary level of meaning, the division of "subject" and "object" blurred into a unitary process of "becoming," which carried significant liberatory potential for this interracial milieu.

JAZZ CLUBS, THE BEATS, AND CROSS-RACIAL DESIRE

As such, the dark and smoky space of the nightclub was central. Much like movie-theater audiences, nightclub patrons were able to project their own layers of meaning onto the performers, as they gazed through the thick cigarette smoke and remained hidden from the musicians' view in the contrast between the stage lights and the darkened club. This allowed what cinema theorist Laura Mulvey has called the "inscribed spectator," who writes his own desires onto the object of his gaze and finds "pleasure in looking."⁴⁹ The racial implications of this are clear and present: for white audiences, Black jazzmen were indeed frequent symbols of unfettered sexuality, prowess, spontaneity, and mystery. Yet musical improvisation is an aural process. The sound of an audience-performer interaction (or its silence) is just as important as its spectacle. Therefore, this subject-object relationship became, for many musicians, mutually constitutive—even allowing the reversal of social hierarchies (at least temporarily).

Perhaps the most striking illustration of this was the cross-racial identification described in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. In Kerouac's depictions of jazz clubs—alongside his protagonists' ecstatic shouts for Black jazzmen to "Blow for me, man, blow!" and to take their solos to new heights, to "Go, go, go!"—are pauses in which Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty identify different instrumentalists according to their resemblance to various Beats. "It's Carlo Marx!" announces Moriarty about a bookish

⁴⁸ Ibid; Writings by CM, with *Beneath the Underdog*, p. 845, Box 45, Folder 10, Mingus Collection, LOC.

⁴⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14-26.

saxophonist who shares the appearance and demeanor of Allen Ginsberg's bespectacled alter-ego. Yet this trope is not reducible to race. Rather, it represents identification as a way of concretizing the new as familiar, even within the very act of rebellion. "It's Old Bull Lee!" shouts Moriarty as dawn breaks, seeing a fidgety white man resembling the fictionalized William Burroughs.

Later, Paradise pines with desire to shrug off his troubles, "wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night," wishing that he could be "a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned."⁵⁰ This problematic passage has quite rightly drawn reams of criticism for its assumption of white privilege and elision of racial oppression, portraying "happy, true hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" in a style uncomfortably close to minstrelsy or southern myths of the contented plantation slave. Yet Kerouac's novel was also a sign of slow, uneven, but significant historical change: the gradual erosion of received notions of social hierarchy, a rejection of the Kiplingesque "white man's burden" as an ideology that sustained American racial caste. Kerouac signaled this by identifying himself as a "white man" in quotations, suggesting the fluidity of racial identity. And the jazz club was where this fluidity took new form, as a coalescence of sight, sound, and identity transformation.

Cultural critic Jon Panish has leveled perhaps the most trenchant assault on Beat representations of jazz, correctly assailing their romanticization of jazzmen, which created a racial picturesque that dehumanized Black characters. Panish argues that the appropriation of African-American culture by bohemians was counterhegemonic in some

⁵⁰ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 180-1, 194-203.

ways, challenging the mainstream, but that they used Black forms on white terms, and therefore ultimately maintained a Gramscian “historical bloc” of white hegemony.⁵¹ A key point in his study is an examination of Kerouac’s fiction, which often was guilty as charged.

Panish fails, however, to recognize the multiple levels of meaning within the jazz nightclub as an historical phenomenon. He points to a passage in *The Subterraneans* in which the *roman a clef*’s protagonist takes his African-American love interest to hear Charlie Parker at the Red Drum. Kerouac describes Parker watching him with recognition from the stage, “as if he knew my thoughts and ambitions or remembered me from other night clubs and other coasts.” Blessing the new union with his eyes and his music, Bird was “the kindest jazz musician there could be while being and therefore naturally the greatest.” Panish rightly notes the inscribed spectatorship at work here, as Kerouac uses Parker as a symbol to “enhance his own image as a kind, humane but suffering, victimized artist and man.”⁵² But Panish then offers a reductionist and ahistorical reading, arguing that this representation of Parker’s kindness “patronizingly reduces this undeniably complex human being to a single characteristic” in which “Parker’s musicianship, and ‘nature’ evokes elements traditional in minstrel and minstrel-like depiction of black people.” Panish’s suggestion that the phrase, “naturally the greatest,” inheres racist stereotypes is tenuous at best, ignoring the novel’s stream-of-consciousness prose that is nearly devoid of standard punctuation, making “naturally” more likely to mean merely “of course”—a distinction that commas would have clarified. Even assuming the dual meaning of the word, which Kerouac may well have intended, “natural

⁵¹ Jon Panish, *The Color of Jazz Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 20, 140.

⁵² *Ibid*, 59; Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*, 14.

kindness” was hardly a part of minstrel portrayals of Black people. The term “kindness” implies authority, power deferred or used benevolently—the sort of privilege that minstrelsy expressly denied to African Americans.

More important, minstrelsy relied on a racial discourse that denied Black agency, allowing only for the gaze of white spectators. Instead, by portraying Parker as “digging [my date] Mardou several times,” Kerouac invests the Black gaze not only with agency, but with authority, suggesting that the jazzman’s blessing of their transgressive relationship was more significant than the dominant view—a complete *reversal* of the 1950s social hierarchy. Finally, Panish ignores the discursive process of jazz improvisation. As Kerouac effused: “the king and founder of the bop generation at least the sound of it in digging his audience digging the eyes, the secret eyes himself watching, as he just pursed his lips and let great lungs and immortal fingers work.” Throughout *The Subterraneans*, the eye, the gaze and its vision, connote subjectivity—seeking, longing, desire, and passionate intellect. In another passage (unexamined by Panish), Kerouac describes a “Red Drum session where Art Blakey was whaling like mad and Thelonious Monk sweating leading the generation with his elbow chords, eyeing the band madly to lead them on, *the monk and saint of bop*.”⁵³ It was the communication between audience and performer, which so many jazz greats have noted as fundamental to live improvisation, that underpinned these representation of musical virtuosity.

⁵³ Panish, *The Color of Jazz*, 59; Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*, 14, 84. Other examples of Kerouac’s vision metaphor include a scene in the bohemian Black Mask bar, where the “leader of the subterraneans” sat with “head thrown back thin dark eyes watching everybody as if in sudden slow astonishment and ‘Here we are little ones and now what my dears’,” and another in which “Pondering Mardou does not know which way to turn but suddenly I tell her of my quick talk with Yuri . . . ‘He said to me ‘Leo I don’t want to make your girl Mardou, after all I have no eyes—.’ ‘Oh, so he has no eyes! A hell of a thing to say!’ (the same teeth of glee now the portals where pass angry winds and her eyes glitter).” Even the main protagonist’s name, Leo Percepied, is an elaborate pun on “perception,” “eyed,” and “pie-eyed,” a common 1950s term meaning drunk. See pp. 4, 96.

Panish mocks Kerouac's intimations that Dizzy Gillespie valued him as a fan and criticizes him for ignoring Parker's life, and thus his full subjectivity, offstage. Yet this elides the fact that Kerouac *was* one of the few white fans to follow the early beboppers at Minton's—which, at least according to David Amram, did indeed earn Gillespie's admiration. Both Pony Poindexter and Slim Gaillard also noted the writer's presence at their shows, welcoming him as “a great listener.” “Jack showed up every night,” recalled Gaillard, “and stood with his back against the wall and while he listened, all the girls would cruise by and admire him. Between sets, I'd stand there right next to him.”⁵⁴ And although Parker's personal life is never explored in Kerouac's novels, the lives of *other* less-known musicians are given more full and sympathetic treatment, integrated into Kerouac's subjective “mad” world. “On the corner of Fourth and Folsom an hour later,” wrote Kerouac, describing a moment between sets at a jazz club, “I stood with Ed Fournier, a San Francisco alto man who waited with me while Dean made a phone call in a saloon to have Roy Johnson pick us up.” Asserting that it “wasn't anything much, we were just talking,” Kerouac quoted Fournier, offering the jazzman's view of his own work: “I blow a sweet tone wherever I go and if people don't like it ain't nothin I can do about it.”

At daybreak, Moriarty and Paradise accompanied their African-American friend, Walter, back to his apartment, where they “sat around the humble table to drink the beer and tell the stories.” Kerouac's portrayal of Black life was doubtlessly problematic, with Walter's “tenement” part of Kerouac's nocturnal picturesque, contrasted with the staid

⁵⁴ Lind, “When Jazz Was King,” 10; Morgan, *Beat Generation in San Francisco*, 134; Amram, *Offbeat*, 73. Amram asserts that Gillespie thought Kerouac was “one of the first to understand what Bird and I were doing.” See also Jack Kerouac, “Origins of the Beat Generation,” in Grana and Grana, eds., *On Bohemia*, 198.

white world —“Holy flowers floating in the air, were all these tired faces in the dawn of Jazz America.” (Not to mention that his admiration grew in part from Walter’s domination of his wife, who “never said a word.”)⁵⁵ Yet Kerouac’s inclusion of these conversations, in spaces suggesting social equality and intimacy, drew the faint but visible outlines of a 1950s cross-racial community that was decidedly uncommon elsewhere, but which sometimes took shape in Greenwich Village and North Beach. While Kerouac claimed a more privileged position in this process for the Beats than was their due, he nonetheless represented the audience perspective in a dialectic that most jazz musicians understood as fundamental to improvisation: the interaction between players and listeners.⁵⁶ Kerouac celebrated this interaction, blurring the (color) line between jazzmen and audiences, claiming interracial alliances (however illusory) and questioning American assumptions of racial caste (however erratically).

There is more than a hint of inscribed spectatorship in *On the Road*’s projection of a dominant Self onto the Other. But to reduce cross-racial identification to this alone would be a form of racial essentialism, suggesting that white and Black minds never can meet. Culture, which the anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines as the “webs of meaning” humans themselves spin, offers threads which can be woven into new social fabrics, sometimes offering space for a new kind of identity. This process of identity formation is more complex than the biology or even the sociology of race. If, as scholars Eric Lott, Ronald Radano, and Paul Gilroy have shown, the racist exploitation of minstrelsy could

⁵⁵ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 204-6.

⁵⁶ I would suggest that live jazz improvisation fits into the dialectic’s basic schema of thesis/antithesis/synthesis. The musicians propose a theme (*thesis*), understood by them as an expression of self, that is subsequently understood by listeners as their own subjective experience (*antithesis*). Performers and audiences finally become aware of this tension and seek to transcend it through their interaction (*synthesis*), an unstable state which is continually renewed with each new improvisatory theme.

carry “love” along with its “theft,” then the complex historical processes of America’s jazz community surely did. The “roots and routes” (to borrow Gilroy’s inimitable phrase) that defined jazz as a transnational and cross-racial cultural production were not linear and neat. They ramified and tangled, branching in reaction to new environments, modernity and countermodernity, racism and antiracism, twisting back and interweaving, attracted by difference and novelty, affinity, tradition, and familiarity.⁵⁷

Mingus’s *Beneath the Underdog* illustrated these “roots and routes,” depicting an all-star jam session in ecstatic style, but with an insider’s sense that often eluded Kerouac that captured the multilayered meanings of jazz improvisation:

“When are you motherfuckers going to stop talking and start playing, instead of Dodo and Stan over there jacking off?”
 “Miles, you’re so vulgar.”
 “I want to hear Bird blow, not all this dumb-ass conversation.”
 “So gone. One, two, three, four.”
 “Yeah, Bird. Play, baby! Go, man!”
 “Hooray!”
 “Ladies and gentlemen, will you all shut up and just listen to this motherfucker blowing!”
 “Miles! Careful, man, you can’t say that.”
 “Schitt, man, I put my hand over the mike on ‘motherfucker.’ Remember Monk calling the club owner in Detroit a motherfucker seven times on the mike ‘cause he didn’t have a good piano?”
 “He had it next night though. If he’d called him ‘sir’ he’d of had the same old clunker.”
 “Who’s this Buddy Collette, Mingus?”
 “. . . He plays flute, clarinet, everything—just like the white man says you’re supposed to play and a little fuller.”
 “Cat named Paul Desmond up in Frisco plays like that. You heard him?” . . .
 “Go on, Dodo! Man, that ofay sure can play! And that drummer too. What’s his name?”
 “Stan Levy [*sic*]. He’s a Jew. You know them Jew boys got soul and gone.”
 “Gone. Take it out. . . Hooray! Yeah!!”

Such praise for “ofays” was uncommon among Black jazzmen, yet Stan Levey and a

⁵⁷ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 93-5; Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19-20, 26, 29-44; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1-5, 19.

handful of others were continually singled out by those such as Dizzy Gillespie as “excellent musicians”—to the extent that Black bandleaders were willing to test the bounds of segregation, despite the greater risk than for their white counterparts.⁵⁸ While rare, this kind of cultural exchange carried liberatory potential, a flickering glint of freedom on the horizon of possibility. Just as humans construct the barricades that divide us, so can we dismantle them.

The jazz underground was no utopia, of course. Despite the centrality of communal exchanges, nightclub culture was not without its cleavages and disagreements. Not all musicians agreed that audiences participated in jazz-club improvisation, insisting it was merely “practicing in public” and that musical technique and preparation were primary. Along similar lines, Rexroth contentiously critiqued the Beats’ romantic primitivism, calling them “debauched Puritans” who “embrace the false image [of the American Negro] which their enemies the squares have painted” and stating, “As Charles Mingus once said to me, ‘We didn’t evolve the new forms of modern jazz in dirty cellars full of dope peddlers. We worked it out in people’s homes, which we didn’t call “pads” either. And our families stood around and listened and approved.’”⁵⁹ Lines of gender and sexuality further separated performers and audiences. The misogyny in Mingus’s memoir was more extreme than most, but its homophobia was fairly typical in the jazz world,

⁵⁸ Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 158-9; Gillespie, *To Be or Not . . . to Bop*, 242-3, 246-9; “Miles Davis,” from Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography*, in Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 256-8. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 140-62, 170-93.

⁵⁹ While jazz was “an exploration in public,” insisted West Coast saxophonist Jackie Kelso, “if you’re really attending to your business, you are not at all concerned with whether or not your offering is being consumed by those people out there . . . it’s a private event between performing musicians. . . . But a jazz performance, a pure jazz performance, in a sense, totally ignores the audience.” From the audience “you get the energy” but not the content of “this idea or that idea.” Jackie Kelso, Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi, 1993, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 109-10; Kenneth Rexroth, “Some Thoughts on Jazz as Music, as Revolt, as Mystique,” *Bird in the Bush* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 40. See also Porter, *What’s This Thing Called Jazz*, 240-86.

associating homosexuality with weakness, filth, or criminality. Jazz musicians and Beats—including those such as Billie Holiday and Kerouac who were bisexual—routinely spoke in derogatory tones of “faggots” and “dykes.” Pony Poindexter epitomized this trend when he leveled the most heinous insult he could muster against Richard Nixon, pegging him as a racist “faggot.”⁶⁰

Race remained at the center of tensions and controversies within the jazz world. For instance, Dave Brubeck’s meteoric rise drew a major outcry from Black musicians, who saw the media’s preference for this white performer despite his more watered-down “cool” style—even as critics condemned the rejection of white jazzmen as racist “Crow Jim.” Assertions of racial divisions among audiences were common, such as Art Blakey’s famous pronouncement that Bird held no allure for Black audiences who “don’t even know him” and had “never heard of him and care less.” Poindexter expressed dislike for white slummers who came to Bop City, bringing police raids in their wake. And Black critics frequently decried the predominantly white audiences in jazz clubs, despite the feeling that jazz was an authentic Black art form “which ‘we’ are largely responsible for.” Moreover, Black musicians resented the preponderance of white nightclub ownership. Black-owned clubs remained in segregated areas, such as Small’s Paradise in Harlem or Bop City in the Fillmore, but the mass media largely ignored these venues, forcing musicians to perform in the Village or North Beach if they wanted to advance their careers. Nightclubs were first and foremost businesses, with mostly slim profit margins, and owners often became antagonists. To musicians, in the words of Orrin Keepnews,

⁶⁰ Poindexter, *Pony Express*, 77.

owners were “not exactly the *enemy*,” but “at least the *opposition*.”⁶¹

Rexroth concurred, privately complaining, “I find this jazz poetry thing extremely unpleasant—nightclub owners & bookers *etc are* really about the worst people there are.” Poindexter was even more blunt, betraying an undercurrent of anti-Semitism by singling out Jewish proprietors and stating that white-controlled clubs and media offered “jazz directed at white audiences and presented in such a manner as to exclude most of the black players.” Mingus’s admiration for Stan Levey belied a similar streak of anti-Semitism, although the bassist also declared solidarity with Jews as fellow sufferers under white supremacy.⁶² Jon Panish has rightly argued that white understandings of jazz often relied on notions of “color blindness,” which made the social and political histories that informed Black music invisible. Moreover, this blindness paved the way for white liberal resistance to the kind of “collectivism” that might have offered deeper solutions to economic and social inequalities. Even Brubeck’s and Gillespie’s universalism, most notably displayed during State Department-sponsored global tours, carried shades of American cultural imperialism, with jazz used as a pawn in the larger Cold War game of wooing non-aligned African and Asian nations and opening new markets.⁶³

But alongside these conflicts were acknowledgments of interracial solidarity—even from those like Poindexter, whose memoir was steeped in Black Power sensibilities.

⁶¹ Reisner, *Bird*, 51; Poindexter, *Pony Express*, 44-5, 56, 71-2; Louise Davis Stone, “Theater Wing,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 8, 1964, p. 10.

⁶² Keepnews, *The View from Within*, 123; Kenneth Rexroth to Lawrence Lipton, November 18, 1957, Box 2, Folder 6, Lipton Papers, UCLA; Writings by CM, p. 747, Box 45, Folder 10 and Folder 8, p. 570, and Charles Mingus to Max L. Arons (AFM), undated (c.1961), Box 45, Folder 3, Mingus Collection, LOC.

⁶³ See Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); and John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). See also Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996) for a critical view of this process and Matthew Fraser, *Weapons of Mass Distraction: Soft Power and American Empire* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2003) for a positive view of soft power.

He noted the Black Hawk as a “favorite hangout for those so inclined—black and white,” where “we had a ball” playing with the Brubeck Quartet, until the media inequitably raised the latter’s star (and salary). He also praised the Coffee Gallery and the Cellar’s “pure bop” and “beatnik” patrons, who came to hear him back Rexroth and Ferlinghetti’s poetry readings. While he was a sharp critic of Rexroth as “a performer,” with “no sense of drama” and, worse, “no sense of rhythm,” Poindexter nonetheless praised the “substance of his poetry [that] spoke of the depth of his being turned on by a black woman,” which he read “with a sort of passion and this got him over.” Poindexter reveled in North Beach’s interracial community, where “everything was swinging.” This unity was marred only by police harassment of mixed couples and the occasional racist “cracker” in the audience, for whom the scene “defied all their ideas of what life should be in America.”⁶⁴ These transgressive spaces, mixed with the centrality of bohemian bar talk, could be culturally effective—even if patrons were not always conscious of their underlying politics.

Currents of jazz universalism in no way canceled out the racism that haunted nightclub culture. But while patrons came mostly for music and merrymaking, undercurrents of social critique did occasionally surface. Given that interracial relations were so rare in the 1950s, these conversations were all the more poignant. Poindexter remembered the political discussions during breakfasts that followed all-night jams at Bop City, for example, in which the Korean War, immigration policy, municipal corruption, and the “fact that racism is so ingrained in the United States” were topics du jour. He recalled the whole San Francisco jazz-bohemian scene as “intellectual,” because “cats understood about poetry, they understood about sculpture—and they understood

⁶⁴ Poindexter, *Pony Express*, 70, 163-8.

about jazz.”⁶⁵ And Blakey’s comments notwithstanding, there is substantial evidence that Charlie Parker enjoyed a racially diverse audience.⁶⁶ Jazzmen like Coltrane often spoke of jazz as a “force for unity,” while his nightclub audiences—which one journalist estimated to be just under half Black—were described as a miniature “United Nations.” Coltrane continually emphasized the style’s universalism, insisting (even in the Black-Power era of the late 1960s) that there was little difference between Black and white audiences (or, strikingly, musicians), asserting that jazz had “nothing to do with questions of skin color.” It seems somehow appropriate that when a friend who headed the Interracial Jazz Society in Baltimore wanted to reach Coltrane with a Christmas card in 1957, he sent it to the Five Spot Cafe.⁶⁷

“GIVE ME LIBERTY!”: BRUBECK, MINGUS, AND THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

The interracial community fostered in New York and San Francisco nightclubs was part of a larger discourse about civil rights in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This discourse in part rested on white liberal associations between cosmopolitanism and sophistication, which fortified indignation toward southern Jim Crow. But just as significant was the universalism within jazz circles themselves, seen in the outspoken

⁶⁵ Ibid, 147; Lind, “When Jazz Was King,” 10. In an interesting analogue to this, one journalist compared the debates over John Coltrane’s music to “some of the truculent, hysterical aspects of political arguments in neighborhood bars.” See DeVito, *Coltrane on Coltrane*, 229.

⁶⁶ Dan Burley, “Back Door Stuff: Introducing Bleep, The Blop,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 8, 1947, p. 19; ‘Slam’ Stewart And ‘Yardbird’ Parker Put 52nd Street Back In Swing Groove,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 16, 1947, p. 10; Meredith Johns, “Parker’s ‘Mood Music’ Is Out Of This World,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 14, 1950, p. 20; “Turkey Day Weekend Jams Feature Southside Cafes,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 5, 1953, p. 19; “Death Of ‘Yardbird’ Parker May Affect Bebop’s Fight To ‘Live’: New York (Special),” *The Chicago Defender*, March 26, 1955, p. 6. For a revealing fictional portrayal of Parker’s esteem in the Black community, see James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues,” in Herbert Gold, ed., *Fiction of the Fifties: A Decade of American Writing* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1959), 31-64 and the John Williams novel, *Night Song*.

⁶⁷ DeVito, *Coltrane on Coltrane*, 9, 30, 201, 221, 175-6, 181-2, 263, 283-4. Coltrane’s friend was August Blume, who founded the Interracial Jazz Society in response to a 1955 Baltimore law segregating nightclubs. The law was quickly overturned. See George J. Bennett, “Integration through Jazz,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 6, 1955, p. 7. When Blume mentioned the Christmas card, Coltrane responded, “I think I got it.”

activism of performers such as Gillespie, Coltrane, Mingus, and Brubeck, as well as club owners like D'Lugoff. Moreover, the interaction between the two cities united the bicoastal jazz bohemia into a national nightclub culture. New York had long been established, at the least since the end of World War II, as a global center of the arts, jazz, and print culture—what Hentoff called “the most sophisticated city in the country” and Kerouac termed the “Nation of People” and “the place where Paper America is born.” The network of clubs and musicians that made up the national touring circuit were connected by the Associated Booking Company and its rival booking agency MCA, who divided almost all of the major jazz acts, from Brubeck, Gillespie, Chet Baker, and Billie Holiday to Davis, Mingus, and Gerry Mulligan. These artists made their way across the country, anchoring themselves on the coasts at the Black Hawk, Jazz Workshop, Birdland, and Five Spot, while hitting Chicago’s Blue Note, Detroit’s Flame Show Bar, Kansas City’s Orchid Lounge, and innumerable roadhouses and concert halls across the Midwest and South.⁶⁸ But San Francisco now shared its east-coast counterpart’s cosmopolitan connotations. Herb Caen declared that the city’s jazzy sensibility had become a truism, with “the good jazz of Cal Tjader filtering out of the Black Hawk and getting lost under

⁶⁸ Ironically, the circuit was largely dominated by one man: Joe Glaser. Starting in the 1920s cabaret business in Chicago, Glaser managed Louis Armstrong for over three decades, all the while controlling the horn player’s funds with infamous paternalism. Denounced by Barney Josephson as a racist misogynist with a seedy criminal past, praised by Billie Holiday as a caring friend, it is difficult to disentangle the man from the myth. But whatever the reality of his character, this brash, loudmouthed, hardworking, pragmatic owner of ABC was arguably the most important figure in the postwar jazz business. It is a small but telling detail that ABC itineraries sent to Dave Brubeck throughout the 1950s generally included the names of the venues only in New York and San Francisco. Other tour stops simply listed the city and the date. Chet Baker, *As Though I Had Wings: The Lost Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 64-5; Gillespie, *To Be or Not . . . To Bop*, 296, 446; Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 79-83; Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 90; Hentoff, *The Jazz Life*, 118; Billie Holiday, with William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1956, 1984), 34-41, 63-9, 104-110, 116; Barney Josephson with Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Cafe Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 58-9; Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 2009), 80; Anita O’Day, “Anita O’Day,” in Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz*, 191-2; Bert Block (ABC) to Dave Brubeck, August 27, 1954, Series 1.A, Box 1, Folder 4, Brubeck Collection, UP.

the stars that shine down on Turk Street. . . . Oh, Pearl of the Pacific . . . port of call for half the world and beloved landmark for the other half.”⁶⁹

The prominence of San Francisco columnist Ralph Gleason and the booking policies of the Black Hawk and Jazz Workshop were also significant symbols of the bicoastal network. Starting in the late 1950s, Gleason’s *Chronicle* column was syndicated nationwide and he published a book of collected essays, *Jam Session*, in 1961, making him a recognized counterpart to Boston’s Nat Hentoff. And with two renowned nightclubs continuously booking bicoastal headliners, San Francisco was solidified as a jazz city alongside New York and Chicago. Moreover, the jazz press and nightclub circuits were fully intertwined, as illustrated by a tragic incident concerning Gleason and the Jazz Workshop. In 1966, Workshop owner Art Auerbach died unexpectedly of a heart attack at age 39. His wife Esther, with the help of her friend Marlene Inman, took over management of the club, but their first scheduled act failed to show up, instead confirming the cliché of musicians’ unreliability by staying at a party after a show in Texas. Auerbach and Inman called on Gleason, who “spent hours on the phone . . . helping get in touch with booking agents in New York,” and finally hiring Hampton Hawes as a replacement.⁷⁰

These networks also had political implications, connecting a new generation of musicians with Popular Front activists and civil rights organizations. After an early New York appearance by the Brubeck Quartet, Paul Desmond wrote excitedly to his father that

⁶⁹ Hentoff, *Free Speech for Me—But Not for Thee*, 326; Kerouac, *On the Road*, 106; Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 231; Caen, *Only in San Francisco*, 251-2.

⁷⁰ “Art Auerbach Dies; Jazz Club Owner,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 2, 1966, n.p. clipping in Examiner Morgue, SFPL; Marlene Inman, “Letters to Datebook,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Wednesday, December 29, 2004; Author Interview: Charles and Marlene Inman. Gleason later went on to co-found *Rolling Stone* magazine and work with Fantasy Records’ film department, which produced the underground hit *Fritz the Cat* and the Oscar-winning *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

John Hammond and Judy Holliday were in attendance. Hammond recruited Brubeck for a series of benefit concerts, solidifying the piano man's place in socially-conscious entertainment circles well into the 1960s (when Hammond would similarly work with Bob Dylan and Aretha Franklin.)⁷¹ It did not take much to convince Brubeck, an outspoken voice for racial equality who cemented his role in the Freedom Struggle through a series of events in the 1950s and early '60s. In 1957, Brubeck canceled a concert in Dallas when promoters refused his demand to integrate the audience. Similarly, after African-American bassist Eugene Wright joined the group in 1958, Brubeck turned down shows in Athens, Georgia and South Africa, during their State Department tour, when local officials insisted he replace Wright. And in 1960, all but three of twenty-five college concert dates of the Quartet's southern US tour were canceled as segregated schools spurned the "mixed group" and Brubeck again refused to replace Wright.⁷²

Scholars such as Penny Von Eschen and Stephen Crist have discussed the significance of Brubeck's stand, particularly in relation to the State Department tour's purpose of redeeming America's image abroad. While they are correct to assert that tour showed interaction between "domestic and international realms—of the struggle for civil rights at home and abroad intersecting with the global promotion of American democracy," Brubeck's stand also must be placed within the national domestic discussion about civil rights—in particular its challenge to the social and spatial logic of southern

⁷¹ Paul Desmond to "Dad," undated "Monday" (c. 1953), Box 1, Folder 4, Desmond Papers, UP; Larry Bennett (ABC) to Dave Brubeck, January 26, 1956, Series 1.A, Box 1, Folder 39, Brubeck Collection, UP.

⁷² BJ Furgerson to Dave Brubeck, October 22, 1957, Series 1.C, 1957: A-I, Brubeck Collection, UP; Ralph Gleason, "You Can't Play Here," *San Francisco Chronicle: This World*, September 21, 1958, p. 4; Ralph Gleason, "An Appeal from Dave Brubeck," *Down Beat*, February 18, 1960, pp. 12-13 and "Perspectives," March 17, 1960, p. 43. See also Series 1.E, Clippings, 1959-1960, Brubeck Collection, UP, especially *New York Post*, February 24, 1959 and *Jet*, April 30, 1959.

segregation.⁷³ It is significant that Brubeck, a symbol of jazz “sophistication” since his 1954 appearance on the cover of *Time*, had increasingly moved from nightclub dates to college concerts. His cancellation of the Dallas show coincided with the tumultuous integration of Central High School in Little Rock, during which federal troops were used to overcome Governor Faubus’s staunch opposition. “This racial aspect of American life is at best tragic,” wrote an African-American friend to Brubeck in the wake of these events, adding, “thank you for taking such a stand.” Expressly tying inclusion to liberty, he continued: “Some people feel that they have the right to draw lines that exclude people and/or groups from the human family. . . . Once freedom is denied further denials of rights become easier.”⁷⁴

The canceled 1960 tour sparked a firestorm of publicity, as Ralph Gleason’s coverage was picked up by African-American newspapers and the Associated Press just days before the southern *sin-ins* began in February. Interestingly, racially mixed groups had long performed in southern nightclubs without much notice—an indication of the divide between nightlife experiences and the politics of institutionalized racism and state power. The difference was that Brubeck was bringing this nightclub sensibility to the surface, as implied in the title of his breakthrough album, *Jazz Goes to College*. “We specified in our contract that we would not take a mixed group,” wrote the Dean of Southeastern Louisiana College to Joe Glaser. “It’s the policy of our school.” The

⁷³ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 48; Stephen A. Crist, “Jazz as Democracy? Dave Brubeck and Cold War Politics,” *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 133-174. See also Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷⁴ BJ Furgerson to Dave Brubeck, October 22, 1957, Series 1.C, 1957: A-I, Brubeck Collection, UP. Furgerson also stated that “I have felt that democracy hinges upon consensus for it cuts across all groups—majority and minority,” and, “What rankles me most about this race business is that it interferes with my effectiveness to act as an individual citizen.”

University of Mississippi, Millsaps College, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and a host of other schools soon followed. “The trouble is not with the students,” Brubeck insightfully (and tactfully) stated. “It’s the state college officials, who do not want to be cut off from state funds over this matter.” Desmond concurred, adding a satirical jab that invoked Cold-War civil rights: “I feel sorry for the kids down there, but maybe all is not yet lost. The State Department could always send us on a tour through the south!”⁷⁵

Added to this mix was a financial component that ignored questions of structural inequality, but fit progressive liberal notions of shared sacrifice in the name of social justice: Brubeck forfeited \$40,000 in profits from the tour rather than replace Wright. Out of this, Desmond earned a percentage cut while the rhythm section, including Wright, earned a flat salary. Letters of support, including one from the NAACP, noted Brubeck’s insistence that the “group is interracial and will remain so,” stating that “we do not underestimate the financing loss incurred nor do we overestimate the very valuable and tangible contribution that you have made to the fight for human rights.” One San Francisco supporter wrote that, for those who “live, work and study” interracially, “integration works in the quiet of everyday routine as well as in the racket of intellectual discussion.” But, she continued, “seldom does one of us integrated Americans have the opportunity to defend this everyday fact of our lives as a precious necessity.” By choosing “friendship and craftsmanship” over money, Brubeck had “given us all an

⁷⁵ Pony Poindexter’s memoir, for example, described southern nightclub shows in detail and they differed little from his experiences in the North. The main difference for Black musicians came when they left the club, finding meals and accommodations hard to come by. Brubeck’s stand also garnered international coverage, particularly in Australia. Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 16; Gleason, “An Appeal from Dave Brubeck”; Poindexter, *The Pony Express*, 87-8, 196-7, Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 70-82, and Jackie Kelso Oral History, UCLA.

example of what is at the beating heart of our American life: human honor.”⁷⁶

Throughout the episode, Wright remained upbeat and above the fray, stating that if southerners “ever do get themselves together, they’re in for a treat,” and that “my feeling is: You don’t lose when you know in your heart you’re right.” But he also betrayed his disappointment at a deeper sociocultural level, telling a reporter, “Wherever I go, I’ll be playing the blues, the good old 100-year blues.” As Gleason put it, “Brubeck’s next Columbia LP is called *The Southern Scene*. On it, Eugene Wright plays a bass solo in *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen*.”⁷⁷

MAX ROACH, MINGUS, AND THE SOUND OF CIVIL RIGHTS

By 1960, of course, sounds of Black protest more unmistakable than Wright’s solo were being heard. It is no coincidence that the first sit-ins took place in college-town eateries. SNCC founders, like many young Americans, were familiar with the Rebel Cafe milieu, so the idea of claiming public space in places of refreshment and discussion must have seemed obvious—however dangerous. Two recordings that year reflected this claim on Black visibility and public equality: Max Roach’s *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* and *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*. The more notable was *We Insist!*, which in addition to Abbey Lincoln’s politically-charged vocals used a photo of a sit-in for its cover. Roach was influenced by Sonny Rollins’s 1958 *Freedom Suite*, which stated in its liner notes, “America is deeply rooted in Negro culture: its colloquialisms, its humor, its music. How ironic that the Negro . . . who has exemplified the humanities in his very existence, is being rewarded with inhumanity.” *We Insist!* also grew from tangible

⁷⁶ Terea Hall Pitman, Everett P. Brandon, and Ellis H. Casson (NAACP) to Dave Brubeck, January 13, 1960, Series 1.C, Box 2, 1960: A-F, Brubeck Collection, UP; Pamela Marsh Markmann, “Brubeck’s Stand,” Letters to the Editor, *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 19, 1960, p. 24.

⁷⁷ George E. Pitts, “Give Brubeck Credit for a Slap at Bias,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 13, 1960, n.p. clipping in Series 1.E, 1960, Brubeck Collection, UP; Gleason, “An Appeal from Dave Brubeck.”

African-American institutional foundations. Roach and Mingus had previously gained more control over their careers by founding their own record label in the mid 1950s, and Roach stated that *We Insist!* was originally conceived as musical theater, “commissioned by the Junior League of the NAACP in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.”⁷⁸

The album’s sensibilities were rooted in a Harlem community of Black cultural producers, which included Roach, Lincoln, and Maya Angelou. Songs like “Driva’ Man” and “Freedom Day” were classic Civil Rights statements. With lyrics that compared modern racial oppression to slavery, the album’s style drew from hard bop, blues, and even musical theater, with hints of *Porgy and Bess* and Duke Ellington’s Cultural Front piece, *Jump for Joy*. Maybe most significant in the context of its times, *We Insist!* channeled the sounds of gospel, invoking the churches that were fundamental to Black political organizing—much like Ray Charles, who also gained wide acclaim in 1960. The album captured these elements most fully in the sound poem, “Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace,” while the all-percussion instrumental, “All Africa,” stood as a distinct pan-African statement and a musical precursor to the Black Arts movement led by nationalists such as Amiri Baraka.

Mingus Presents also insisted on Black public visibility and self-determination. Recorded for the same label as *We Insist!*—Candid Records, with Nat Hentoff in an advisory role—the album was part of a conscious effort among cultural producers to give the Freedom Struggle a voice. While *We Insist!* had slender ties to the nightclub scene (Roach and Lincoln met, for example, at Chicago’s Black Orchid in 1957), *Mingus*

⁷⁸ Ted Sirota, “Max Roach,” November 17, 2011 in *Ted Sirota Music* <http://www.tedsirota.com/music/max-roach> (accessed March 12, 2013).

Presents grew directly from the Rebel Cafe milieu. As described in Hentoff's liner notes, the songs evolved during a stint at Greenwich Village's Showplace club, and the album's recording session was designed to "set a mood that might resemble a night in the club." This included dimming the studio lights and, most remarkably, the faux stage banter heard on the album, in which Mingus announces song titles and warns nonexistent patrons to refrain from talking and rattling cocktail glasses. "I finally realized," Mingus asserted, "that a lot of jazz records don't make it because guys almost unconsciously change their approach in a studio from what they do every night. I finally wanted to make an album the way we are on the job."⁷⁹

As Mingus's gendered language suggests, the record is a testament to the muscular jazz that predominated in 1950s nightclubs. It also evoked the experimental and participatory aspects of nightclub culture, as suggested by the ambitious "All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother," whose "title probably came from the way the audience was reacting one night." The song rested heavily on antiphony—call and response among instruments—and includes sounds with counterhegemonic potential, a protest against commercialism as inexorably intertwined with institutionalized racism. The wails, grunts, and cries of Eric Dolphy's saxophone, in conversation with Mingus's serpentine bass, advanced an escape from Adornian culture-industry totality, a refusal to acquiesce to either the demands of musical convention or the marketplace. Meanwhile, "Folk Forms, no. 1," with its aspects of jump-blues and R&B, forcefully reclaimed jazz as an expression of African-American community. Interestingly, *Mingus Presents* embraced integration more fully than *We Insist!* This was most apparent in "Original Faubus Fables," which decried and satirized the governor's obstructionism

⁷⁹ Liner Notes, *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* (Candid: 1960).

with its call-and-response shouts between Mingus and drummer Dannie Richmond, who shouted, “Nazi fascist supremists! He won’t let us in his school—then he’s a fool!” The song’s dual refrains feature the two musical compatriots singing in unison, “Oh Lord, don’t let them shoot us; oh Lord, don’t let them stab us,” and, deliberately echoing the chants of a determined crowd, “Two, four, six, eight, they brainwash and teach you hate!”

As the *Amsterdam News* reported in 1962, both Mingus and Roach, along with Miles Davis, gained dual reputations in the African-American community as virtuosos and jazz’s “angry men,” refusing to kowtow to white tastes. That September, after finishing a run at the Five Spot, Mingus announced he was leaving the United States. A friend told the *News*, “Charlie is a little tired of our brand of democracy.”⁸⁰ Although he later abandoned the plan, Mingus had made his point: Black life in America must be lived on its own terms.

Mingus was not shy in pointing out pay discrepancies between himself and Dave Brubeck or Chet Baker—whom he considered weak imitations of Monk and Davis. Amiri Baraka echoed this sentiment, declaring that cool jazz was a reaction to bebop separationism, and therefore represented the intellectualization of bop, as seen in Brubeck’s popularity with college kids, and not a serious popular movement among Black audiences (despite Davis’s own popularity).⁸¹ Mingus expressly tied this musical phenomenon to Black exploitation by the white culture industry: “Jazz is big business to the white man and you can’t move without him. We just work ants. He owns the magazines, agencies, record companies and all the joints that sell jazz to the public. If

⁸⁰ Ibid; Dave Hepburn, “Mingus Leaves U.S. Will Live In Majorca,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 8, 1962, p. 18.

⁸¹ Writings by CM, Box 45, Folder 5, pp. 199-202 and Folder 10, pp. 842-6, Mingus Collection, LOC; Jones (Baraka), *Blues People*, 204-14.

you won't sell out and you try to fight they won't hire you and they give a bad picture of you with that false publicity . . . Then if some honest club owner tries to get hold of you to book you, they tell you're not available or you don't draw or you'll tear up the joint like you was a gorilla . . . But if you behave, boy, you'll get booked—except for less than the white cats that copy your playing and likely either the agent or owner'll pocket the difference.”⁸²

While Mingus's critique, like Baraka's, ignored Miles Davis's position as the highest-paid jazzman of the period (not to mention his own well-deserved reputation for tempestuousness, which appears in both white and Black sources), he nonetheless convincingly connected economic exploitation to political liberation. Writing to a friend who was helping collect royalties from a British record company, Mingus put his thoughts into characteristically direct and volatile terms. “Give me liberty or give me death. Yeah that's how I feel. Paul Revere style, free me from your political strings of bondage or kill me,” he wrote. “How did you get mixed up with such phoney? Man that Crow stuff is all shot to hell, it's Freedom Day. You cats got atomic bombs . . . But I still feel like I can whip whitey with all his guns and bombs [threatening] the world. Yea! Like where's the button to the atomic bombs, Max, I'll push it and free everybody.” *Beneath the Underdog* recapitulated this sentiment in terms of armed self-defense and revolution. Like a jazzy reflection of radicals like Huey Newton and Robert Williams, Mingus proclaimed that Black musicians should follow the example of the Revolutionary Founding Fathers and load up on “some heat, guns, cannons, and be willing to die like *they* was.” He concluded by placing the tradition of American independence in the service of African-American liberation: “That's all I heard when I was a kid, how bad

⁸² Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 188-9.

they was and not afraid to die—to arms, to arms, and all that schitt . . . Show me where that atomic power button is and I’ll give them cocksuckers some liberty!”⁸³

While *We Insist!* and *Mingus Presents* were not huge sellers by the standards of popular music (although Roach would later assert that the former “sold more copies than any record I’ve ever made”), they were nonetheless important cultural statements, serving as flash points of social commentary that ignited the ethos of protest rising from the nightclub underground.⁸⁴ If Black culture in the 1920s cabaret was almost entirely exoticized entertainment, and Cafe Society’s presentation of Billie Holiday and “Strange Fruit” represented cabaret entertainment’s shift toward white liberalism, the cabaret of the late 1950s and early 1960s was where African Americans laid full claim to their culture’s place in the public sphere—especially given the period’s integrationist impulse.

FROM MYSTERY TO MOBILIZATION

As Farah Griffin has argued in her study of Holiday, Black performers, aware of the invisibility of their lives to white society, cloaked themselves in a mantle of “mystery.” “Choosing to be a mystery is the one way to maintain a semblance of control, to keep your inner self to yourself,” writes Griffin. “This is an act of agency for the unfree.” Griffin quotes the poem, “Canary,” by Rita Dove, from which she takes the title of her book: “Billie Holiday’s burned voice / had as many shadows as lights . . . / Fact is, the invention of women under siege / has been to sharpen love in the service of myth. / If you can’t be free, be a mystery.” Nina Simone explicitly rejected the racist assumptions that underpinned the myth of the mysterious jazz singer, recoiling from comparisons with Holiday: “And I deeply resented it because the comparison had nothing to do with our

⁸³ Charles Mingus to “Dear Max,” undated (c. 1965), Box 54, Folder 15, Mingus Collection, LOC; Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 191. See also Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

⁸⁴ Quoted in Ted Sirota, “Max Roach.”

musicianship and everything to do with the fact that we were both black . . . [because] in American society a black woman's talents are never truly seen for what they are."⁸⁵ The music of Roach, Lincoln, Mingus, and Simone signaled a rejection of mystery, instead demanding the recognition of their humanity, making the African-American community visible and echoing the most vocal phase of the Freedom Struggle.

Many, if not most, white fans were loath to relinquish the allure of the mysterious. Few people enjoy being disabused of their pleasurable illusions.⁸⁶ But the integrated spaces of jazz clubs offered openings that allowed white patrons the chance, for those willing to take it, to peer past received notions of race. Joyce Johnson's description of Holiday's famed impromptu Five Spot performance just before her death in 1959 illustrates this tentative shift:

I remember one night when a middle-aged, sad-faced black woman stood up beside the table where she'd been sitting and sang so beautifully in a cracked, heartbroken voice I was sure I'd heard before. There was silence when she finished, then everyone rose and began clapping. It was the great Lady Day, who had been deprived of her cabaret card by the New York police and was soon to die under arrest in a hospital bed—subject of the famous poem by Fran O'Hara, who also heard Billie Holiday sing that night:

Leaning in the john door in the 5 Spot
While she whispered a song along the keyboard
To Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing⁸⁷

With its references to Holiday's "heartbroken voice" and her death amid legal wrangling, this passage was a tenuous symbol of the move from Black jazz as a picturesque of noble suffering toward its recognition as a protest against institutional racism. Moreover, Frank O'Hara was a staunchly anti-racist participant in the Village scene, described by Baraka

⁸⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If you Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 156-8; "Nina Simone," in Barnett, *I Got Thunder*, 146-7.

⁸⁶ The explicit goal of Robin D.G. Kelley's biography of Thelonious Monk was to reveal the living human being behind the mysterious "High Priest of Bop." When I asked Lorraine Gordon, herself a politically active, progressive supporter of Black rights—not to mention a veteran of the jazz business and Monk's earliest press agent—how she felt about Kelley's praise for herself and Max as strong supporters of the pianist, she responded with disapproval, literally complaining that Kelley's book had "demystified Monk."

⁸⁷ Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 211.

as a “friend” whom he “admired [for] his genuine sophistication.” O’Hara also offers one of the few ties between New York’s gay and jazz scenes. His ode to Holiday was part of a larger movement to infuse jazz into poetry as an impetus to social change—what literary scholar Michael Magee has explicitly called “democratic symbolic action.” Baraka viewed this as a way to break from Eurocentric aesthetics, stating, “It would be better if such a poet . . . listened to the tragic verse of a Billie Holiday, than be content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe.”⁸⁸

Many in the jazz world went beyond art and engaged more directly in political action. And Rebel Cafe nightclubs were often sites in which the aesthetic and the political became publicly engaged. Max Roach’s first public performance of *We Insist!* was at a Village Gate benefit show for CORE—the organization that supported the Freedom Riders’ fight to desegregate interstate buses in 1961.⁸⁹ It is no surprise that Roach debuted his politically-charged work at D’Lugoff’s nightclub. The Village Gate was frequently the site of Civil Rights benefits—particularly for SNCC—which featured folk singers such as Seeger and Theodore Bikel alongside jazzier fare. And Maya Angelou recalled becoming directly active in civil rights through connections she made at the Gate when starring in *Cabaret for Freedom*. The public commitment to social justice which shone through her performances convinced Bayard Rustin to offer her a position with SCLC. Along with Roach and Lincoln’s Village appearances—and the blazing speeches

⁸⁸ Michael Magee, “Tribes of New York: Frank O’Hara, Amiri Baraka, and the Poetics of the Five Spot,” *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 4 (Winter, 2001): 694-726; Baraka, *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 234.

⁸⁹ The Freedom Riders themselves had direct ties to the nightclub underground through one of their own, Bill Svanoë, who later formed the Rooftop Singers with Erik Darling, Pete Seeger’s replacement in The Weavers. Svanoë’s wife, Joan Darling, was also a member of the politically conscious satirical troupe, The Living Premise, with Godfrey Cambridge. Ingrid Monson, “Revisited! *The Freedom Now Suite*,” *Jazz Perspectives* (September, 2001) in <http://jazztimes.com/articles/20130-revisited-the-freedom-now-suite>; Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 263.

of Malcolm X—Angelou recalled of this period, “The world was on fire.”⁹⁰

In San Francisco, the Cellar and the Jazz Workshop raised \$2,200 for the Freedom Riders in June 1961, presenting performers such as Dizzy Gillespie and Pony Poindexter. In a more populist vein, Ray Charles benefitted the NAACP, appearing at the Longshoreman’s Auditorium. Ralph Gleason praised Charles’s gospel and soul as the sound of the folk, calling him “an artist who spoke for the people.” Gleason may have been hyperbolic when he suggested that this signaled America’s “moral reawakening,” but he was correct that these shows contributed to a “swell of public opinion” supporting civil rights.⁹¹ In other large venues, jazzmen from Monk to Mingus also supported SNCC, most memorably at a concert at Carnegie Hall in February 1963. Brubeck lent his name as a sponsor of the event. And despite the warnings of Joe Glaser’s ABC that “I hate like the devil to see you take these kinds of dates” due to the loss of revenue, Brubeck agreed to another SNCC benefit in November. He also personally donated to both SNCC and the Highlander Folk School, which trained activists in nonviolent civil disobedience. Brubeck specifically earmarked revenue from southern performances, feeling that he was “putting Southern money to good work conquering the civil rights problem.”⁹²

⁹⁰ Angelou also recalled *We Insist!* being smuggled into South Africa as a work of political subversion. D’Lugoff Oral History, NYPL, 40; Reminiscences of Art D’Lugoff, Columbia, 36-7; Press releases and photos, Box 18, Folder 6 and Box 50, Folder 20, Ivan Black Papers, New York Performing Arts Library; “Music In and Out of New York,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1963, p. 98; Maya Angelou, *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 702-3, 729, 735.

⁹¹ Ralph J. Gleason, “On and Off the Record,” *San Francisco Chronicle: This World*, June 18, 1961, p. 31, “Charles Is Riding the Crest of Several Waves Simultaneously,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 8, 1961, p. 15, and “Jazz Clubs Play for CORE Riders,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 27, 1961, p. 35.

⁹² Charmian Slade to Robert Bundy, September 24, 1963, Series 1.A, Box 6, Folder 41, Bob Bundy to Brubeck, September 26, 1963, Series 1.A, Box 6, Folder 5, A. Philip Randolph to Brubeck, July 11, 1963, Series 1.A, Box 6, Folder 9, Charles H. Boyle (Highlander Folk School) to Dave and Iola Brubeck, July 15, 1961 and Boyle to Brubeck, May 25, 1961, Series 1.A, Box 5, Folder 10, C. Conrad Browne (Highlander) to Brubeck, September 11, 1964, Series 1.A, Box 8, Folder 12, Iola Brubeck to Oscar Cohen, November 13, 1964, Series 1.A, Box, 8, Folder 38, Brubeck Collection, UP; “Sit-in benefit bill headed by Monk, Mingus,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 2, 1963, p. 11. Randolph credited Brubeck with raising “hundreds of

Both fundraising and the rising public profile of the Movement drew on long-existing social networks. John Hammond helped connect Brubeck with Highlander, as he had with earlier benefit shows. And Ivan Black, Theodore Bikel, and Lorraine Hansberry were among those who kept the pianist in contact with SNCC's organizing needs. Black, whom D'Lugoff had "inherited" from Cafe Society's Barney Josephson—and whose vocal opposition to HUAC had made him reliant on nightclubs as a source of income—was a key liaison between Village nightclubs and SNCC. Black organized Civil Rights benefits throughout the early 1960s, including a 1963 concert supporting CORE at the Five Spot with Monk and Bill Evans.⁹³

These benefits used the networks of the jazz underground to help establish an independent source of funding for civil rights organizing. Yet they also showed the limits of white liberal support. For instance, Brubeck began to turn down benefit shows in 1965, claiming that despite his "sympathy with . . . 'the cause'," "the time has come when we are besieged with so many requests for free appearances for worthy causes that we are forced to decline most of them, simply to maintain our value on the concert circuit." As late as 1968, Brubeck remained publicly vocal about racial justice, however, declaring that, although the Movement had "won" the battle for school integration, the US had failed to live up to its "basic guarantee which is equality of man to our citizens."⁹⁴

thousands of dollars for the civil rights movement." See also Ingrid Monson, "Monk Meets SNCC," *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 2, New Perspectives on Thelonious Monk (Autumn, 1999): 187-200.

⁹³ Lorraine Hansberry and Robert Nemiroff to Dave Brubeck, March 6, 1963 and Theodore Bikel to Brubeck, May 27, 1963, Series 1.A, Box 6, Folder 9, Brubeck Collection, UP; Reminiscences of Art D'Lugoff, Columbia, 18; "Hearings Attacked at Two Rallies Here," *New York Times*, August 18, 1955, p. 14; Press release, "CORE Benefit at Five-Spot, Sun. Oct. 27," 1963, Box 13, Folder 21 and "SNCC," Box 33, Folders 14-18. See also photos, Box 50, Folder 20, Ivan Black Papers, New York Performing Arts Library.

⁹⁴ Dave Brubeck to Phyllis Elkind, May 18, 1965, Series 1.A, Box 9, Folder 34 and Brubeck to Quin McLoughlin (CORE), August 11, 1965, Series 1.A, Box 9, Folder 35, Brubeck Collection, UP; Michael Levin, "Performer Dave Brubeck Speaks on Jazz Role," *The Purdue Exponent*, October 15, 1968.

At the grassroots level, the effect of Rebel Cafe culture on a new generation of subterraneans was equally fundamental to change in the 1960s. The poet and activist Ed Sanders first found his “main inspiration” for action in Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s 1959 reading at the Village Gate. By 1961, he was participating in civil rights and peace marches; in 1962 he was jailed in the south for his organizing work. Throughout the sixties, Sanders was active in both New Left politics and the artistic counterculture. Similarly, Paul Krassner, the radical satirist, publisher of *The Realist*, and co-founder the Yippies with the infamous Abbie Hoffman, began his career doing standup comedy at the Five Spot.⁹⁵ Sanders and Krassner were singular examples, countercultural celebrities. Yet they represented the experiences of thousands of others whose views were guided by, sometimes formed within, the Rebel Cafe. As late as 1965, well after The Beatles’ arrival in the US made jazz less than synonymous with young radicals, San Francisco activists continued to associate the “rights scene” of CORE and SNCC with Rebel Cafe clubs. Even as the nation’s attention turned toward antiwar demonstrations and the Free Speech Movement’s protests, the city’s emerging countercultural press routinely promoted benefits at the Coffee Gallery with jazz, folk, and experimental films by Stan Brakhage, shows at the Jazz Workshop with activist jazzman John Handy, or the “sensitive and arresting” music of Horace Silver.⁹⁶ Like SNCC’s Julian Bond, they too heard America singing.

⁹⁵ Ed Sanders to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, January 9, 1964, September 19, 1961, May 15, 1962, and undated, Box 11, Folder 31, City Lights Books Papers, Bancroft Library; Paul Krassner, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 35. During one southern civil rights organizing trip, Sanders wrote to Ferlinghetti, “Have been staying mostly at spade churches where they groove at night-meetings with a big lady Ray Charles at piano, Screaming Jay Hawkins at the pulpit, and a choir full of madmen, while the red-necks form the mob outside.”

⁹⁶ Sam Ridge, “Jazzville,” *Open City Press*, Vol. 1, no. 6 (January 6-13, 1965), p. 6 and Vol. 1, no. 9 (February 3-9, 1965), p. 4, “Beatles Called a Red Menace,” Vol. 1, no. 12 (February 24-March 2, 1965), p. 4., San Francisco History Center, SFPL. See also *Open City Press*, Vol. 1, no. 5 (December 21-27, 1964), p.

. . . . AL CODA, AL FINE

The sounds of the Rebel Cafe became mainstream in the 1960s. In particular, *We Insist!*, with Abbey Lincoln's a cappella wails and screams, alternating with eerie sotto voce and falsetto passages, echoed back and forth across eastern oceans and southern routes. Musicians under the influence included contemporaries like Juan Esquivel ("Mexico's Duke Ellington") and later British Invasion bands such as Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, whose exploitation of Black styles nonetheless laid the foundation for their psychedelic blues—the soundtrack of rebellion for post-1968 bohemians. This was part of the larger shift in American society and politics that was first signaled by John Kennedy's 1960 defeat of Nixon, who as vice-president had perhaps embodied the cold-war 1950s more than Ike himself. Little matter that Kennedy's policy positions were only separated from Nixon's by a razor's width (as was his electoral majority). His election marked the transition from the black-and-white politics of the fifties to the living-color flamboyance of the sixties' social revolutions. After all, as Norman Mailer famously pronounced, Kennedy was the nation's first "hipster" president.⁹⁷

Not that anticommunism had come to an end; the Vietnam War and the Bay of Pigs were proof enough of that. But the days when Americans would be trotted out before paranoiacs like McCarthy with the full support of the public were behind them—for the time being, at least.⁹⁸ Whereas in 1953 the majority of Americans accepted

4, Vol. 1, no. 11 (February 17-23, 1965), and Vol. 1, no. 13 (March 3-9, 1965) for coverage of jazz, satire, and the Civil Rights Movement.

⁹⁷ J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 271-3, 279.

⁹⁸ Through the 1940s and early 1950s, Gallup polls consistently showed that between 70% and 80% of Americans supported restricting the rights of communists to jobs and civil liberties. And while Joseph McCarthy's methods eventually grew unpopular, as late as January 1954, he still found support among a plurality of those polled, with 40% registering support and 35% disapproval. Lewis Allan (Abel Meeropol), composer of "Strange Fruit," adopted the two Rosenberg boys, one of whom, Robert Meeropol, went on to be an activist in the 1960s New Left.

McCarthyism's trampling of civil liberties and sat by as the children of communist spies Julius and Ethyl Rosenberg were orphaned by US government electric chairs, the main controversy surrounding actress Judy Holliday by the time of her death in 1965 was whether her marriage to a jazz saxophonist was a bit unseemly for an Academy Award winner. In other words, those who argued for the significance of culture over party politics were beginning to gain some ground.

Chapter 8

“Hipsters, Flipsters, and Holy Fools: The Rebel Cafe and the Politics of Madness”

When the highest type of men hear Tao, / They diligently practice it.
 When the average type of men hear Tao, / They half believe in it.
 When the lowest type of men hear Tao, / They laugh heartily at it.
 Without the laugh, there is no Tao.

—Lao Tzu (sixth century, B.C.E.)

[M]adness fascinates because it is knowledge. . . . While the man of reason and wisdom perceives only fragmentary and all the more unnerving images of it, the Fool bears it intact as an unbroken sphere: that crystal ball which for all others is empty is in *his* eyes filled with the density of an invisible knowledge.

—Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (1961)

In 1959, Lawrence Lipton published *The Holy Barbarians*, a cultural touchstone of the New Bohemia. The study was a spirited defense of voluntary poverty and free sexuality—“lifeways” that celebrated psychic liberation. Lipton presented a “picture of a disaffiliated generation trying to find a way of life it could believe in,” nurtured “through the arts,” and a “voluntary self-alienation from the family cult, from Moneytheism and all its works and ways.” More than mere withdrawal, this stance relied on “experiment and public performance” as mechanisms of social engagement. To illustrate this point, one of the most significant passages in the book described a recent Beat poetry reading in the Los Angeles living room of a “Left Wing bohemian” magazine editor. Hyped by the beatnik craze and rumors of “bebop poets careening madly down the San Francisco streets naked on roller skates,” the reading attracted a mix of seasoned bohemians, such as Lipton and Anais Nin, and a “square audience” of the kind found at “any liberal or ‘progressive’ . . . fundraising affair.” When Gregory Corso followed Allen Ginsberg’s recitation of *America*, a “drunk” who “looked and sounded like . . . an American Legion patriot on a convention binge” began to berate the poet. The belligerent boozier’s grumble about Corso’s “highfalutin crap” quickly escalated into an invitation to “step outside and

settle this thing like a *man!*” Ginsberg defused the situation by dramatically disrobing and challenging the drunk likewise “to do something *really* brave. *Take off your clothes!*” The now-naked Ginsberg declared “I’m not afraid,” while the savage “square” was “stunned speechless” by an act that completely befuddled him—an apparent act of madness.¹ At the reading’s end, the chastised tippler meekly asked Ginsberg where he could buy a copy of *Howl*.

This pacification was just the kind of Rimbaud-esque “derangement of the senses” called for by bohemians since the Cabaret Voltaire. Expanding this lesson to the social function of the oppositional artist, Lipton suggested, “He holds that it is not enough to entertain and instruct the audience, he must also *transform* it.” By describing Ginsberg’s act as one of “bravery,” Lipton unconsciously recognized it as political, a symbolic claim on public presence and visibility, an incipient precursor to the gay pride parade: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!” Yet this position seemed possible to Lipton only in terms of “hip” versus “square,” obscuring Ginsberg’s homoerotic taunt and the gay culture that suffused the Rebel Cafe. Lipton’s study displayed typical 1950s metaphors and language, betraying an unconscious misogyny, homophobia, and racism. But it also avoided the period’s overt dismissals of feminism, homosexuality, and racial justice.² Instead, Lipton was largely *silent* about these issues, a refreshingly non-ghettoizing approach, and simply included women, gays, and African Americans unmarked within the scope of bohemian opposition. Despite its liberationist blind-spots, *The Holy Barbarians* reflected the social role that bohemia *did* play: to celebrate the apocalyptic

¹ Lawrence Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians* (New York: Julian Messner, 1959), 43, 149, 193, 196-7.

² *Ibid.*, 168, 200. *The Holy Barbarians* was peppered with phrases like, “Poetry, all art, is a labor of love and the person on the receiving end is like a passive female, not unwilling to be seduced if you catch her in the right mood.” And its discussions of jazz as the sound of protest almost exclusively for Euro-American bohemians illustrated its assumptions of white-male privilege.

politics of “madness.”

Americans in the 1950s were obsessed with madness: defining it, containing it, declaiming it. The nation institutionalized the mentally ill in record numbers, accompanying the widespread acceptance of psychotherapy. But the discourse of madness also provided a language of opposition to denounce cold war and the social fiction of race. As critical theorist Michel Foucault proposed in 1961, the Age of Enlightenment had associated madness with the inability to work, and so contained it, not in the otherworldliness of its own irrationality, but segregated and “encircled by the sacred powers of labor.” The madman was abhorred because “he crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic.” Beats and bohemians fought a similar fight with the dangers of rationality, inverting the insights of Freud who, Foucault noted, returned *language* into “dialogue with unreason.” Quoting an eighteenth-century physician, Foucault tendered words that could well have issued from the Rebel Cafe: “When the imagination ‘is sick, it can be cured only by the effect of a healthy and active imagination. . . .’” This was a recognition of modern consciousness, what Foucault points to as the internalization of discipline. No longer was labor enforced by the whip or, for many, even the factory bell, but by demonstrable intellectual production—the success of which was measured by material status, conspicuous consumption: the Affluent-Society-as-Asylum.³ By confronting the consumerist nuclear family with the madness of art, by refusing the systematic “sickness” of atomic armament and de jure racism with a cultural politics of psychosis, bohemia

³ For a brief summary of institutionalization rates of the mentally ill in the US, see “Timeline: Treatments for Mental Illness,” PBS Homepage, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/nash/timeline/timeline2.html> (accessed January 10, 2014); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Transl. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 21-2, 58, 187, 198, 210, 246-78. This containment, he noted, was culturally signified in de Sade by “the Cell, the Cellar, the Convent.”

bolstered its oppositional stance and plotted its escape—idiosyncratically opening space for social movements in the process. There was method in this madness.

In particular, bohemia's own reckoning with race added a psychological component to growing Euro-American support for the Civil Rights Movement. In bebop, the dissonant notes of a solo that disrupted listeners' aural expectations were labeled by cool jazzmen and finger-snapping hipsters with a single common term: "crazy." Dissidents similarly injected "madness" into oppositional culture, stabbing its jagged edge into the social fabric. These rips revealed the rage of violently oppressed subterraneans seething beneath the surface of the 1950s. Beats and bohemians discursively defined "madness" as a special kind of knowledge that made sense of this sociopolitical "dissonance"—just as the hipster established his status by exhibiting his understanding of the "crazy" language of bebop. By the end of the 1950s, to support southern segregation was to declare oneself "square." Racism was simply not hip.

These ruptures relied on a declarations of a new consciousness in which bohemians rebuked the "sickness" of the nuclear age's diminished humanism. This path was first blazed by critics like Marshall McLuhan, whose 1949 *Neurotica* article, "The Psychopathology of *Time* and *Life*," indicted the Luce magazines' "rationalism of the machine." "Physics is now, directly, politics," proclaimed McLuhan, recognizing the pervasiveness of Cold War logic. "But the physicist can't any more get reasonableness and order into atomic politics than a university president can get them into mass education. . . . The only practical problem which remains today is that of restoring human dimensions so that a merely human order can become relevant and practical once more." His remedy? "All psychological drugs cut off. . . . No press. No radio. No movies. Just

people . . . Forming small communities within big cities.”⁴

Yet bohemia’s critique of American society flipped this rational humanism on its head, using humor and intoxication to pierce the pretensions of dominant culture through the persona of the “Holy Fool.” Bohemian boosters like Lipton suggested that the “way to get release from the rat race” was to “to *let go*” of material desires that trapped modern consciousness and to find the non-grasping “calmness of mind,” the “‘stupidity’ of the Sacred Clown, the Holy Fool” personified by the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. As Lipton lauded exemplars of this Zen-like humor, from the Beats to *MAD* magazine, he used hipster language and the neo-shamanic rituals of jazz and drugs to separate bohemians from squares. Jazz-poetry sparked a revival of the “oral tradition,” he declared, and bebop’s complex rhythms released listeners from the regimented “time” that structured the workaday world. Meanwhile, “madness” served the “social function of the Dionysiac ritual,” a “catharsis” to purge “the individual of those infectious irrational impulses” that were bottled up by modern rationality. As Beat progenitor Antonin Artaud wrote some two decades earlier in defense of legalized opium, “You won’t be able to stop souls from being predestined for poison, whatever kind it might be: poison of morphine, poison of reading, poison of isolation, poison of onanism, poison of repeated coitus, poison of the rooted weakness of the soul, poison of alcohol, poison of tobacco, poison of anti-sociability. . . . If you take away from them a means of madness, they will invent ten thousand more.” Much of the mass media, and some intellectuals, recognized such criticisms of modern alienation, but disparaged the bohemian embrace of madness as unthinking, barbarous, or “sick,” and labeled the demimonde a disease, an unhealthy

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, “The Psychopathology of *Time* and *Life*,” in Chandler Brossard, ed., *The Scene Before You: A New Approach to American Culture* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), 147-60.

cause of national decline. But within New Bohemia, to “flip,” to go mad, was considered a paradoxically therapeutic path to sanity. To exaggerate the Freudian “Pleasure Principle” was to reverse the Cold War’s calculated atomic insanity of Mutually Assured Destruction: MAD.⁵

One early example of this hip-flip ethos was the comedian Richard “Lord” Buckley, who performed the apocalyptic social reversal of bohemianism on stage and gave it a presence in American nightclubs with his “hip-somatic” routines soaked in jazzman jargon. And while the Beats—themselves influenced by Buckley—continued to use “madness” as social critique, bohemia opened other sociopolitical opportunities. Rebel Cafe activists joined groups like SANE and Women Strike for Peace, who challenged the “sickness” of unchecked nuclear armament, bridging an earlier generation of anarcho-pacifism with the New Left antiwar movement. Moreover, a new generation of literary intellectuals emerged from the hipster underground, as social critics such as James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Amiri Baraka claimed places in the public sphere alongside a previous generation that included Henry Miller and Paul Goodman.

Subterranean intellectuals often used jazz as a symbol of social and psycho-sexual liberation, making it contested cultural ground on which they battled over questions of race, power, and politics. In part, these struggles were embodied in the public personas of jazzmen Charlie “Bird” Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. For many hipsters, Bird represented the ultimate model of a cool, self-destructive genius, whose heroin addiction and interracial relationships flouted convention, and whose death made him a countercultural martyr. Meanwhile, Dizzy’s very namesake invoked the Holy Fool. As his satirical 1964

⁵ Lipton, *Holy Barbarians*, 169, 165, 170-80, 222-4, 234, 245, 181-9; Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, Jack Hirschman, ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965), 61.

presidential run showed, Gillespie's humor was a vehicle for social criticism. At the same time, his organizational skills aided both the popularization of bop and his direct political activism, but undercut his image as a rebellious auteur in the eyes of underground tastemakers. These characterizations belied real-life complexities: Bird was well-read and politically conscious; Diz was every bit the instrumental virtuoso, without the creative self-destruction of drug addiction. But their personas interestingly paralleled the Beats, with Kerouac's free-spirited espousal of ecstasy contrasting Ginsberg's contemplative organizing and progressive politics.⁶

But Bird and Diz also symbolized the two sides of the Left's debate over how best to bring about social change. With postwar recognition of the Soviet Revolution's murderous results, power politics seemed less attractive than efforts to shift culture and consciousness. Some asked themselves whether radicalism could build a future at all. As journalist Al Aronowitz wrote to Ginsberg in 1962 about the Cuban Revolution's turn toward dictatorship, its violent inversion of power: "[T]he only way is to liberate the oppressors too, but how?" For many, the answer lay in the dizzy apocalypse of psychic liberation. At the other end of the spectrum, the masculine atmosphere of the nightclub underground fostered intimations of violent opposition. These were found in both racist portrayals of Black psychosexual resistance, such as Mailer's "White Negro," and the increasingly militant writings of Black intellectuals, from Baldwin and Baraka to Grove Press's edition of Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.⁷ By the mid-1960s,

⁶ Max Roach, for example, described Dizzy as authentically Black and Bird as socially-conscious of oppression. And Gillespie declared that Bird was a reformer who became a martyr to the cause. Dizzy Gillespie, with Al Fraser, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979), 391-402. See also Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3, Music Anthropologies and Music Histories (Autumn, 1995): 396-422.

⁷ Alfred Aronowitz to Allen Ginsberg, February 11, 1962, Box 7, Folder 34, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford;

confrontational politics had won out among radicals. But during the Rebel Cafe's peak from 1958 to 1963, the notion of psychic revolution against social "sickness" held sway, becoming an ideological counterpart to bohemia's personal politics. And while discourses of madness and jazz authenticity sometimes bolstered racial essentialism, they also played a part in shifting American political consciousness, helping set the "hip" tone of the Kennedy years and raising cultural expectations that aided the sixties social movements.

THE NAZZ VS. THE BOMB: MADNESS AND THE BOP APOCALYPSE

It would be a "Night of Blues, Jazz, Be-Bop, Jam, Swin[g] and Boogie Woogie," proclaimed a 1947 advertisement for Small's Paradise in Harlem. And "N.Y. Ace Comedian" Dick Buckley would be the club's guest MC. A performer like Buckley was an uncommon sight at Small's: a white comic, who had cut his teeth in burlesque and satirical revues, performing routines such as his "'televised' Amos and Andy broadcast," in which he used members of the audience as ventriloquist dummies, mouthing his impersonations of the popular radio show. Recently he had developed a new stage persona and begun performing under the name "Lord Richard Buckley," mimicking the songs of Louis Armstrong and offering recitations of Shakespeare and passages from the Bible in pseudo-aristocratic jive-talk: "Hipsters, flipsters, and finger-poppin' daddies, knock me your lobes!"⁸

Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984), 271. Jack Kerouac himself was also an embodiment of the tensions between bohemian pacifism and masculine violence. Even as he protested to the press that the increasingly popular Beat Generation was not "hoodlumism" or "violent," his drunken sprees in Village Bars often ended in fistfights, including one that sent him to the hospital with cuts and a concussion. Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 295-9.

⁸ "Display Ad," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 22, 1947, p. 23; Philip K. Scheuer, "'Fun for the Money' Given by Enthusiastic Cast," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1941, p. A-10; Will Davidson, "Jimmy Joy Presenting Sparkling Music at Bismarck: Talia Wermuth Is Highlight of Colorful Show,"

In retrospect, these routines seem ill-fitted for Harlem, smacking of condescension, a pale imitation of Black culture much like *Amos 'n' Andy* itself. Yet it remains among the ironies of US cultural history that, even as the NAACP campaigned to have *Amos 'n' Andy* taken off the air, the show was widely popular among African Americans, who found humor in its misadventures and malapropisms. In fact, Buckley's act fit nicely within a tradition of Black humor that, in the 1940s, still retained much of its vaudeville style—an entertainment genealogy that stretched back to African-Americans' subversive, satirical appropriation of nineteenth-century minstrelsy.⁹ Lord Buckley was more than simply an entertainer, however. He was a doomed visionary who embraced Black culture in an effort to effect a new American consciousness, an almost utopian vision of community. In many ways Lord Buckley was the embodiment of bohemianism at its most liberatory and egalitarian, but also its most problematic. His hip persona was a burlesque of the underground figures that would populate Beat novels, driven by a similar desire to use Black culture to burst through national repression.

In 1955, Buckley began a correspondence with Henry Miller, the West-Coast guru for aspiring bohemians. Written entirely in aristocratic-hipster jargon, Buckley's letters addressed Miller as "Your Royal Majesty" and "My Dear Rex." He declared that his "campaign for Love Universal" would include establishing a "Church of the Living Swing," featuring a jazz band alongside life-sized figures of the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and

Chicago Daily Tribune, April 18, 1943, p. F-4; T. H. P., "New Revue Is Presented At Bushnell: 'Passing Show' Reborn With Willie Howard Again at Comedy Helm," *The Hartford Courant*, November 10, 1945, p. 8

⁹ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 276-82, 321-2; Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 202-4; David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 1-7, 32-33. See also James C. Scott, *Dominion and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

Jesus—whom he called “the Nazz.” (According to one friend, the Living Swing “had the distinction of being the only church performance ever raided by the vice squad.”)

Buckley envisioned the Buddha and Lao Tzu with “their arms around J.C.,” the three “flying with the high fire of the dance of laughter”—laughter that was akin to prayer.

Miller responded, praising the comic’s work and comparing it to the “ecstasy [*sic*] buried in the wilds of Patagonia,” testifying that Buckley “must have drunk from the Holy Bottle that Rabelais speaks of.”¹⁰

The Buckley family (including “Lady Buckley” and their two children) became regular visitors to Miller’s home in Big Sur. Buckley praised Miller as “swinging with the sweet sounds of life . . . on the beat – in tune & on time.” In return, Miller glorified the comic’s work as flowing equally from subterranean regions and the labyrinth of the mind, an antidote to modern America’s banalities: “It seems to me that your Lordship opened a new vein, leading from the medulla oblongata (hold on to this one!) and the Cloaca Maxima.” Miller quickly leapt from this reference to ancient Roman sewers to the celestial, proclaiming, “It’s all so very alive and jumpin’ and in the pauses one can hear the atoms exploding out there in the Milky Way where the grass comes up every once in ten billion years and there are no moth balls or frigidares, no box office receipts, no railroads, no crucifixions rosy or otherwise.” He concluded, “I say it as a writer who knows the power of language, the miracles it can work.”¹¹

Buckley’s performances projected these transformative aspirations. Resting on a

¹⁰ Richard “Lord” Buckley to Henry Miller, April 7, 1955 and December 15, 1959, Box 7, Folder 3, Henry Miller Papers, (Collection 110), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA; Miller to Buckley, undated, Box 2, Folder 11, City Lights Books Records, BANC MSS 72/107c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Samuel Charters, “Hipsters, Flipsters, and Finger Poppin’ Daddies: A Note on His Lordship, Lord Buckley, the Hippest of the Hipsters,” in *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* ed. Anne Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 105.

¹¹ Miller to Buckley, undated, Box 2, Folder 11, City Lights Books Records, Berkeley; Miller to Buckley, February 15, 1955, Box 7, Folder 3, Miller Papers, UCLA.

sincere belief in “love and great curiosity for people” as the “oil of life . . . to go round the bare axel of normalcy,” the comic promoted a “brotherhood and sisterhood projected warm feeling of Communion, a desire to help each other[,] a flowing together, very pleasant and cozy to dig.” This hip universalism sat well with bohemians such as Bob Kaufman and Jack Kerouac, who were known to perform Buckley’s routines at bohemian “pad” parties and saloons like The Place.¹² Throughout the 1950s Buckley toured the nation’s nightclubs, including Rebel Cafe venues such as the hungry i, selling an increasing number of record albums and glimpsing wider fame with nine appearances on Ed Sullivan’s television show.¹³ He declared that he had been a “Beatnik” long before the term was coined, claiming “an Atomic philosophy that states – the Steeples of the churches are too high for the holes in the pants of the poor.” Bohemians, he predicted, would form a “new cafe society of the nobility of the young gentility, gold or no.”¹⁴

The comic further proclaimed that Euro-Americans “not only should know, but need, the American black beauty Negro.” For Buckley—like the Beats at their least reflective—Blacks offered a “swing hymnal” of salvation to Euro-Americans who came to “love the strains of his stupidity cross.” They had the ability to “laugh at nine things in succession, one of which would flip an ofay in twain,” making them a liberatory “treasure-head of humor.”¹⁵ These comments recalled Lao Tzu’s notion of “stupidity” as

¹² Richard “Lord” Buckley to Henry Miller, December 1958, Box 7, Folder 3, Miller Papers, UCLA; Joanne Kyger to Philip Whalen, July 11, 1967, Box 5, Folder 7, Philip Whalen Papers, MS#1328, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Brenda Knight, *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1996), 103. Bill Cosby also later performed parts of Buckley routines in Greenwich Village nightclubs. Charters, “Hipsters, Flipsters, and Finger Poppin’ Daddies,” 105.

¹³ “Humor Is the Only Thing Lord Buckley’s Serious About,” *Independent-Journal*, June 18, 1960, p. M-6, clipping in Box 2, Folder 11, City Lights Books Records, BANC MSS 72/107c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁴ Richard “Lord” Buckley to Henry Miller, December 1958, Box 7, Folder 3, Miller Papers, UCLA.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the chief characteristic of the Holy Fool, who mocked the intellect's ability to know truth—like the court jester, whose clowning allowed him to jab critiques at the king that would have seemed treasonous from more sober critics. In the US, Blacks sometimes adopted this tactic in the form of the “Sambo” stereotype, whose malapropisms masked his satire of Euro-American society.¹⁶ That was all well and good for African Americans who *chose* that role—such as the vaudevillian comics Bert Williams or Jackie “Moms” Mabley (who echoed in later comedians like Redd Foxx and Richard Pryor). The mistake that bohemians made was to ascribe the image of the Black Holy Fool to African Americans as a people, making it a form of racial essentialism almost as corrosive in its misplaced admiration as racism was in its ideas about biological inferiority.

As edgier comics such as Lenny Bruce appeared on the scene, Buckley's humor and Satchmo impersonations began to appear tired and even demeaning—a shift paralleled by early bebop's rejection of Armstrong himself as a kowtowing “Uncle Tom” figure. As Black political consciousness rose, Buckley's good intentions could not overcome his persona's atavistic appearances. In at least one case, he was shouted off the stage at North Beach's Coffee Gallery by an African-American audience member who declared him a “Nazi.”¹⁷ Buckley's failure to change with the times reflected the racism buried in his notion of the Black savior figure. Blind to his own white privilege, Buckley failed to see that culture alone—whatever effects it might have on society's consciousness—was not enough to reshape that society and that admiration for Black culture was not the same as a political demand for equality.

¹⁶ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 112, 128-32, 154, 179-80, 390-3, 453-62; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. 30th Anniversary ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 298-366.

¹⁷ Ralph J. Gleason, “‘The Lord’ Calls His Fans ‘Your Hipness,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 17, 1960, “This World” insert, p. 18.

In November 1960, during a run at New York's Jazz Gallery, police revoked Buckley's cabaret card due to a marijuana conviction. Just weeks after, too proud to ask his friends for financial help, he died penniless of illness and malnutrition. The Village Gate's Art D'Lugoff, stunned by the tragedy, quickly organized a community action group with prominent New Yorkers such as George Plimpton and Norman Mailer to protest the cabaret card requirement. Guided through the courts by renowned lawyer Maxwell Cohen, D'Lugoff's Citizen's Emergency Committee successfully defied police harassment and bureaucratic resistance to have the policy revised.¹⁸ With this final chapter, Lord Buckley's truncated life left behind an ambivalent legacy of universalist consciousness, vestigial racism, sociocultural change and conflict, and, finally, organized political action.

“EVERY MAN HIS OWN CHRIST”: URBAN BOHEMIA AND THE NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

The threads of hip performativity and urban political activism that wove through Lord Buckley's story also guided the trajectory of the Rebel Cafe from 1958 through 1963. During those years, its ethos expanded into the broader culture, its counterpublic was absorbed into the national public sphere. But it was also subverted by its own contradictions. Bohemians from the Beats and poets of the San Francisco Renaissance to the hip intellectuals of Greenwich Village often theorized the “liberation” of America as white male “freedom” to adopt the “lifeways” of disadvantaged Others. This carried an assumption of racial integration which bolstered the Civil Rights Movement but too often ignored Black demands for self-determination. At the same time, in Kerouac's words, the

¹⁸ Maxwell T. Cohen, *The Police Card Discord* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press and the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers, 1993), xvi, 55-73; Arthur Gelb, “Charges of Police Corruption Made by Citizens' Group Here,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1960, p. 1. By 1966, issuance of cabaret cards was placed within the Department of Licenses, thus eliminating the use of criminal background checks, as well as the humiliation of fingerprinting and police interrogation.

Beats looked to “the Negro people who will be the salvation of America” to inspire their “revolution” in consciousness. Like Buckley’s Holy Fool, the Beat notion of the Black savior figure rested on a fair amount of racial essentialism. But it also served what Nan Boyd has termed “cultural politics,” in which public “visibility” was a move toward political action, open resistance, and demands on the state.¹⁹ New Bohemia’s claim to interracial community, at least on the surface, was intertwined with its hip public image of poetry, jazz, and madness, carrying the tacit message that failure to get behind the Movement was simply “square.”

The first step came with bases of operation that were visible signs of a new consciousness. Rebel Cafe nightspots were part of a broad-based anarchism that resisted the cooption of the individual into the technocratic Establishment, an urban politics of place. “One can practice the pure poem in Life,” wrote Beat poet John Wieners in 1959, expounding the artist’s social role. “The poem which contains enough joy and pain to illuminate men,” he proclaimed, was practiced “in the middle of noisy bars and restaurants, on the back porches of houses from Gloucester to San Francisco.” He also posed a picture of bohemia’s larger libertarian-anarchism, led by a vanguard of aesthete martyrs, concluding, “That is why it is impossible for IBM to ever turn all men into robots. There being at times 10 or 50 poets in every 175,000,000 men.”²⁰

Accompanying this allusion to of the Gray-Flannel-IBM-Man was the very real phenomenon of suburbanization, as cheap auto travel and FHA loans made it possible for many in the newly-arrived white middle class to flee the discomforts of the city. The

¹⁹ Charters, *Kerouac*, 268, 275-8; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 71-2.

²⁰ John Wieners, *The Journal of John Wieners Is to Be Called 707 Scott Street For Billie Holiday 1959* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996), 51

result was urban decay, as municipalities like New York struggled against dwindling tax bases to provide necessary services for metropolitan areas.²¹ Bohemians and nightspot owners faced this challenge head-on, resisting urban decline, the underside of the Affluent Society. The Holy Fool ethos suffused this effort, framed as a secular parallel to sacred self-sacrifice. As one sociologist wrote of Left Bank squatters, “They are willing to pay with their health. Violence and self-destruction are forms of existentially necessary penance. Every man is his own Christ.” Lipton extended this common bohemian theme to the utmost, seeing organized religion itself as part of the dominant power hierarchy and suggesting that “beats see themselves as outlaws from the Church, something like the first Christians who also lived in pads of a sort, in the slum quarters of slaves and outcasts.” Similarly invoking those first-century zealots, Robert Duncan proclaimed that the bohemian combination of asceticism and performative aesthetics had the potential to “transform the nature of the audience” and, as a result, for “the public, to be completely changed.” The potential was the modern city “transformed into that city . . . that men have talked about from the beginning”—a utopian-anarchist vision of community reclaimed from the detritus of mass society.²²

Modern urban social structures weighted down this effort, Wieners wrote, even as nonconformists took the “desperate act” of attempting to “make it there on one’s own terms” and “seek sustenance from the street.”

²¹ See Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Random House, 2003); David M.P. Freund, *Colored property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

²² Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 280; Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians*, 161, 200.

But the city is a fabled labyrinth, and sustenance there is subterranean. Life on the surface regiment, ordered mechanized the people move as robots, displaying neither love nor fear: Sophistication and of course the infinite variety of individual acts made to break the stereotype. . . . Under the street lights only the eccentric stands out garbed in the costume of his game. Streetwalkers, showgirls, perverts, late business men, clerks, schoolboys, tourists, from the healthy country . . . poets with pale faces, girls dressed in black beside them. All parade by on silent errands. There is seldom laughter except in the neighborhood and negro districts. . . . To restore the devastation of absolute poverty which America, not our laziness which is inherent in all and everyman, has to fight against, forces us to practice. For every scrap of bread is worked for. Each crumb from the master table of 1959. A prosperity peak.

While Wieners' declaration betrayed his hipster assumptions about African-American "laughter" as a natural resource of liberated consciousness, he also recognized the bohemian's own role as the Flipster within the larger framework of society: "When the man who wants to create on his own level has to resort to crime to do it. Petty or not, it is theft and we are held responsible for it. The jails are filled with saints and heads who believe in Jesus Christ, his acts as a man."²³

Critics quickly pounced on this revolt's eccentricity. While sociologist Francis Rigney defended the beatniks for simply desiring "to be with people who are sympathetic," he agreed with less sanguine psychiatrists that many were indeed "sick." Responding to the Beat avowal that their generation was defined by "a sort of nakedness of mind and . . . a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness," one detractor sardonically denounced them in William Whyte's terms as "Nihilism's Organization Men."²⁴ But the most pointed attack came from the generation's own ranks. Norman Podhoretz's 1958 *Partisan Review* article, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," has become canonized as the quintessential criticism of the Beats. Declaring them "hostile to

²³ Wieners, *Journal*, 53-4.

²⁴ "Scientist Likens Beatniks To Settlers Among Indians," *The Sun*, April 2, 1959, p. 3; James McC. Truitt, "The Beats (Who Really Never Were) Are Gone," *The Washington Post*, October 23, 1960, p. E-3. Even Rigney's defense problematically relied on comparisons between the beatniks' place in the mainstream and "settlers of the old days huddling in hostile Indian country."

civilization,” he argued that their “predilection for bop language is a way of demonstrating solidarity with the primitive vitality and spontaneity they find in jazz” which “is more than a cover for hostility to intelligence; it arises from a pathetic poverty of feeling as well.” “This is the revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of soul,” he wrote, which “shades off into violence and criminality, main-line drug addiction and madness.” At his most convincing (if a bit hyperbolic), Podhoretz recognized Kerouac’s portrayals of “happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” as comparable to “Southern ideologues” who suggested “things were just as fine as fine could be for the slaves on the old plantation.” But he ended by running off the rails. Comparing bohemianism to a kind of proto-Nazism, Podhoretz wrote that the “history of modern times” showed a “close connection between ideologies of primitivistic vitalism and a willingness to look upon cruelty and blood-letting with complacency.”²⁵

Podhoretz was correct to denote Nazism’s “primitivistic vitalism.” But to apply it to the Beats required an inversion of logic. Fascist ideology rested on the supposed vitality of racial *superiority* as the justification for violence. (Not to mention that it was backed by the full force of modern rationalism.) Yet Kerouac’s (admittedly superficial) *admiration* for African Americans was the issue. For Podhoretz to infer that Beat *participation* in Black culture would result in violence was equally to ascribe primitivism to African Americans. Ultimately, Podhoretz missed the Beat vision of self-consciousness conceived not as an apocalypse of destruction, but of rebirth—however

²⁵ Norman Podhoretz, “The Know-Nothing Bohemians,” in Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 479-93. Podhoretz attended Columbia with Ginsberg, who considered him a worthy literary nemesis. LeRoi Jones (Baraka), however, objected to the *Partisan Review* article, publishing a response in the next issue that defended the Beats as a necessary “reaction against . . . fifteen years of sterile, unreadable magazine poetry.” See also Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 292-3.

much that rebirth relied on misconceptions about the life-affirming authenticity of the primitive. As one sympathetic cultural critic asserted, simply, “If we remain beat, sick and merely angry we shall be utterly defeated.”²⁶ Regardless, Podhoretz, like other intellectuals who later formed the Neoconservative ranks, deplored the Beats’ rejection of social restraint, setting the stage for the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s.

Unsurprisingly, the details of this rebellious renewal were debated within the Rebel Cafe. Jack Spicer, always among the most conservative of the New Bohemians, saw the maintenance of tradition as commensurate with psychosexual liberation. “I am dissatisfied with the angels I believe in,” he wrote in “Song for Bird and Myself,” recognizing both sides of the jazzman’s genius. “Neo-classical like Bird, / Distrusting the reality / of every note. / Half real / We blow the sentence pure and real / Like chewing angels. . . . *We’re crazy*, Jack . . . So Bird and I die / Outside your window . . . / Deny / The bloody motherfucking Holy Ghost.” This call for new consciousness over nihilism was also the salient theme of “A Poem for Dada Day at the Place, April 1, 1955,” in which Spicer proclaimed, “The difference between Dada and barbarism / is the difference between an abortion and a wet dream. / An abortion / Is a conscious sacrifice of the past, the painting of a mustache / On Mona Lisa, the surrender / of real children. The other, darling, is a sacrifice / Of nobody’s children, is barbarism . . . / is Bohemia / Renouncing cities it had never conquered.” By contrast, Herbert Marcuse, calling for the “Transformation of Sexuality into Eros,” sought a version of the “aesthetic state,” a political solution to the institutional “organization of the instincts” into an “antagonistic” system. He argued that “the emergence of a non-repressive reality principle” would

²⁶ Cyrus Durgin, “Sharp and Perceptive Drama on Today’s Generation: Beat, Sick and Angry Britons of Boisterous Play by John Osborne,” *Daily Boston Globe*, December 7, 1958, p. A-78.

“*regress* behind the attained level of civilized rationality,” but that, “occurring at the height of civilization, as a consequence not of defeat but of victory in the struggle for existence, and supported by a free society, such liberation might have very different results.” For Marcuse, “barbarism” meant that the Dada-like sacrifice of civilization was open to everyone, resulting in “instinctual liberation.”²⁷

The difference between destruction and redemption, these views seem to suggest, lay in the varying levels of optimism about change, or satisfaction with the present state of things. As Amiri Baraka poetically put it, leaving behind mainstream middle-class “death by boredom and sterility” was a “high dive from blues cabaret streets into the grinning yellow of Jesus the Cool.”²⁸ In 1950s America, where rebellious individualism and humor were often labeled “sick,” subterraneans claimed the mantle psychic martyrdom as a sort of preemptive cultural defense. They declared that their own insanity was the product of society’s absurd demand that safety and security be found in nuclear-family “togetherness” in the teeth of atomic threat and the reality of social and sexual oppression. Such self-recognition deflected charges of “sickness” and opened space for the discussion of oppositional ideas in the public sphere.

FROM APOCALYPSE TO ACTIVISM

This oppositional consciousness could be seen in the activists who gathered at the

²⁷ Jack Spicer, “Song for Bird and Myself,” in Charters, ed., *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 535-8; Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, eds. (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 46-7; Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, 1966), 197-8.

²⁸ Baraka, *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 448-9. Similarly, Jack Kerouac complained that the press airbrushed out the crucifix he wore in a photograph taken in North Beach for an early article on the Beat Generation. Asserting that he wore it to “parties, arties, parts, jam sessions, bars, poetry readings, churches, walking talking poetry in the streets,” he saw it as part of his declaration of a joyous life. “I want to speak for things,” he wrote, “for the crucifix I speak out, for the Star of Israel I speak out, for the divinest man who ever lived who was a German (Bach) I speak out, for sweet Mohammed I speak out, for Buddha I speak out, for Lao-tse and Chuang-tse I speak out . . .” Jack Kerouac, “Origins of the Beat Generation,” in Cesar Grana and Marigay Grana, eds. *On Bohemia: The Code of the Self-Exiled* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 195-6.

White Horse and San Remo, including Paul Goodman and the Living Theatre's Judith Malina. Goodman was gaining increasing visibility as a public figure and his most prominent work, *Growing Up Absurd*, was deeply rooted in the 1950s notion of social "madness." Arguing that the absurdity of a consumerist society grew from its demand for masculine achievement even as it failed to provide meaningful work or leisure, Goodman proposed that the Hipster's youthful rebellion was a needed rupture. Although he deemed the Beats' "mysticism" to be solipsistic, he nonetheless saw value in their attempt to create a meaningful existence. (He also had a kind word to say about *MAD* magazine's comic satire.)²⁹ While not a trained psychiatrist, Goodman offered considerable insight to fellow Village bohemians with his method of "gestalt psychology." These psychic explorations had a profound effect on Malina (despite its misogynistic aspects), who used their revelations to further her development of the Living Theatre over the course of the decade.³⁰ Malina's diaries reveal that her life and work were equally intertwined with Village bar culture. Like Michael Harrington before her, she began her nocturnal excursions at the San Remo, where she met subterraneans, writers, poets, musicians, and filmmakers including Ginsberg, Kerouac, Bill Keck, Maxwell Bodenheim, James Agee, Dylan Thomas, John Cage, and Maya Deren. Through the course of "complex conversations" in Village bars, Malina expanded the "horizon" of her experience, finding community and artistic identity among these "sophisticated" intellectuals. Some of her compatriots also became sexual partners, adding to the interpersonal complexity within her adopted "bohemia and lunatic fringe."³¹

²⁹ Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System* (New York: Random House, 1960), ix-xvi, 12, 26, 52-95, 159-90229, 235-8.

³⁰ Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 209, 225, 244-53, 402, 436.

³¹ *Ibid*, 183, 213-14, 252, 263-5, 234-5, 272-3. See also Juan A. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and*

Village activists did not limit their politics to the personal, however. Malina was deeply troubled by the oppressive mood of the 1950s, decrying Joseph McCarthy's "paranoid vision" and privately mourning the executions of communist spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. She craved greater political involvement and when San Remo acquaintances first took her to the White Horse, Harrington's "heroic" and purposeful politics awoke her own sense of civic responsibility.³² By 1955, Malina had infused her decidedly experimental life and work with social activism, participating along with Harrington and the Catholic Worker Movement in a protest against local civil defense drills. She also picketed with Catholic Worker Ammon Hennacy and radical poet Jackson Mac Low in front of New York's Internal Revenue Service building, "because it is the tax money, after all, that pays for the bomb." After a day spent handing out leaflets and marching with a sign that read "LOVE & LIFE / NOT DEATH & TAXES," Malina, characteristically, returned "To the Remo and the White Horse."³³

Malina's candid diary entries displayed a brand of romanticism that became less than celebrated by second-wave feminists. But they also showed independence and ideological complexity, making her part of the "bridge" feminism that carried the gains of the early twentieth century through the 1950s.³⁴ Crucial to Malina's oppositional stance was the Village bar culture that not only opened a critical space for sexual experimentation, but was itself a product of women's roles as activists and intellectuals. While the contradictions within women's experiences show that the Rebel Cafe did not

Superstars: Avant-garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

³² Malina, *Diaries*, 284-5, 107-8, 290, 258, 299, 320.

³³ Ibid, 377-8; Dee Garrison, "Our Skirts Gave Them Courage: The Civil Defense Protest Movement in New York City, 1955-1961," in Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver*, 201-20. See also Wilcock, *The Village Square*, 76 and Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 103-13.

³⁴ Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 11.

spawn fully-formed feminism, it did offer critiques, if only by its example as a space in which their public voice could be proclaimed.

Similarly, the Village Vanguard's Lorraine Gordon was openly vocal about her political activities—much more so than her low-key partner Max. After first joining SANE, an anti-nuclear proliferation group that began in the late 1950s (and whose name was an obvious rebuke to atomic MAD-ness), Gordon further explored activist networks in the early 1960s. She became a key New York organizer and spokesperson for Women's Strike for Peace, an early model for widespread opposition to the Vietnam War. Gordon later used the relations she developed with Soviet officials through her antinuclear protest work to arrange a visit to Moscow in 1965. From the Soviet capital, she traveled to North Vietnam, becoming the first American peace activist to witness the devastation wreaked by US bombs around Hanoi. While subsequent news reports about her visit largely ignored the civilian toll of “controlled” B-52 missions, which ostensibly were aimed only at military targets, Gordon's harrowing stories continued to energize WSP protests. Moreover, her Hanoi trip laid the groundwork for later activists' visits to North Vietnam and subsequent scrutiny of US policy in Southeast Asia.³⁵

Gordon's activism is unsurprising, given her history in Left and Rebel Cafe circles. Yet WSP, in an effort to garner mainstream support for the cause of peace, intentionally sidestepped rhetorical challenges to gender norms and instead focused press

³⁵ “25 Picketing Women Decry Atomic Tests,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1962, p. 27; “Negotiators Get Thanks,” *The Daily Plainsman*, January 27, 1963, p. 6; “1,000 Women Appeal to NATO,” *The Cedar Rapids Gazette*, May 13, 1964, p. 13-B; Fulton Lewis, Jr., “Commies Identified Among the Vietniks,” *The Brownsville Herald*, December 3, 1965, p. 4; Douglas Robinson, “Javits Urges Cease-Fire for Vietnam's Election,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1966, p. 2; See also Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 132, 194-5, 214-15, Robbie Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism, and the U.S. Peace Movement, 1945-63* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), and Mary Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam: American Peace Activists and the War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

attention on the women's status as "middle-class housewives." In her recent memoir, Gordon draws a sharp distinction between WSP, with its intimation of traditional domesticity, and her identity as a nightclub owner:

If you ask me, did I have a job in those days? Yes, I had a job, nonpaying. My kitchen was an office where women came to organize . . . Black women, working women, they were fighting their own battle. We all had fancy clothes; many of the ladies had houses out in the suburbs somewhere. We were very middle-class, obviously, but we cared.³⁶

While the apparent conflict between this traditionalism and the edgy progressivism of the Vanguard initially seems puzzling, Gordon's politically savvy insistence on separating her protest activity from her nightclub life is actually revealing. WSP's strategy paralleled Judy Holliday's 1952 Senate testimony, using gendered notions of middle-class female propriety to deflect charges of unpatriotic subversion. But Gordon's participation was also an extension of the Rebel Cafe's revitalized role. After sheltering leftists and their ideas through the early Cold War, its denizens now returned to the left-cabaret goal of transmitting radical ideas into the middle class. In the "Port Huron Statement," SDS included "middle-class women" alongside "socialists, pacifists, liberals, scholars, [and] militant activists" as part of the burgeoning peace movement, a subtle nod toward WSP's influence, as well as the Rebel Cafe milieu which had helped nurture oppositional ideas back to health.

MORE DIZ, LESS BIRD: THE RACIAL POLITICS OF HIP

The theme of "madness" suffused Beat literature, with its postwar bohemian generation "destroyed by madness," even as they were "mad to be saved." In *On the Road*, this took on the additional trait of madcap humor, as the often "demoniacally and seraphically drunk" Dean Moriarty threaded his way through the novel "twinkling like

³⁶ Lorraine Gordon, as told to Barry Singer, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 141-2, 154.

Groucho Marx,” leaning forward and eyeing his surroundings wildly. Moriarty was a “madman,” a “Gargantua” whose “suffering bulk and bursting ecstasies” overflowed American saloons. But William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959) most graphically captured the Beats’ Spenglerian sense of Western civilization’s decay. A heroin-soaked fever dream of violence, pan-sexuality, murder, and misogyny, the novel was structured as a series of grotesque “routines” such as “The Talking Asshole” and “The Black Meat.” Critic Mary McCarthy suggested that its satirical pornography read “as though *Finnegan’s Wake* were cut loose from history and adapted for a Cinerama circus titled ‘One World.’” Burroughs’s characters—sickly echoes of real-life subterraneans—continually weave in and out of bars and cafes, from New York to Mexico, Tangiers, and the fictional “Interzone,” a “maze of kitchens, restaurants, sleeping cubicles, perilous iron balconies and basements opening into underground baths.” Most prominent was the “Meet Cafe,” where “Faces of the City poured through silent as fish, stained with vile addictions and insect lusts.” Like *Howl*, obscenity charges spawned the novel’s public notoriety with a pair of unsuccessful prosecutions against Grove Press and Chicago poet Paul Carroll’s *Big Table* magazine. As the judge who presided over the *Big Table* case, Julius Hoffman, declared, Burroughs’s design was “to shock the contemporary society in order perhaps to better point out its flaws and weaknesses.”³⁷

Race was also a significant current that ran through *Naked Lunch*. Although Blacks most often appear as mere symbols of an oppressed underclass, Burroughs did

³⁷ Norman Mailer said of Burroughs: “He catches the beauty and, at the same time, the viciousness and the meanness and the excitement, of ordinary talk—the talk of criminals, of soldiers, athletes junkies.” Kerouac, 104-6, 128, 212; Edward de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* (New York: Random House, 1992), 394, 365; William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 51-5, 131-5; J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 356.

frequently indict the violence of southern racism with repulsive images of “nigger-killing sheriffs” and “Giggling rioters” who “copulate to the screams of a burning Nigra.” These images underscored his assertion that American democracy’s hypocrisy (and bureaucracy) was like a “virus” that diseased the body politic.³⁸ But Burroughs also mixed inflections of Black culture and jazz into the novel’s swirling junkie-fever-dream imagery. The result was an ambivalent social statement suggesting, much like his representations of drug use and homosexuality, that while subversion could provide an escape from the “control” of dominant norms, it simultaneously prescribed its own rules that resulted in a form of containment. *Naked Lunch* offered a decidedly different Beat vision than the cross-racial desire and liberationism of *On the Road* and *Howl*.

Just as Kerouac projected the identities of Neal Cassady and Ginsberg onto the Black jazzmen in *On the Road*, his real-life search for experience as a path to American redemption relied on similar cross-racial projections and alliances. As he wrote to Ginsberg in 1950, in characteristically ecstatic terms, “I just got back from Poughkeepsie—where I met a mad ‘Negro Neal’ or ‘Negro Allen’.” Kerouac’s new compatriot, he insisted, was a living exemplar of the Beats’ apocalyptic spirit:

Says, “I have a mission in life. I want to dig everybody. I will save them. I am Christ’s ambassador on earth. . . .” The maddest I’ve ever seen. He talks & gesticulates like Neal; yet he has *your* spirit. He explains his name. “My name is Cleophus—it means to rise from the ground.” . . . We dug music just like Neal and I dig. . . . I am aware of what you meant concerning Wolfe’s “lost America.” There is no worse deception. Cleophus rising incarnate from the streets, really exist in America.

Echoing Marshall McLuhan’s rebuke of mass media, Kerouac declared that “Time & Fortune is only the sickness.” The remedy, he suggested, was street-level resistance to

³⁸ de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere*, 14, 208.

hierarchical authority. “They think they run America,” Kerouac declared. “They do not.”³⁹

Kerouac concluded that the “future of America lies in the spirituality, simplicity and strength of a Negro like Cleophus” and “in all those . . . white or black or purple, like him,” a Rabelaisian vision of the “beat-up old innocence of Peter Martin,” and a “Mad Murphy . . . outspoken old Irish drunk,” a “kind of martyr . . . sheltering whores from the abuse of slobs in the saloons” who sometimes “becomes like Gargantua.” “I am waiting for the big old fashioned Biblical curse which is about to rise in this disintegrating culture, this land, and for the resurrection of a potentially great country, greater than all the Soviets,” he insisted. “I believe in the White Rose bars at noon when workingmen are eating ham on rye and drinking beer; I hear sounds of humming joy; I see thing[s] going on, and up. . . . Not only [in] spirit but politics eventually.”⁴⁰ Kerouac ultimately set these proto-political ideas within the jazz club because jazz functioned as a symbol of rebel America, the cultural production that echoed the sounds of the underground and the messy conflicts and negotiations of national democracy on a local scale. Further, they were the sites where Flipster martyrs enacted their apocalyptic social reversals, where the jazz-bohemian’s Christ-like refusal of materialism and racial hierarchy’s “sickness” found its reward in the ecstatic spontaneity and universalism of bop consciousness.

THE INTELLECTUAL LOOKS AT THE HIPSTER

The fraternal twin of the Flipster was the Hipster. The two most enduring depictions of this outsized urban figure were Anatole Broyard’s “A Portrait of the Hipster,” published in *Partisan Review* in 1948, and Norman Mailer’s infamous “The

³⁹ Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, undated “Dear Allen” (February 1950), Box 11, Folder 17, Allen Ginsberg Papers, MS# 0487, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

White Negro,” which appeared in 1957 in *Dissent* magazine and 1959 as a City Lights pamphlet. Broyard and Mailer each placed the Hipster’s roots in jazz music and jargon. Broyard suggested that jive’s laconic vagueness was a response to the anxiety and complexity of modern life; Mailer insisted on its immediacy as “a communication by art,” an expression of the “experiences of elation and exhaustion” that was “imbued with the dialectic of small but intense change.” Both noted the Hipster’s use of marijuana, which provided a kind of primitivist “ecstatic trance”—a shamanistic aid to his “revolution of the word” in bohemia like the Village. He was an “ambassador from the Id,” a “poet, a seer, a hero” who “laid claims to apocalyptic visions and heuristic discoveries,” like Lazarus “come back from the dead, come back to tell them all.”⁴¹

They agreed that the Hipster’s origins were in World War II. But while Broyard gleaned this obliquely from their co-evolution with bebop, Mailer declared that the war “presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it,” obligating modern man “to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation.” And “our collective condition,” he suggested, “is to live with instant death by atomic war. . . . or a slow death by conformity.” The result, he concluded, was a “collective failure of nerve” with the only visible “courage to be individual” in the postwar years being “the isolated courage of isolated people.” Both Broyard and Mailer recognized that this jagged individualist was a “frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life” who found his “community of feeling” in “52nd Street clip joints” and Village bars. Yet Mailer extended this emphasis on place—apropos of his Cold War

⁴¹ Anatole Broyard, “A Portrait of the Hipster,” in Brossard, ed., *The Scene Before You*, 113-19; Norman Mailer, “The White Negro,” in *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Berkeley Medallion Books, 1959), 311-30; Lennon, *Norman Mailer*, 221.

vantage point—noting the Hipster’s bicoastal bohemian territory in “New York, of course, and New Orleans, in Chicago and San Francisco and Los Angeles,” as well as bohemia’s cultural-imperial scope “in such American cities as Paris and Mexico, D.F.”⁴²

While Broyard stopped short of addressing race as part of the Hipster psyche, Mailer insisted on the centrality of cross-racial desire, the Hipster’s “White Negro” aspirations to “the sophistication of the wise primitive in a giant jungle” and the “existentialist synapses of the Negro,” with his “Saturday night kicks” and “pleasures of the body.” Placing this ostensible white adoption of Black culture in Freudian terms, Mailer argued that “a crisis of accelerated historical tempo” meant that “the nervous system is overstressed beyond the possibility of such compromises as sublimation, especially since the stable middle class values so prerequisite to sublimation have been virtually destroyed in our time,” with the result that “neurosis tends to be replaced with psychopathy.” The Negro, he suggested, “not being privileged to gratify his self-esteem with the heady satisfactions of categorical condemnation” provided a path to radical existential therapy. Rather than bland psychoanalysis, he “chose to move instead in that other direction where all situations are equally valid, and in the worst of perversion, promiscuity, pimping, drug addiction, rape, razor-slash, bottle-break,” the “search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it.” It is little wonder that Mailer’s contentious colleague James Baldwin denounced this portrayal, suggesting that its stereotype of hyper-masculinity reduced Black manhood to a “walking phallic symbol.”⁴³

⁴² Broyard, “A Portrait of the Hipster”; Mailer, “The White Negro,” 311-14.

⁴³ Ibid, 316-22; James Baldwin, “Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), 290. Ingrid Monson cogently argues that the Freudian framework in these discussions of “hip” were inherently racialized, as the id represented a

This critique can be taken a step further. Mailer's entire conception of Hipster madness as the redemption of a society "where security is boredom and therefore sickness" rested on manly "courage," on masculinity itself. The exception to this, Mailer suggested, was the female-gendered "mysticism" of the beatniks, "often Jewish," "passive" and "sentimental," which in Ginsberg's *Howl* doubled as a sardonic form of Holy Fool laughter. His "angelheaded hipsters" were also "hysterical." Given that Mailer saw himself as a sort of diplomat between the underground literati and the formal realm of New York intellectuals like Lionel Trilling, his equation of feminized bohemianism with Jews illustrated the complexity of American racial construction, revealing his own defensiveness and need to establish a muscular Jewish identity.⁴⁴

As he suggested, the solution was the "action" of the Hipster. For Mailer, this existential reckoning was the reverse of a retreat into madness:

Whereas if you *goof* . . . you lapse back into being a frightened stupid child, or if you *flip*, if you lose your control, reveal the buried weaker more feminine part of your nature, then it is more difficult to swing the next time, your ear is less alive, your bad and energy-wasting habits are further confirmed, you are farther away from being with it. But to be with it is to have grace, is to be closer to the secrets of that inner unconscious life which will nourish you if you can hear it, for you are then nearer to that God which every hipster believes is located in the senses of his body, that trapped, mutilated and nonetheless megalomaniacal God who is It, who is energy, life, sex, force . . . To which a cool cat might reply, "Crazy, man!" . . . and everything interesting is crazy, or at least so the Squares who do not know how to swing would say.

"And yet crazy is also the self-protective irony of the hipster," he concluded. "Living with questions and not with answers, he is so different in his isolation and in the far reach of his imagination from almost everyone with whom he deals in the outer world of the Square . . . that his isolation is always in danger of turning upon itself, and leaving him

primitive form of sexuality that was opposed to civilized (and thus European) culture. See Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness." For Baldwin's stormy relationship with Mailer, see David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 183-4.

⁴⁴ Norman Mailer, "Hipster and Beatnik: A Footnote to 'The White Negro'," in Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 329-32; Lennon, *Norman Mailer*, 224-8, 239.

indeed just that, crazy. . . . To be beat is therefore a flip, it is a situation beyond one's experience, impossible to anticipate—which indeed in the circular vocabulary of Hip is still another meaning for flip, . . . that dialectic of the instantaneous differentials of existence in which one is forever moving forward into more or retreating into less.”⁴⁵

There is no disputing that, despite Mailer's disclaimers that he was presenting an archetype with “all exceptions admitted,” his White Negro was fundamentally a demeaning caricature. Further, his views on jazz were reductively sexual, eliding both its intellectual and sociological depth. Yet Mailer's notions of national redemption were more multidimensional than the figure of the White Negro would initially suggest. He agreed with Baldwin, for instance, that the social *conditions* in which African Americans suffered, rather than some innate racial trait, accounted for Black oppositional culture. As Baldwin asserted in “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” a 1961 response to Mailer published in *Esquire*, “to become a Negro man, let alone a Negro artist, one had to make oneself up as one went along. This had to be done in the not-at-all metaphorical teeth of the world's determination to destroy you.” “Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day,” wrote Mailer, “and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk. The cameos of security for the average white . . . are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible.”⁴⁶

“The White Negro” also attempted to reconstruct a radical Left out of the shambles of totalitarian Communism, to rediscover the “muted rebellion of the proletariat” in racial politics, even as bread-and-butter resistance evaporated. While “Marx's

⁴⁵ Mailer, “The White Negro,” 322-6.

⁴⁶ Baldwin, “Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” 298; Mailer, “The White Negro,” 314.

proletariat disappeared . . . when the refrigerator arrived,” the Hipster was “a psychic proletarian” who rejected rationalism as the solution to social ills. (Although, Mailer admitted, given the Hipster’s individualism, when political push came to shove he would more likely swing Right than Left.) “Hip,” he declared, “is the affirmation of the barbarian for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State.” The new popular front would rely on the liberation of consciousness, “the knowledge that new kinds of victories increase one’s power for new kinds of perception.”⁴⁷

Interestingly, in spite of his racist assumptions, Mailer successfully took liberals to task for their failure to recognize full African-American humanity, their *denial of* Black sexuality the flip side of Jim Crow’s underlying logic:

To take the desegregation of the schools in the South as an example, it is quite likely that the reactionary sees the reality more closely than the liberal when he argues that the deeper issue is not desegregation but miscegenation. (As a radical . . . I believe it is the absolute human right of the Negro to mate with the White . . . [and] there will be Negro high school boys brave enough to chance their lives.) But for the average liberal . . . miscegenation is not an issue because he has been told that the Negro does not desire it. So, when it comes, miscegenation will be a terror. . . . What the liberal cannot bear to admit is the hatred beneath the skin of a society so unjust that the amount of collective violence buried in the people is perhaps incapable of being contained, and therefore . . . the dilemma may well be this: given such hatred, it must either vent itself nihilistically or become turned into the cold murderous liquidations of the totalitarian state.⁴⁸

But Black freedom also required full intellectual and political subjectivity—a notion haplessly hidden in Mailer’s opaque demand that African-American humanity and citizenship be “seen more as a vector in a network of forces than as a static character in a crystallized field.”⁴⁹ The failure of Mailer’s call for national redemption was his inability

⁴⁷ Mailer, “The White Negro,” 329-30.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 322.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 194; Mailer, “Hipster and Beatnik,” 330; Norman Mailer, *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon, ed., (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 44, 50, 67. Mailer also insisted that he wrote “The White Negro” with political intent, later tying it to Kennedy’s election in 1960.

to follow his own advice, to see that a new progressive politics had to be founded in fully equal alliance *with* African Americans, not merely *on* the merits of Black culture.

Of course, the notion of redeeming America through Black liberation was not simply the product of white racism. Baldwin made the same point in his 1955 collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*. “At the root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself,” he wrote.

And the history of this problem can be reduced to the means used by Americans—lynch law and law, segregation and legal acceptance, terrorization and concession—either to come to terms with this necessity, or to find a way around it, or (most usually) to find a way of doing both these things at once. The resulting spectacle, at once foolish and dreadful, led someone to make the quite accurate observation that “the Negro-in-America is a form of insanity which overtakes white men.” . . . The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. . . . This fact faced . . . it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met.

Baldwin concluded, “It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”⁵⁰

This reversal of the Flipster-Holy Fool formula relied on Baldwin’s assertion that Euro-Americans naively sought to maintain their “innocence,” ignoring the conflagration that their “weird nostalgia” and “romance” about race would surely spark. By 1963, in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin made this point even more clearly, declaring that “if we, who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of ourselves as one, we condemn ourselves . . . to sterility and decay, whereas if we could accept ourselves *as we are*, we might bring new life to Western achievements, and transform them.” It was the

⁵⁰ James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, 1984), 173-5.

“individual uncertainty on the part of white American men and women” that made the discussion “of any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficult,” as the “person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality.” The price for the this willful insanity, the refusal “to be *present*,” was more pressing than the distant concern with atomic fallout. Rather than a hard rain falling, he presciently suggested, domestic tensions were better reflected in biblical terms by an old slave spiritual: “*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*”⁵¹

Baldwin also illustrated the circular workings of the Rebel Cafe in the public sphere. In “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” he described face-to-face discussions with Mailer “in various dives in Paris” and “Village bars”—where Mailer often faced vehement, even violent, challenges from young upstarts. The stuff of these conversations was then captured in their work, expanding the debate about America’s racial politics from the grassroots to the ether of mass media. Baldwin’s 1962 novel, *Another Country*, encapsulated this process, tracing his characters’ passages through interracial relationships, New York’s bohemia, and jazz clubs. In the novel’s pivotal moment, African-American jazz singer Ida Scott quietly listens to the lighthearted talk of her prosperous liberal friends about what could possibly replace the American “free enterprise” system” as they cavort in Small’s Paradise. “I suppose,” said Ida, “that one replaces a dream with reality.” “Everybody laughed nervously,” Baldwin wrote. “The music began again.”⁵² For Baldwin, nightclub talk was not to be dismissed, but real political change required a recognition that talk was cheap and actions spoke louder.

⁵¹ Baldwin, “Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” 290, 292; James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International Books, 1963, 1993), 93-4, 43, 106.

⁵² Baldwin, “Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” 295, 299-300; James Baldwin, *Another Country* (London: Corgi Books, 1962), 279.

At the same time, Baldwin asserted elsewhere, a writer's work was its own kind of political action, testing society's boundaries and envisioning possibilities. Despite his misgivings about Kerouac's unrealistic portrayal of African Americans, Baldwin recognized that "there is real pain in it, and real loss, however thin; and it *is* thin, like soup too long diluted, thin because it does not refer to reality, but to a dream." Baldwin even found redemption for Mailer's "White Negro." Despite the essay's misstep of attempting to top the "*mystique*" of the Beats' "infantile dream of love" with violent sexualized vitality, its call for national courage and moral clarity had critical potential. "For, though it clearly needs to be brought into focus, he has a real vision of ourselves as we are," Baldwin wrote, "and it cannot be too often repeated in this country now, that, where there is no vision, the people perish."⁵³

"CRAZY!": MADNESS AND THE DISCOURSE OF BLACK AUTHENTICITY

Black novelist John Williams similarly exposed very real issues in his fictional portrayal of Charlie "Bird" Parker in *Night Song* (1961). Through the character of Richie "Eagle" Stokes, Williams humanized Bird, debunking his heroin-chic myth as irrelevant to creativity. Williams declared that Eagle/Bird's music was affective in the Black community beyond mere politics, even as his legend after death from a drug overdose filled a "communal need" for hip individualist heroes. "Eagle is our aggressiveness, our sickness, our self-hate, but also our will to live in spite of everything," proclaimed one of the jazzman's compatriots, the Black proprietor of a Village nightclub. "He symbolizes the rebel in us. No organization can do that." Williams emphasized the economic exigencies of the jazz world, as Eagle perpetuated his own mystical image to make his way in a business that rewarded white players more handsomely than Black ones.

⁵³ Baldwin, "Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," 297-8, 303.

Ultimately, Williams suggested, social conditions made full cross-racial communication impossible. Interracial relationships were labeled “sickness” by both Black and white communities and, as Eagle Stokes professed, white efforts to “prove that ‘Man, I am one of you!’” by “layin’ on you with hippy-dippy talk” simply rang hollow. For Euro-Americans, Williams wrote, the thorny question of how to see a figure like Bird “objectively, as a man, and not as a Negro enhanced by three hundred years of mythology” remained unanswered.⁵⁴

By the early 1960s, African-American writers like Baldwin and Williams were successfully shifting the discourse of authenticity onto Black terms, not as an intrinsic expression of primal humanity, but as a complex, socially-constructed racial identity whose humanity demanded recognition in its full, sometimes contradictory subjectivity. But Williams’ portrayal of Eagle/Bird’s performative persona also revealed the inherent contradictions of this discourse of authenticity—an issue at the heart of debates within the nightclub underground. Authenticity was a double-edged sword which, on one hand, cut through the pretensions of constructed social hierarchies to demand deeper human connections. On the other hand, it denied the constructed nature of *all* identities, which was all the more acute for African Americans contending with a dominant white society.

This tension helps clarify the social function of “hip” as a dialectic of authority mobilized on both sides of the American racial divide. In his autobiography, Amiri Baraka recounted his arrival in Greenwich Village in 1957, where he developed his identity as a dissident writer, intellectual, and, ultimately, a militant Black activist. He recalled feeling “liberated” among bohemia’s eccentrics, as “the streets themselves held a magic” and “notions of the strange, the exotic.” Baraka spent his days working at the

⁵⁴ John Williams, *Night Song* (Chatham, NJ: The Chatham Bookseller, 1961), 50, 210, 126, 63, 66, 87.

Gotham Book Mart, his nights drinking and talking at the San Remo, Romero's, the White Horse, the Five Spot, or in the "continental sophistication" of Rienzi's coffeehouse with Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac, and Black writers and artists like Tim Poston and Ted Joans. He sought to establish himself as an authentic Village intellect by devouring modernist Western literature. But this effort was bolstered by a "hip" persona, which included interracial relationships in emulation of Bird as the "patron saint" and "arch-bohemian in the downtown Village sense." Alongside Baldwin, "the last great black arts figure" to embrace a "romantic connection" to Europe as a cultural center, Baraka described himself as "transitional," moving from cultural to racial politics. Meanwhile, the ultra-bohemian Poston aided Baraka's burgeoning "new consciousness," as he came face to face with "the real," disabused of the "fairyland subjectivism I had about the Village" as a place free from racism and intellectual posturing.⁵⁵ At each step, Baraka's sense of authenticity rested on a certain kind of elite knowledge, whether that of the aesthete or the streetwise hipster.

Baraka's *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, published in 1984, ultimately rejected the European tradition as "whitening," reflecting his turn toward black nationalism in the mid-1960s. While his anger toward white America's violence and his desire to establish independent Black institutions more than justified this shift, it also blinded him to the contradictions within the idea of racial authenticity. Baraka recognized the social construction of the Western intellectual tradition, and even the performativity of "hip," as well as the way he mobilized them to establish sociocultural capital in the Village. Yet he insisted on African-American culture as fully authentic and "real," despite his simultaneous awareness of Black performativity and double-consciousness. As Baldwin

⁵⁵ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 182-7, 225, 190-1, 221-2, 194-6.

affirmed, his “experience in this country” led him to “expect very little from most American whites, especially, horribly enough, my friends.” “I have spent most of my life,” he wrote, “watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive.” Ignoring this complex dynamic resulted in Baraka’s own kind of racial essentialism that flattened the contours and conflicts of Euro-America into a monolithic “whiteness.”⁵⁶

True enough, the unmarked social category of whiteness—a status taken for granted by the vast majority of Euro-Americans—was, and remains, very real. But Baraka’s authentic ideal also led to missteps. At a panel discussion on jazz and race at the Village Vanguard in 1965, he callously said of white civil rights activists Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, murdered in Mississippi, “Those boys were just artifacts—artifacts, man. They weren’t real. I won’t mourn them. I have my own dead to mourn for.” And his autobiography blithely described his physical abuse of Hettie Jones during their breakup as a bi-product of his awakening racial consciousness (although the incident also bore the marks of the bohemian underground’s masculine ethos, which was all-too apparent in Mailer’s turbulent marriages as well).⁵⁷ Baraka’s views on racial authenticity left him with an indefensible philosophical position which failed to recognize the ubiquitous performativity of identity formation. His stance also presaged the Black Power movement’s isolation from potential political allies, as its lack of coalition-building handicapped its move toward mainstream politics in the 1970s, exacerbating the damage done by overt and covert state oppression. Baraka’s personal biography therefore

⁵⁶ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 187; Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” 290; Pierre Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*, edited and introduced by John B. Thompson, transl. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 12-17, 166, 172-3, 220-3. While Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* and cultural capital are primarily concerned with larger social hierarchies and linguistic representation, I am applying it here to the “performative discourse” within bohemia. However, because of the increasing popularity of bohemian culture, this quickly began to invert the kind of hierarchy that Bourdieu critiques.

⁵⁷ One famously ended with the Mailer non-fatally stabbing his wife. Lennon, *Norman Mailer*, 281-4.

provides insight into the tensions between Black Power's limited national political gains and its successful legacy in today's multiculturalism, as well as local self-determination in cities such as Newark and Philadelphia.⁵⁸

By his autobiography's end, Baraka himself recognized the problem of racial authenticity, asserting that the notion of a single "blackness" was "mythical" and "still a supremacy game." Seeing that "hating whites" was not necessary to "love oneself," Baraka declared, "*The solution is revolution.*" "We thought it meant killing white folks. But it is a system that's got to be killed," he wrote. "It's hurt all of us." He closed by recognizing the necessity of continual transformation, and—while still insisting that both white and Black intellectuals were subject to false consciousness—attested that Marxism, feminism, and family laid more solid foundations for "the real." As was often the case for Baraka, jazz offered both a path to self-love and models of political possibility. "Miles was at least as hip as JFK and Miles, though cool, would fight," he declared, reflecting John Williams' portrayal of Eagle/Bird's performative claim to self-determination, on stage showing "No teeth, no sambo smiles." Such jazzy self-representation also contained

⁵⁸ "The Negro After Watts," *The Sphinx*, Vol. 51, no. 4 (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity: December 1965): 6-8; Baraka, *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 241. Tensions also existed between the masculine ideology behind Black Power's emphasis on armed self-defense and the feminist activism of Black women, sometimes even within organizations like the Black Panther Party. See Philip S. Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* (Philadelphia, New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970); Meier, August and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981); William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2006); Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Simon Wendt, "Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era," *Gender & History* 19, no. 3 (November 2007): 543-64. Nikhil Singh argues that teleological progressive views of the classic Civil Rights era denies the long Movement that began with New Deal social democracy and urbanization. This was tied to resistance against white privilege in housing and employment and global capital-imperialist ideology, which was stifled during the Cold War. Thus 1960s militancy was not a deviant result of nationalist efforts but a continuation of the struggle for racial justice. Nikhil Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Flipster elements of social madness. Baraka asserted that one weapon to make whiteness “crumble and its apologizers break and run even faster than they are now would be to turn crazy, to bring out a little America Dada, Ornette Coleman style.” Equally important, he saw “experience” as the path to “blackness,” revealed by leaders such as Malcolm X to be founded on an activist “united front,” as well as higher consciousness. Politics required seeing that “the *cool* of death, of isolation and self-imposed alienation, was not what we meant.”⁵⁹

This kind of expansive progressive alignment was the dominant trend within the early 1960s underground, even if Baraka’s doctrinaire Marxism later led him to denounce it as “reformism.” Baraka’s *Blues People* in 1963 suffered some of the same demands for racial and cultural authenticity, asserting that bop had become part of a Black “middlebrow,” maybe even a new minstrelsy, with the complexities of jazz becoming fetishized. But, written while still in a moment of transition, it better characterized bohemia’s role, arguing that the Beats were firmly allied with jazz’s rebellion, albeit a bit “ingenuously.” Greenwich Village’s multiracial bohemia, he predicted, would prove important for redefining the culture in coming years.⁶⁰

Calls for both presence and continual change fit the Rebel Cafe’s universalist ethos of authenticity and spontaneity, even as its public permutations were performative. As Mailer argued, the Hipster’s “sense of place is acute.” Given that “orgasm is his

⁵⁹ Ibid, 458, 459, 460-65, 453, 452; Williams, *Night Song*, 211; LeRoi Jones, “Philistinism and the Negro Writer,” in Herbert Hill, ed., *Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 53. See also Daniel Won-gu Kim, “‘In the Tradition’: Amiri Baraka, Black Liberation, and Avant-Garde Praxis in the U.S.,” *African American Review* 37, no. 2/3, Amiri Baraka Issue (Summer - Autumn, 2003): 345-363.

⁶⁰ Amiri Baraka, “Manning Marable’s Malcolm X Book,” May 4, 2011 in Sundiata Acoli.org <http://www.sundiataacoli.org/manning-marables-malcolm-x-book-by-amiri-baraka-263> (accessed August 21, 2013); LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1963), 221-35. As late as 2011, Baraka continued to cite Stalin (!) to bolster his arguments about national liberation movements and the rejection of alliances with bourgeois liberals.

therapy” and “jazz is orgasm,” the center of his “dialectical existence” was often the nightclub—a “theatre of the present” where life is “lived out” by “moving individually through each moment of life forward into growth or backward into death.” Baldwin echoed this notion in *The Fire Next Time*, proclaiming, “It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love . . .—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change.”⁶¹ This sense of presence within transformation was also contained in the hipster lingo of “Dizzy” madness: as Williams’ jazzmen in *Night Song* declared of Eagle Stokes’s awesome improvisational prowess, his ability to solo in the moment and on the fly was positively “crazy.” The alternative, Gillespie himself declared, was the “boxed-in” Square, who “rejected the concept of creative alternatives,” the very “opposite of ‘hip,’ which meant ‘in the know,’ ‘wise,’ or one with ‘knowledge’ of life and how to live.” Citing the etymological root of “hip” in the African Wolof “hipicat,” meaning a “man who is aware,” Gillespie affirmed his dialectical jazz humanism by “everything we stood for, like intelligence, sensitivity, creativity, change, wisdom, joy, courage, peace, togetherness, and integrity.” As usual, public hipness was delineated by nightclub contrasts, as the Square would “spend his money at the Roseland Ballroom to hear a dance band playing standards, rather than extend his ear and spirit to take an odyssey in bebop at the Royal Roost.”⁶²

This notion of movement and change, set within the bebop jazz club, was central

⁶¹ Mailer, “Hipster and Beatnik,” 330; Mailer, “White Negro,” 187, 193, 189, 192; Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 92.

⁶² Williams, *Night Song*, 81; Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 297. The etymology of “hip” is unsurprisingly disputed. But its true origins, which will probably never be known, are less important than the significance Gillespie attached to the theory of its African roots. See Jesse Sheidlower, “Crying Wolof: Does the Word Hip Really Hail from a West African Language?” in *Slate* online http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/hey_wait_a_minute/2004/12/crying_wolof.html (accessed August 31, 2013).

to the Beats' cultural re-vision of America. While critic Jon Panish is largely correct to accuse Kerouac of being "apolitical," he carelessly lumps him in with explicitly activist poets such as Philip Lamantia as exponents of a view that "makes a fetish out of jazz." Panish suggests that spontaneity itself was fetishized (even *colonized*) by the Beats as a form of racial essentialism that "diminished" jazz by ignoring its technical, social, and historical creative processes. Yet the embrace of spontaneity as a sign of authenticity was equally embraced by African-American poets such as the Umbra group. *On the Road's* primordial shouts of, "Stay with it man! beep! honk! EE-yah!" exclaimed by its white protagonists, certainly fail to capture the deep particularities of the jazz form—as the phrase "dancing about architecture" suggests the impossibility of ever achieving an adequate literary representation of music. And without a doubt, many white fans, including the Beats, were able to simultaneously appreciate jazz and hold racist notions of Black people. But to argue, as Panish does, that Kerouac "diminishes" jazz as a "second-class musical tradition" defined only by its revolt against traditional European (white) forms takes too narrow an historical view and itself demands a notion of jazz authenticity that relies on exactly the kind of racial essentialism he purports to combat.⁶³ Instead, the Beat vision of jazz as a source of national redemption relied on a universalist notion of social change that in many ways paralleled Gillespie's hip proto-political stance. While universalism had its own pitfalls, ignoring the particularity of Black culture and political demands (thus tacitly subsuming them within Euro-American culture), it did

⁶³ Jon Panish, *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 60, 113, 111-16, 138-40. Moreover, public zeal for Kerouac's ecstatic descriptions of live jazz cannot simply be reduced to racial discourse. Jazz-club scenes in *On the Road* equally represented the amateur in awe of professional virtuosity. Kerouac's portrayal of the white pianist George Shearing, for example, is nearly identical to that of Charlie Parker; each was a jazz "God" to the wide-eyed Beats.

bolster the Movement's broader interracial coalitions, who rejected overt racism as incompatible with the ideal of an authentic shared humanity.

(NO) LAUGHING MATTER: THE AMBIVALENT LEGACY OF MADNESS

While Beat wonderment grew in part from jazz's association with blackness, it was just as much a product of twentieth-century audiences' alienation from their own culture. The postwar generation was the first to grow up from childhood fully immersed in electronic and recorded music, a culture in which hearing a performance could be fully devoid of a human performer's presence. Previous generations had gathered around the family parlor or the local cafe, listening to small string combos or the sound of an upright piano, gleaning the techniques of music-making at some basic level even if they lacked formal training. Even the ghostly moving keys of a player piano and its punch-hole rolls gave clues to its musical workings. But the entirely disembodied sound pouring from a radio or phonograph speaker created the illusion that music simply *exists* as a thing apart, separate from human construction. No wonder, then, that the Beats apotheosized the live improvisations of beboppers, who must have seemed as if they were receiving their sonic signals from the air itself, absorbing them in the same way that radio antennae pick up the invisible waves of a broadcast. Live performances in the 1950s became American culture's new witchcraft and the performers modern "shamans," who awakened the nation from the dream world to try and cure the madness of the modern world, to exorcise the demons of alienation and political apathy.⁶⁴

The politics of hip had its effects as African-American activists pressed the Kennedy administration to recognize their struggle against segregation. Kennedy's need

⁶⁴ See W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 152.

to maintain his “hip” status made the failure to at least nominally support civil rights a political liability. This political momentum carried into the Johnson administration, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in public places, including sites of entertainment. (It is no coincidence that the first—and initially successful—challenge to the law was made by the white owner of a Louisiana bar, the Celebrity Lounge, in 1966.)⁶⁵ But the politics of madness were not sustainable. Bohemians often ignored the pain and politics in jazz, for instance, paralleling their too-sanguine view of apocalyptic consciousness. Madness without a method usually means little more than self-destructive suffering. And the Rebel Cafe’s politics of hip were about more than music and madness. Dissident American literature was equally affected by the styles that emerged from bars and cafes of the 1950s into the sunlit space of the public sphere—a blossoming of bohemia that could make a Dizzy Presidency, if only as satire. In fact, satire became the Rebel Cafe’s most potent weapon in the culture wars of the 1950s and 1960s.

⁶⁵ Tyson v. Cazes, 363 F.2d 742, 22616 (5th Cir. 1966).

Chapter 9

“Rise of the ‘Sickniks’: Nightclubs, Humor, and Modern American Shamanism”

[Humor] heightens our sense of survival and preserves our sanity.

—Charlie Chaplin (1964)

In every peal of laughter we hear the menacing voice of extortion and the comic types are legible signs which represent the contorted bodies of revolutionaries. Participation in mass culture stands under the sign of terror.

—Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*¹

“We are living in a culture of conformity, the sociologists keep telling us as they pore over statistics that indicate college students are conservative this year,” wrote Ralph Gleason in 1958. “That may be. But sometimes it seems as if the sociologists miss a few points such as Bob and Ray, jazz musicians and the well-honed wit that is bringing the Comedy of Dissent these nights to various clubs in the person of Lenny Bruce.”²

Unknowingly, Gleason announced the start of a revolution in American culture, and a new period in the history of jazz. While jazzman argot had long informed Hipster posturing, his verbal message rarely reached the public’s ears unaltered. Of course, the true language of jazz—the wail of saxophone solos, the blare of trumpets, the syncopated pounding of kick and snare—still came steaming up from the smoky spaces of the Rebel Cafe. But for many white listeners, this only diverted the social message of those such as Gillespie and Mingus, as the complexities of the African-American experience were transposed into exoticism, serpentine sensuality, and libertine expression. No doubt, jazz’s aesthetic was heard in the Beat readings of North Beach and Greenwich Village, but the most popular manifestation of this trend was not in the mystical mumblings of poets, but rather in the prickly monologues of nightclub comedians. In particular, the

¹ Charlie Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964; Penguin Modern Classics, reprint, 2003), 210; Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on Mass Culture* J.M. Bernstein, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 12. See also pp. 59 and 112.

² Ralph Gleason, liner notes for *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce* (Fantasy Records, LP 7001, 1958).

jazzy social satire of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce gave a public voice to the Rebel Cafe's liberatory ethos.

Numerous scholars and generations of journalists have tackled the subject of these "New Comedians" (as the press dubbed them) and their challenges to notions of public propriety in the early Cold War period. Mostly they have spotlighted Sahl's West-Coast liberalism as a satirical chisel that chipped away at McCarthyism or Bruce's anticlerical, profanity-laden rants as early salvos in the sexual revolution and fights against censorship.³ Both comics were retrospectively hailed as trailblazers who significantly changed American culture. This was especially true for Bruce, a paragon of questionable taste whose work became a hip-set free-speech litmus test, while his obscenity prosecutions and premature death of a drug overdose in 1966 made him a countercultural martyr.⁴ But scholars' generally top-down perspectives lose sight of the New Comedy's cultural function. These performers did not simply emerge from the Cold War nightclub underground. In many ways they were its most salient expression, and the only novel cultural form to survive the period intact. As jazz-poetry, and even bebop itself, fell away from mainstream American tastes by the end of the 1960s, the style of the New

³ The most notable of these is Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). See also Jesse Bier, *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968); James D. Bloom, *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2003); Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture* (Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Ronald K. L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002).

⁴ Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 59; Joel Foreman, ed. *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury Icons*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 161; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987); Paul Krassner, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969); Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

Comedians visibly persists today. A close examination of their humor helps reveal the Rebel Cafe's broader cultural role. But it also exposes the very makeup of the underground itself, along with the complexities and contradictions of race, gender, and identity, as Sahl and Bruce reflected the aspirations, anxieties, loves, hates, joys, and fears of their audiences.

This point is underscored by a brief glance at their careers, as well as the performers who followed in their wake. Both Sahl and Bruce came to notoriety through Rebel Cafe nightclub performances and live albums, as opposed to radio, theater, or TV as was the case for Steve Allen, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, or George Carlin. Moreover, each displayed an inability to translate their humor into mass media. Compared with other New Comedians like Bob Newhart and Woody Allen, or the Black comics that came to renown after Dick Gregory broke the comedic color line—such as Bill Cosby, Redd Foxx, and Richard Pryor—Sahl and Bruce failed to develop mainstream success in film or television.⁵ As such, their historical significance must be understood within the context of the nightclub underground—the site from which they launched their assault on the wider culture.

While variations existed between clubs, performers, and locations, nearly all nightclub patrons arrived expecting some level of social engagement greater than that of a more passive medium like film. In a nightclub, the physicality of tables, walls, ceiling and stage, the shared spaces and conversations, the sounds of shifting seats and clinking glasses intermixed with the performance inherently went beyond the surface “effects” of mechanical art like television. Listeners experienced this fresh perspective in a direct and

⁵ The one faint exception being the Oscar-nominated portrayal of Bruce—some eight years after his death—by Dustin Hoffman in the film *Lenny*.

“tactile” way that mass media could scarcely provide.⁶ It was nearly impossible to detach from the actions and language within the urban built environment of the club—an experiential sphere with the listener at the center. Meanwhile, a verbal craftsman forged a unique work of art before the listener’s very ears in a manner impossible for mass production to replicate. As much as a comic may have perfected his or her “bits” prior to the show, the very possibility of improvisation—oftentimes fulfilled in the New Comedians’ case—denied the ability to mechanically reproduce a truly live performance. This active engagement served the era’s desire for authenticity, but also opened a public dialogue.

Responding to audience desires, Sahl and Bruce both embodied a national tradition of satire and broke new ground. In her classic 1931 study, *American Humor*, Constance Rourke described three archetypes of nineteenth-century culture, evoking the tragicomic images that emerged from deep in the national psyche during the country’s adolescence. For Rourke, the figures of the “Yankee,” the “Backwoodsman,” and the “Negro” fulfilled modes of social self-understanding.⁷ Each character became a mask donned during the telling of tall tales, under the dim lights of the pre-vaudeville saloon stage: the sharp, fantastical figure of the Yankee, a peddler forever moving his wares, wary to reveal himself but quick to demand basic justice—the spark of the Revolution in

⁶ As Miriam Hansen has argued in relation to American silent cinema, which featured live elements such as musical accompaniment and actors’ performances or commentary, the intertextual and spatial contexts of a performance are integral to its role within the public sphere. Conversely, Walter Benjamin described the tactile nature of film and the political implications raised by its destruction of the high-art aura that often separated the masses from classical forms and art’s concomitant role in subject formation—a changing sense of identity linked with particular historical agents’ social and cultural position. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 35, 44, 94; Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

⁷ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Anchor Books, 1931; 1953), 232.

his satire; the primitive and powerful Backwoodsman's outsized myth of Olympian pioneering (most notably embodied in the legendary images of Paul Bunyan or Abraham Lincoln); and the tragic, absurd Negro of mid-century minstrelsy, doubly misrepresented as his blackface mask hid both white fears and the genuine subversion of Black humor that raised downtrodden spirits and cut the haughty down to size. "The three figures loomed large," Rourke wrote, "not because they represented any considerable numbers in the population, but because something in the nature of each induced an irresistible response. . . . Each in a fashion had broken bonds, the Yankee in the initial revolt against the parent civilization, the backwoodsman in revolt against all civilization, the Negro in a revolt which was cryptic and submerged but which none the less made a perceptible outline. . . . Comic triumph appeared in them all; the sense of triumph seemed a necessary mood in the new country."⁸

Social comedy, Rourke argued, was a "leveling agent," a "preparation for new growth" as "laughter created ease . . . unity . . . the illusion of leveling obstacles." This flattening took the form of burlesque, the blunt exaggerations of archetypal masquerade. The pointed detachment of satire was an uncomfortable fit for a country as yet unsettled, while burlesque, on the other hand, wore "the look of friendship."⁹ That this friendship was itself an illusion—as seen in the vicious parodies that were Jim Crow and Sambo, in the violence of racial comedy and pie-in-the-face pratfalls—meant little for the central place of these archetypes in the national culture. "There is hardly an aspect of the American character to which humor is not related," Rourke wrote, "few which in some sense it has not governed." At the same time, national humor was a failed attempt at unity,

⁸ Ibid., 16-21, 40, 45-9, 71-4, 86.

⁹ Ibid., 35, 56-8, 71-3, 83, 86-7, 101, 110.

an inadequate “solvent” for smoothing the rough surface of pluralism in a nation of immigrants both voluntary and coerced.¹⁰

While the masks of the Yankee, the Backwoodsman, and the Negro certainly changed over the course of the early twentieth century—growing warped and worn by time and use—they were still visible, if only as ghostly auras, in the personas of Sahl and Bruce. Sahl exhibited the Yankee sharp’s patriotic and revolutionary fervor, combined with a keen sense of his audience’s hunger to consume his comic wares. Bruce acted as the Backwoodsman, a “verbal Hieronymous Bosch” of grotesque and Gargantuan humor.¹¹ But he also represented the subversive “Negro,” as his Hipster image and jazzy lingo “blackened” him in the eyes of his critics. But there was a fourth archetype that Rourke missed, the “Immigrant,” whose outsider status simultaneously demanded that the fabled promise of the American Dream be kept. As Jewish comedians, both Sahl and Bruce displayed these archetypal elements, firing social barbs from beyond the fringes while drawing from an ethic-American tradition that demanded justice and inclusion.

The Village Vanguard’s cabaret satire and the comedy of Irwin Corey and Lord Buckley had set the Rebel Cafe precedent and made it fertile ground in which the New Comedians flourished. While Corey’s humor was as much vaudeville as the stuff of an early New Comedian, he nonetheless introduced themes and approaches to American satire, from routines on Freudian psychology to rapid-fire delivery, which Sahl and Bruce adopted. Along with Lord Buckley’s “hipsomatic” style, the stage was set for a brand of comedy that embraced the Hipster-Flipster-Holy Fool social role, and that the press quickly labeled “sick.” Within the walls of the Vanguard, the hungry i, and other

¹⁰ Ibid, 9, 232.

¹¹ Ralph J. Gleason, “Rebels with a Cause—Jazz and Lenny Bruce,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 8, 1958, p. 35.

bohemian nightspots, these comic satirists crafted what was in some ways the Rebel Cafe's most forthright view of America. Sometimes presaging changes, sometimes driving them, they raised a carnival mirror to the broader society to expose the absurdities of the Cold War in an era of constrained politics. Some audiences flinched at the grotesqueries they saw; others burst out laughing at the crudities of the burlesque. But those with the courage of conviction, or a fiercely skeptical eye, saw past the facade of caricature and recognized the saturnine visage of social critique that lay underneath.

LEFT-COAST LIBERALISM: MORT SAHL AND THE HUNGRY I

At first blush, Mort Sahl's biography belies his role as the atomic-age Yankee humorist. Born in Montreal in 1927 and raised in Los Angeles by left-liberal Jewish parents, Sahl grew up in an environment, driven by his civil-servant father, which emphasized social responsibility and Democratic Party loyalty. But the Cold War's conservative turn sharpened his political edges. "My father and mother gave me a very radical orientation," Sahl later asserted. "They are people who refused to watch America turn 180 degrees after FDR." A stint in the Army Air Forces just after World War II was a firm education in liberalism, as he related in a 1959 interview: "I suddenly got the message. I matured in that idealistic time in the Nineteen Forties when Franklin Roosevelt was President, there was a war on Nazi Germany, and the Democratic party's social philosophy reigned. All these had an effect—probably still do—on my thinking."¹²

Sahl attended the University of Southern California on the GI Bill, studying public administration and "statistics." ("Well," he later quipped, "how else can you document prejudice?") Sahl dropped out of the graduate program at Southern Cal,

¹² "Mort Sahl Up and Down the Organization," *Chicago Metropolitan News*, February 24, 1973, p. 17; Mort Sahl, *Heartland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 150; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 54-5; Herbert Mitgang, "Anyway, Onward With Mort Sahl," *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, p. SM 32.

however, after falling in love with jazz clubs—and a young woman named Susan Babior, whom he followed to Berkeley when she began college.¹³ Like many other young arrivals, Sahl found the Bay Area to be revolutionary. “Berkeley had three shifts of people who were forever talking politics in coffeehouses,” he facetiously reported in his memoir. “There was a cadre of left-wing oriented Jewish kids with fervor. I just wandered around and listened.”¹⁴ In Los Angeles, he had occasionally performed under the name Cal Southern, styling himself as a humorist in the mold of Will Rogers since “ruminating on the human condition” to him “seemed rural.” However, his observational jokes and impersonations of movie stars and politicians proved unsuccessful, and after three years of showbiz failure he put Cal Southern out to pasture.¹⁵

Sahl’s experiences in the charged atmosphere of the Bay Area scene sparked a comedic transformation. Either Babior or, as North Beach lore had it, bohemian Hubert the Cube suggested that he audition at the clubs in San Francisco and after a series of rejections, Sahl approached Enrico Banducci at the hungry i.¹⁶ The standard comic’s “equipment” at that time was a tuxedo (“and a line of girls behind you”), which was deemed necessary to give performers a hint of respectability and “class,” but Sahl lacked the proper accoutrements. Wearing a suit and tie given to him by musician Stan Kenton and punctuating his jokes with a big cigar, Sahl auditioned for Banducci and the club’s

¹³ Sahl, *Heartland*, 6-11; “Mort Sahl Up and Down the Organization,” *Chicago Metropolitan News*, February 24, 1973, p. 17; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 203-4; Albert Goldman, from the journalism of Lawrence Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!!* (New York: Random House, 1971), 192. Sahl and Babior divorced in 1958. She charged that he “had been ‘loud and abusive’ in his criticism of her before friends and in public places. “Night-Club Comic Mort Sahl Divorced,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 28, 1958, p. 14.

¹⁴ Sahl, *Heartland*, 10-11.

¹⁵ *Mort Sahl: The Loyal Opposition*, directed by Robert Weide (1987), Paley Center Archives, New York, NY; Interview on WHYY, “Last Laughs 2004: Comedian Mort Sahl,” by Terry Gross, December 30, 2004 (Recorded December 2003); Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 56.

¹⁶ Ralph J. Gleason, “Beatnik Poets Move Out, the Tourists Move In: North Beach Haunts Are ‘Going Commercial,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 30, 1960, pp. 1 and 6; Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 192.

manager, Purple Onion co-owner Barry Drew. By all accounts the act was less than stellar, but Banducci put Sahl on the bill to cover a last-minute cancellation on December 22, 1953. Sahl enticed his friends from campus to attend and, concealing notes for his routine in a newspaper to stave off stage fright, proceeded to crack up his ready-made audience. Banducci was impressed enough to keep the young comic on for a week's run, launching his journey into the wilds of oppositional satire.¹⁷

Sahl's sojourn was not a solitary one, however. His metamorphosis from tree-stump ruminator to "Yankee" humorist who challenged America's comedic status quo was undertaken in close partnership with Banducci and was embedded in the Rebel Cafe milieu. Banducci's bohemian persona evolved into a reputation as "The Billy Rose of North Beach," with the hungry i touted as "the most influential nightclub west of the Mississippi." Yet the flamboyant club owner's approach maintained a spirit of experimentation and a dedication to interaction between patrons and performers. "I gave people artistic freedom, allowed them to express themselves as they wished, without any interference from me or anybody else," Banducci recalled. "I wanted . . . to develop and nurture talent." He certainly extended this openness to the young Sahl—who was reportedly told by one unimpressed club owner, "Go across the street to the hungry i. Enrico Banducci will talk to anybody."¹⁸ The comic's stint at the club started a partnership that defined each one's place in American culture, as Sahl's iconoclasm and the hungry i's subterranean populism became inextricably linked in the public imagination.

The rapport between Sahl and nightclub audiences, both at the hungry i and in

¹⁷ Sahl, *Heartland*, 12-13, 5; John D. Weaver, "San Francisco: hungry i," *Holiday* 29 (April 1961): 125-38.

¹⁸ "Enrico Banducci: 1922 – 2007," *Chicago Tribune*, October 16, 2007. pg. 6; Howard Taubman, Special to the *New York Times*, May 13, 1961, p. 11; Weaver, "San Francisco: hungry i."

New York venues such as the Village Vanguard, was fundamental to the development of his satirical brand. Sahl was the first comedian to appear at the club, but the beatnik and avant-garde ambiance Banducci had cultivated over the previous three years encouraged experimentation. Sahl quickly jettisoned any traditional comedy trappings. Instead of impressions or Borscht Belt setup-and-punch-line routines, he presented stream-of-consciousness monologues drawn from his lone prop, a rolled-up newspaper. The US was sure to win the Cold War, Sahl assured audiences, since “every time the Russians threw an American in jail, Nixon would throw an American in jail to make sure they didn’t get away with it.” He savagely satirized the “I Like Ike” phoniness of mid-fifties politics, bringing to the nightspot the sensibility of a radically snide subterranean Holden Caulfield. Eisenhower had better watch his step, Sahl warned, or “General Motors may become vindictive and cut the Government off without a cent.” These largely improvised ramblings also included shots at the controversial but still politically potent Joseph McCarthy. He jived listeners that there was now a Joe McCarthy jacket, just like an Eisenhower jacket but with “an extra flap that fits over the mouth.”¹⁹ While the televised Army-McCarthy hearings from April to June 1954 undoubtedly delivered the final blow, Sahl’s sarcasm added power to the discursive punch that finally knocked America’s most famous anticommunist out of the limelight.

While he ultimately benefited from having been ahead of the political curve, Sahl’s remarks made him the target of some early “savage” reactions from among the “400-type socialites,” or “crew-cut fraternity boys” and tourists who had begun to sniff

¹⁹ Mort Sahl, *Live at Sunset* (Fantasy, 1958), Library of Congress Recorded Sound Reference Center; Sahl, *Heartland*, 21; Walter Kerr, “The Fast-Talking Man in a Sweater Has Started Something,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 1958, *This World* insert, p. 21. See also Gross, “Last Laughs 2004: Comedian Mort Sahl.”

out the wild climes of bohemia. Sahl later recalled the early “resistance” to his material as “guys would come by and yell ‘Communist,’ and . . . wait upstairs to beat me up after work, and Enrico would walk out with me and take them on.”²⁰ Sahl’s memoir and press interviews show that, even seen through the gloss of nostalgia and (often self-serving) memory, theirs was a joint effort. “It was the Eisenhower fifties and everyone was going along with the lie, so Enrico and I were betting that the audience was smarter than that,” Sahl asserted. Those who discouraged them “were our good friends and they were frightened. They said ‘You can’t say that, he’s the president.’ . . . The act [was] a daring rescue mission for America.” As the show grew more prominent, conservative patrons, often attending shows as part of Gray Line bus tours, sometimes grew hostile, even violent. One night the wife of John Foster Dulles’ pilot, angered by jibes that she felt demeaned the Secretary of State, burst on stage and slapped Sahl. “It was really a battle,” Banducci noted, invoking the image of warfare. “They called us communists and everything else.”²¹

Such comrade-in-arms terminology underscored the notion of the nightclub as a male social space. And while this was pure illusion—women being frequent performers as well as patrons—the language of fraternity infused the Sahl-Banducci alliance. One magazine article, noting their similar ideals and diverging temperaments, went so far as to quote Sahl’s mother saying that they were “like brothers.”²² Sahl later relied on a similar military metaphor as he acknowledged Banducci’s role: “Enrico is really a demonstration of how powerful an idea can be. You know, Fidel said . . . ‘An idea is

²⁰ Sahl, *Heartland*, 21; Gerald Nachman, “A Funny Thing Happened to the hungry i,” *Oakland Tribune*, January 11, 1970, p. 3-EN.

²¹ “*Enrico Banducci’s hungry i: San Francisco’s Legendary Nightclub*,” Exhibition Video Loop, San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum: Sahl and Banducci Interview, 1997.

²² John D. Weaver, “San Francisco: hungry i,” *Holiday* 29 (April 1961): 125-38.

more powerful than an army.’ Well, the club is an idea; the club existed between his ears.”²³ Sahl’s invocation of bewhiskered rebels tramping through the mountain jungles above Havana, mounting a muscular challenge to Batista’s right-wing touristic heaven, only underscored his Cold War oppositional myth-making.

SAHL, THE SALOON, AND THE POSTWAR PUBLIC SPHERE

As the winter of 1953-4 warmed into summer, Sahl’s original one-week stint extended into months and his new style of intellectual comedy began to catch fire with audiences. By fall, local columnists such as Herb Caen began praising Sahl and his “high IQ”—if “jaded”—humor.²⁴ Sahl’s success relied heavily on the kind of face-to-face interactions found in small nightspots such as The Place—with many of the same cosmopolitan connotations. Banducci later insisted that the hungry i “wasn’t just a nightclub, it was a place for people to come and express themselves . . . [with] the intimate atmosphere conducive to lovers of Piaf and Sartre and all the existentialists.”²⁵ And the process of challenging the prevailing satirical winds, Sahl suggested, was dialogic: “We found out things too, and you find it out by listening to the audience.” He often compared the evolution of his act to jazz improvisation, with the audience acting as fellow band members, adding that “if they don’t laugh you’re playing a cappella.”²⁶

With the hungry i’s origins firmly rooted in North Beach bohemia, the club’s transformation into an entertainment space required some adjustment, as its circle of patrons widened to include more casual visitors. Attempting to maintain an environment

²³ “*Enrico Banducci’s hungry i: San Francisco’s Legendary Nightclub*,” Exhibition Video Loop, San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum: Sahl and Banducci Interview, 1997.

²⁴ Dan Steele, “Going Places,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 12, 1954, p. D 11; Steele, “Going Places,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 18, 1954, p. D 35; Steele, “Going Places,” *Oakland Tribune*, September 1, 1954; Sahl, *Heartland*, 16-17.

²⁵ Nachman, “A Funny Thing Happened to the hungry i.”

²⁶ *The Loyal Opposition*, Paley Center Archives.

of rational exchange, and one that was friendly to his performers, Banducci told drunks who “wanted to get in on the act” to “be quiet,” enforcing respect for ideas over mere uninhibited outbursts.²⁷ Banducci even stopped serving cocktails during the show, “So the entertainer didn’t have to fight waiters pushing steaks or pushing drinks.” Such a radical nightclub policy had very real implications for the dynamic between satirists and audiences. “Mort Sahl could take the lingering pause,” Banducci later stated, “and you could *feel* it, the buildup. You could hear a pin drop in the whole damn room. The he’d whap ya and the whole room would just break up.”²⁸ The hungry i’s distinct performative space was later illustrated in a 1961 article in *Holiday*:

[The patron] is spared the familiar nightclub dodges to wheedle an extra buck. There are no cover charge, no minimum, no long-legged cigarette girl. . . . [C]anvas chairs are arranged in rows around three sides of the uncurtained platform which serves as the stage. The theatrical seating arrangement and the lowered house lights discourage conversation during a performance. Except for an occasional heckler, nothing distracts from the show. Banducci refuses even to have drapes in the room. “The women would start studying the pleats and the way they’re hung,” he says. The spotlight is on the performer, who stands with his back to a brick wall, facing the audience in a setting which suggests the working area of a Cuban firing squad.

“It’s a great room because of the discipline that’s forced on the audience,” one entertainer said.²⁹

This emphasis on audience attention sits in uneasy tension with the 1950s cabaret as a site of discussion and debate. Although Banducci’s policies certainly discouraged a completely open dialogue of the kind found during The Place’s Blabbermouth Nights, they did fit within liberal notions of a rational public sphere and reasoned debate (however uncomfortably those may sit within an often raucous democracy). In his

²⁷ “*Enrico Banducci’s hungry i: San Francisco’s Legendary Nightclub*,” Exhibition Video Loop, San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum: Sahl and Banducci Interview, 1997.

²⁸ “Interview: Enrico Banducci,” *San Francisco Focus* (March 1987), clipping in Enrico Banducci Biography File, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco, CA. Banducci reported that renowned jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald, visiting the club to see Popular Front folk artist Josh White, was so impressed by the no-drink policy that she included it in her contract for other venues.

²⁹ Weaver, “San Francisco: hungry i.”

memoir, Sahl discussed the social conventions, cradled within the jazz idiom, that underpinned nightclub discourse:

Jazz musicians were saying that, as Lennie Tristano put it, my newspaper was my ax and I improvised within a chord structure, which was my thematic material. They . . . seemed to know that what I had to say was innovative in the same sense that Marlon Brando's work was at that time. Marlene Dietrich said to me once in 1957, "Brando's secret is that he acts like a human being, and most actors act like actors." Well, I acted like a human being and talked about those things that affect human beings, rather than talked like a nightclub comedian. My secret was in the public domain—that the audience has just as much stake in what happens to America as I do.

For Sahl, lack of rehearsal before a show was itself part of this dialogue; otherwise, it would have felt "like rehearsing a conversation."³⁰ Recognizing the commercial aspect of these exchanges, he insisted that his monologues were "not a lecture" but rather a "point of view" that audiences "subsidize."³¹ According to Sahl, Dietrich declared that the hungry i was "the only place she'd seen political cabaret outside Berlin," recognizing Banducci's aim to foster an atmosphere of public discussion and controversy, if only to swell the size of the crowds.³²

The hungry i's crowds did indeed swell, and in the spring of 1954 Banducci opened a new, larger location, raising his seating capacity from eighty-three to over two hundred. The decor, and even its employees, reflected the Rebel Cafe sensibility, with both European "sophistication" and American no-nonsense populism. During renovations, Banducci (who was always quick to note that he led the construction efforts himself) removed the decorative plaster and left the venue's original load-bearing brick walls exposed. Whether out of instinct or canny calculation, Banducci's innovative upgrade became a symbol for the rejection of slick commodified facades—a la the beatniks—

³⁰ Sahl, *Heartland*, 34, 38.

³¹ Paul Krassner, *Impolite Interviews* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), 162.

³² Sahl and Banducci Interview, "Enrico Banducci's hungry i: San Francisco's Legendary Nightclub," Exhibition Video Loop, San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum, 1997.

while simultaneously inviting patrons to envision themselves in the confines of a Montmartre cabaret. “The motif of simplicity is maintained scrupulously,” the *New York Times* enthused, before making a prediction that soon proved prescient. “If this country’s offbeat tastes are spawned in such uninhibited spots as the bistros of this city’s North Beach district, look out for a wave of Bohemianism combining the chi chi of Paris and the breeziness of San Francisco.”³³ Further, *Holiday* magazine spotlighted the club’s exotic émigré manager, Paul Goldenberg, gushing over the “bushy-haired young French intellectual, who was born in Egypt, and . . . spends his spare time translating Anouilh instead of boning up on the new acts in *Variety*.” Yet, Goldenberg quickly rejected suggestions that “the hungry i has ‘gone commercial,’” dryly insisting that the new location’s construction was done by Banducci, himself, the door man, and “a man who turned up with an electric saw.” He insisted that “The i hasn’t changed because Enrico hasn’t changed.”³⁴

While sarcastically suggesting that the end result “looked like the ruins of Frankfurt,” Sahl clearly admired Banducci’s work ethic, detailing how he “poured the concrete foundation and built the bar, by hand, and worked around the clock sandblasting.”³⁵ This formula combining European mystique with an American journeyman ethos, and earnest earthiness with theatrical formality, struck a nerve with the public, which craved this dual notion of authenticity. The best productions of the mid-1950s, crowed one San Francisco critic, originally “rose out of the English music halls of

³³ Howard Taubman, “Spawning Ground of the Offbeat,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1961.

³⁴ Weaver, “San Francisco: hungry i.” By the early 1960s, several New York nightclubs began mimicking the brick wall motif, including the nation’s first full-time comedy club, the Improv. See Paul Colby, with Martin Fitzpatrick, *The Bitter End: Hanging Out at America’s Nightclub* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 38.

³⁵ Sahl, *Heartland*, 20.

the early Eighteenth Century in which ale was served with thesping, just as it is today at the Hungry I and Purple Onion.”³⁶ Sahl’s public image further cemented these associations. Banducci had encouraged Sahl to discard traditional comedian attire in favor of an open-collar shirt and v-neck sweater, giving him the appearance of a thoughtful graduate student “straight from the campus at Berkeley.” (Sahl insisted that the switch was his idea, but the intended effect was largely the same: an attempt to avoid looking “like any member of the society you’re criticizing.”)³⁷

This sartorial statement spoke to Cold War audiences on multiple levels. First, the rejection of the “classy” clothes normally required for comic acceptability appealed to patrons who sought to escape the conformist pressures of mass-produced consumer culture; but equally, Sahl’s sweater, like the beatnik sweatshirt, suggested that the transcendence of bourgeois tastes was the prerogative of *members of that class*. According to this cultural logic, those who had access to the trappings of middle-class affluence were the only ones who could truly claim to have voluntarily rejected them. Further, the mention of Berkeley highlighted the association between middle-class status and a college education, which was increasingly within the reach of those like Sahl who qualified for the GI Bill, yet was largely withheld from African-American veterans (not to mention women and gay men, who were deemed outside the realm of standard military service).³⁸ Thus Sahl’s sweater was a subtle form of self-congratulation for his fans as

³⁶ Wood Soanes, “This Seems to Prove No Business Like Show Biz,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 25, 1954, p. 52 E.

³⁷ Howard Taubman, “Spawning Ground of the Offbeat,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1961; Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 58. See also Kercher, 204.

³⁸ John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1988), 99; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 166-73 and 138-141. See also Margot Canaday, *The*

they saw reflections of themselves in his image and intoned the social authority of the educated, along with the authenticity of informality, and complemented themselves that their very presence at the hungry i distinguished them as connoisseurs of a new American culture.

This self-flattery further illuminates the part that Sahl's satire played in public discourse, as well as his cultural role as a midcentury Rourkian Yankee humorist. The comic himself facetiously noted the pretensions of "bohemian" patrons ("a lot of Jewish people acting like Italians"), suggesting that North Beach "audiences are all intellectuals, which means if they understand you, great, and if they don't, they will never admit it because they will think it is whimsical humor."³⁹ The popularity of this "Highbrow Comic" among "intellectuals" and other presumably well-informed fans was ubiquitously touted by supportive ink slingers. In early 1955, the first feature-length newspaper article on Sahl depicted him as a "mournfully happy-looking young man"—in his trademark collegiate costume—who soon had "the audience fooled for a moment into thinking that his wild monologue is really a two-way conversation." By the article's third column, the fans' self-flattery became apparent: "You know Mr. Sahl," one "tipsy" young woman remarked, "I understand you. But I wonder how many others do." Another Sahl insider soon followed, slyly suggesting, "I know what kind of politics you're peddling out there."⁴⁰

While the brash young comic was quick to insist that he was no "college radical,"

Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³⁹ Sahl, *Heartland*, 12.

⁴⁰ Jim Wells, "Out in Left Field," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 27, 1955, *This World* insert, p. 4; *The Loyal Opposition*, Paley Center Archives. Sahl also later insisted that the graduate student "costume" was intended to separate him from the top nightclub comics. As usual, this seems to imply both a commercial concern for recognition and novelty, as well as an ideological rejection of uncritical lowbrow humor.

his boosters asserted he was just that. In a celebratory article on Sahl's return to San Francisco after a successful national tour in 1960, renowned jazz critic Grover Sales, Jr. (who was also the hungry i's press agent), declared that the satirist who "revived the spirit of Mencken and instigated the 'New Comedy of Dissent' " had been positively groundbreaking in the world of cabaret: "Mort would have been considered part of the architecture on any large Eastern campus; in the world of the night club he seemed as out of place and potentially explosive as Tom Paine at the Vatican." Adding a messianic element by incorrectly stating that Sahl's first show at the hungry i had been on "Christmas Night," Sales paid homage to Bay Area bohemianism, proclaiming he "assumed on the part of his audience a high degree of literacy and 'hipness,' employing polysyllabic references to T. S. Eliot, Joyce, modern jazz and Bartok."⁴¹

Through the mid-1950s, as the press reported Sahl's popularity with the bohemian "high IQ crowd," his reputation grew among college students and jazz fans, and he gained the attention of Dave Brubeck saxophonist Paul Desmond, who soon claimed Sahl as "my best friend."⁴² This connection led to the opening slot on a concert bill with Brubeck in 1955, which was recorded and later released by Fantasy Records as Sahl's second album, *Live at Sunset*, in 1958. As Sahl's first known recording, the performance suggests the shape of his early material at the hungry i. Sahl peppered Brubeck's crowd with snappy patter, alternating between light-hearted vignettes about young, middle-class masculine culture—with coffee tables made from doors on bricks, expensive hi-fi

⁴¹ Grover Sales, Jr., "Seven Years of Sahl and His Satire," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 6, 1960, p. 15; Alvah Bessie to Mr. Cassidy, December 5, 1963, Box 20, Folder 8, Bessie Papers.

⁴² "Going Places," *Oakland Tribune*, June 12, 1954 and July 31, 1954; Sahl, *Heartland*, 16-18; Paul Desmond to "Duke," undated, Paul Desmond Papers, MSS #309, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA. This relationship appears to have become strained when Desmond began to date Sahl's ex-wife, Sue.

systems, and European sports cars—and satirical looks at 1950s politics: the push for socialized medicine, the US role in the UN, the plight of unions, racial discrimination, and the architects of the Red Scare.⁴³

While the contingent nature of crowd response makes any analysis of comedic material problematic, the varying levels of laughter and applause contained on *Live at Sunset* can help illuminate Sahl's public appeal.⁴⁴ Episodes of laughter/applause generally fell into two broad categories: reaction to themes centered on gender or sexuality, and critiques of anticommunism or the military-industrial complex. For example, Sahl elicited boisterous laughter and subsequent applause with cracks that the American Medical Association was “against any cure that is rapid” such as “artificial insemination,” and that British sports cars bought to impress girls were constantly under repair, leading to the conclusion that “neither one of them is worth it.” Meanwhile, the Cold War and America's new global hegemony were never far from the surface. On US-Soviet competition for the allegiance of emerging new nations in Asia and Africa, Sahl quipped, “Are they our neutrals or are they theirs?”⁴⁵ And stabs at CID or FBI agents, conservative efforts to dismantle Roosevelt's legacy, and relations between the Department of Defense and GM received equally appreciative responses. These reactions indicated the arrival of the new American audience that steered the direction of Cold War

⁴³ “Review Spotlight on Albums,” *Billboard*, October 27, 1958, p. 28; Wally George, “Court of Records,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 1959, p. J-34; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 57-60, 62-3; Sahl, *Live at Sunset*.

⁴⁴ As noted by psychologists and humor scholars, laughter is an unconscious, reflexive response and so may be evoked by a comic's vocal inflection and physical presentation rather than the material itself.

Throughout Sahl's recordings, however, the sound of applause following involuntary burst of laughter, often after a pause that suggests contemplation, reveals a conscious approbation of content by nightclub audiences. In other words, the sudden presentation of *incongruities* by the comic elicits the physical response of laughter as a release of “redundant tensions,” which are created by seemingly irreconcilable social concerns. Conversely, applause is an explicit recognition of the skill required by the comic to effectively conquer these contradictions and therefore becomes a key measure of the significance of a satirist's content, rather than simply his appeal as funny.

⁴⁵ Lewis Funke, “Sahl Views Political Campaign In 2 Performances at Town Hall,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1960, p. 24.

comedy—one that insisted on hip, sophisticated, and worldly commentary, yet often bowed uncritically toward male prerogative and the baubles of affluence.

It is no mere coincidence that both Sahl and *Playboy* debuted in December 1953. Both were products of their time which offered a sense of intellectual sophistication tied to the titillation of broken taboos, the objectification of women, and brazen public expressions that mirrored patrons' hidden desires—all wrapped in a stubbornly patriotic package that declared itself fundamentally “American.” Sahl later recounted that *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner recognized that they rolled on parallel tracks, suggesting that the “magazine has got to do what you do. You make the people feel hip.”⁴⁶ Radical cartoonist Jules Feiffer, whose *Village Voice* sketches were appropriately titled “Sick, Sick, Sick,” notes in his recent memoir the combined impact of these two new social forces who tackled “the undiscussable subjects: politics, the FBI, the Cold War, and sex.” “Who had heard or read anything like it?” he asks rhetorically.⁴⁷ Although *Playboy* ultimately had a much deeper impact on national culture, in the late 1950s Sahl ran neck and neck with the magazine's popularity. Over a period of five years, *Playboy*'s circulation expanded to over a million copies and Hefner launched a network TV show in 1959. Meanwhile Sahl's albums on the jazz label Verve Records, *The Future Lies Ahead* (1958), *1960 or Look Forward in Anger* (1959), and *At the hungry i* (1960), each sold in the hundreds of thousands and Sahl began to appear periodically on Broadway, in feature films, and on national TV. The pair's tracks even occasionally crossed, as Sahl hosted

⁴⁶ Sahl, *Heartland*, 25.

⁴⁷ Jules Feiffer, *Backing into Forward* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 230-31. See also Carrie Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Pitzulo challenges the simple notion that *Playboy*'s sexual politics were only objectifying, noting the magazine's admittedly uneven support of feminism and its liberatory impact on the sexual revolution more broadly.

Playboy's first Chicago Jazz Festival in 1959 and appeared on Hefner's *Penthouse* and *After Dark* shows through the 1960s.⁴⁸

This is where the parallels end, however. Hefner's empire was founded firmly in the realm of mass media, always on a trajectory of undifferentiated expansion, even as it offered the illusory allure of hip exclusivity. Carried on a wave of newly cheap color printing technology and freely flowing ad revenues, Hefner's magazine consciously linked "sex and status."⁴⁹ Sahl, on the other hand, remained primarily a boutique commodity. His humor's attraction was its immediacy, an artisan hand-crafting each improvised performance, as it were, for audiences in-the-know enough to make their way into the subterranean spaces of the cabaret. Feiffer's comments underscore this aspect of Sahl's significance, as well as the feeling that Rebel Cafe patrons participated in a kind of resistance movement, stating, "Mort Sahl opened the discussion. If you were in his audience, you felt that this stuff was dangerous, truly underground humor. One might be arrested for listening"⁵⁰ Much like Rourke's nineteenth-century Yankee, Sahl sated the desires of audiences thirsty for commodities that proclaimed their emerging class status—for stories they could tell themselves about themselves as sophisticated citizens of the world—cultural literacy as conspicuous consumption. He profited by selling modern prophecy in satirical form: analysis of global events and America's place in them, leavened by attention to the absurd. Yet audience desires were inflamed by the notion,

⁴⁸ "Verve August Sales Surge," *Billboard*, August 8, 1960, p. 8; "Mort Sahl," *Billboard*, March 6, 1961, pp. 2 and 52; "Comedy Album Sales Brighten," *Billboard*, November 20, 1961, pp. 13 and 18-19; "Funny Men Score on Sales Chart in Houston Area," *Billboard*, January 23, 1961, pp. 3 and 28; Thomas Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise: The Playboy Vision of America* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 88; Russell Miller, *Bunny: The Real Story of Playboy* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984), 75; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 84; *Playboy's Penthouse*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052503/episodes> (accessed April 8, 2012).

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 69.

⁵⁰ Feiffer, *Backing into Forward*, 230-1.

perhaps the “illusion,” that they were not simply consumers, but active producers of the “conversation” in the hungry i’s showroom.

Sahl’s orbit first extended outside San Francisco in the fall of 1954 when he traveled to New York for a short run at the upscale Blue Angel. Owner Max Gordon must have seen potential for Sahl in his more bohemian Village Vanguard, however, and in early 1955 the rapidly rising comic returned to New York for a “Vanguard stint”—another piece that helped complete the bicoastal bohemian puzzle.⁵¹ (Sahl often complained that he hated New York, however, with its apartments like “rabbit hutches” and air conditioners dripping water on the sidewalk—a droll complement to Henry Miller’s vision of America’s “air-conditioned nightmare”). Paul Desmond’s connections in the jazz club circuit also led him to shows in Boston and Chicago.⁵² Throughout the late 1950s, Sahl’s friends in the jazz world, particularly Dave Brubeck, connected him with management, as well as bookings at hip Rebel Cafe venues.⁵³

Sahl’s appearances at the Village Vanguard fit organically within the oppositional atmosphere created by Max and Lorraine Gordon. Sahl later asserted that in the mid-

⁵¹ Walter Winchell, “Broadway and Elsewhere,” *The Pharos-Tribune*, Logansport, IN, November 26, 1954; Lloyd Johnson, “Star Time,” *San Francisco News*, January 8, 1955, p. 4 and January 15, 1955, p. 4; Lloyd Johnson, “Star Time,” *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*, January 22, 1955, p. 4.

⁵² Sahl’s introduction to the Chicago nightclub scene illustrates how the jazz social network plugged him into the national club circuit. Desmond first encouraged Sahl to venture outside San Francisco, introducing him to Newport Jazz Festival organizer and Boston club owner George Wein, which led to shows in Chicago after George Marienthal, owner of the jazz venue Mister Kelly’s, caught Sahl’s act. In the Windy City, Sahl made key connections with both Hugh Hefner and Norman Granz, the owner of Verve Records, who was known in jazz circles as a left-leaning champion of civil rights and was therefore a perfect match to help break Sahl into wider popularity. In addition to acting as the anchor for Sahl’s recording career, Granz briefly acted as the comic’s manager—although the mercurial Sahl quickly broke their arrangement, as he had with several previous managers. Verve provided another slender thread tying Sahl to the literary underground, as the label released spoken-word albums by Dorothy Parker, Jack Kerouac, and Alice B. Toklas. Sahl, *Heartland*, 40-44 and 53-54; *Billboard*, August 17, 1959, p. 43; Tad Hershorn, *Norman Granz: The Man who Used Jazz for Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3-8, 256-7.

⁵³ Brubeck’s web of relationships is perhaps the best documented of all the 1950s jazz notables. His voluminous correspondence with Associate Booking Company agents Joe Glaser and Bert Block illuminate the multiple relations among performers and club owners. See the Dave Brubeck Papers, Box 1A.1, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA. In particular, Block to Brubeck, August 27, 1954 shows Brubeck’s connection to George Wein.

1950s Max was “a disappointed freethinker” who mourned that “people don’t come out, and they don’t want to change the world.”⁵⁴ Despite this pessimism, the Gordons continued to provide a public forum for the expression of provocative ideas. For over a decade, Sahl remained a staple in the Village, where satirical humor reverberated through an active and engaged community. For Village scribbler Dan Wakefield, visits to neighborhood jazz clubs were part of daily existence, and his walk to and from home regularly included a look “to see if there was any musician or group I wanted to catch” or a late night visit to hear “some stand-up comedians” such as “Mort Sahl, Jackie Mason, Redd Foxx.” Ronald Sukenick also noted the comic’s effect on himself and “a number of novelists” who looked to his form of social critique as inspiration “to break away from established styles.” Even those in the neighborhood’s gay community recalled Sahl’s satire as part of the “crosscurrents flowing beneath the prevailing calm of the fifties.”⁵⁵

Noting the significance of socially interactive spaces, Sahl proclaimed in 1963 that he had “constructed a network of theaters where people can speak—they happen to be saloons, and people said it could not be done—in complete freedom.”⁵⁶ On the flip side of the discursive coin, Sahl touted himself as a lodestar of public opinion. “I found out, I guess, what teachers feel like. You know, it’s not a democracy, a school,” he noted. “And if you owe anything to the students, it’s to uplift them, to make knowledge attractive. If you leave it to them, they’re going to say, ‘On a democratic basis, we prefer recess and chocolate milk.’” More succinctly, and pessimistically, Sahl suggested that the

⁵⁴ Sahl, *Heartland*, 54.

⁵⁵ Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 164, 313; Ronald Sukenick, *Down and In: Life in the Underground* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987), 32; Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis: 1940-1996* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 135, 136.

⁵⁶ *The Realist*, “Mort Sahl,” 1963, in Paul Krassner, *Impolite Interviews* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), 156.

American public was easily misled and insisted that his function was to “wake people up,” or even act as “the Nation’s Conscience.” This intimated his demanded for a level of fluency in the language of world affairs—or, perhaps more to the point, awareness of *commentary* on such affairs. “To keep up with Mr. Sahl,” said one perspicuous critic, “you have to be not only equally quick but also equally familiar with what is going on, and with what Mr. Sahl has said about what people are saying about what is going on in his creation of himself as one of the conspicuous figures. In other words, you have to be hip, or hep, whichever is right.”⁵⁷ Sahl maintained the newspaper as his single prop during his performances over the years and it became a symbol for his very method of humorous critique, as he “worked from the newspaper headlines.” “I was playing back the sounds of my time,” he later recalled of those early years, somewhat wistfully. “People were listening to me. They believed me.”⁵⁸

Sahl’s satirical methods, however, ultimately undercuts the idea that he was only a didactic “Yankee” peddler, educating and entertaining passive audiences. In a 1958 *New York Times* editorial, Sahl declared that his audiences were allies, insisting—pace elitist critics such as Walter Lippmann—that “too much emphasis has been attributed to suppression in attempts to explain the scarcity of satire on the American Scene. Rather than admit his lack of mental ability or courage, the [average] comic . . . projects his

⁵⁷ Sahl, *Heartland*, 31; *The Realist*, “Mort Sahl,” 1963, in Paul Krassner, *Impolite Interviews* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), 163, 178; John Canaday, “Mort Sahl Links Up String of Asides,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1964, p. 34. A recent sociological study found empirically that in the classroom “the use of comedians to model sociological perspectives increased student ability to apply course concepts, decreased student anxiety when tackling new concepts, and engaged a broader number of students during class discussion.” Shawn Chandler Bingham and Alexander A. Hernandez, “‘Laughing Matters’: The Comedian as Social Observer, Teacher, and Conduit of the Sociological Perspective,” *Teaching Sociology*, 37, no. 4 (October, 2009): 335-352.

⁵⁸ *The Loyal Opposition*, Paley Center Archive; Sahl, *Heartland*, 37.

inadequacies onto the audience.”⁵⁹ Even as followers congratulated themselves on their superior taste, there continued a persistent vein of democratic ethos running through Sahl’s popular appeal. “Mort’s virtuosic command of today’s American language is not mere verbal ability,” wrote one scholarly commentator. “It . . . [is] the by-product of his desire to be well-informed—to be *au courant* with the latest developments everywhere, not merely through observation and reading, but by energetic participation.”⁶⁰

Rather than envisioning himself as a leader, Sahl projected himself as a public spokesman for fundamental American principles that were in danger of erosion from without and within. Many of his signature routines made unfavorable juxtapositions of American and Soviet leadership, wringing laughs from the harsh truth that hypocrisy and misuse of power did not fester only behind the Iron Curtain. Sahl was staunchly anti-Soviet and frequently referred to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev as a “thug.” But he also took the unpopular stance of supporting Castro’s revolutionary Cuban government after its 1959 takeover—a clear demonstration of his antiauthoritarian populism.⁶¹ Sahl insisted that nightclub audiences deserved to be respected as thoughtful and discerning, crediting them with “being ready” for controversy. “You define a place by what you say to the people,” he said. “They’re helping you to process the material.” He asserted that this nightclub rapport underpinned a more authentic form of satire, allowing him to express “what I really cared about instead of an act.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Mort Sahl, “Satire is Shorthand,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1958, p. SM-26.

⁶⁰ Louis Gottlieb, “It Takes a Heap of Information to Mint a Mort Sahl Funny,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 1, 1959, *This World* insert, p. 27. Gottlieb emphasized the significance of place to the production of this comedy, even as it offered only the “illusion of spontaneity”: “One fact, known to performers, becomes immediately clear from listening to Mort Sahl’s two LP’s on Verve: ‘The Future Lies Ahead’ cut early in 1958 at the hungry i and ‘Mort Sahl 1960’ cut late in 1958 at the Crescendo in Hollywood . . . San Francisco audiences are hipper.”

⁶¹ For the best examples of this material, see Mort Sahl, *At the hungry i*, (Verve: 1960).

⁶² Krassner, *Impolite Interviews*, 156; *The Loyal Opposition*, Paley Center Archives.

Sahl's inability to translate nightclub intimacy into larger venues only underscored his act's democratic ethos. After premiering a Broadway show in 1958, one critic wrote, his motor-mouth delivery left theater audiences "feeling a certain defensive edginess," while the show lacked a broader "sense of total security." But Sahl's iconoclastic humor, marked by its bohemian connotations of "free thought, free speech, and perhaps—in view of the fact that the performer dresses untidily and may not shave regularly—free lunch," was a welcome change "after too many muddy and fearful years." "And it's nice to know," the critic concluded, "that improper things can once more be said in public."⁶³

"A SORT OF BISTRO VOLTAIRE": SAHL AND THE RESURGENCE OF POLITICAL SATIRE

Sahl became a touchstone: a symbol of incoherent rebellion for some, a redeemer of a humorless age for others. Mass-media debates about his satire focused on either the value or destructiveness of social criticism itself. Some in the press favored the notion of attacking the "foibles of the egghead" and undercutting "political figures . . . all of whom are sitting ducks for [Sahl's] skeptical attitude towards the contemporary world." Others saw such assaults on authority as "a symptom of the 20th century's own sickness," portending the nation's decline. "It's like the last days of Rome," asserted *Time's* feature on the New Comedians in 1959. "They joked about father and Freud, about mother and masochism, about sister and sadism." In conjunction with Sahl's reputation in the press as a "saloon talker," these psychoanalytical connotations were telling, suggesting a wide social parallel to the nineteenth-century century "talk" therapy that backed Freud's work. To raise underlying social issues to the level of public discussion, Sahl said plainly, "I

⁶³ Walter Kerr, "The Fast-Talking Man in a Sweater Has Started Something," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 1958, *This World* insert, p. 21.

discovered I had to *talk*.” Through these debates, Sahl contributed to a vein of critique that managed to “see the worm in the golden apple” of postwar prosperity. As scholars such as John Kenneth Galbraith, Michael Harrington, and C. Wright Mills questioned the beneficence of corporate liberalism, Sahl offered a similar message to many who might not otherwise have cracked a copy of *The Affluent Society*.⁶⁴ So doing, he furthered public debate about the nature of American society in the mainstream.

Even as the audience helped lead the direction of Sahl’s performances, this direct social dialogue also affected patrons themselves—and in ways that were distinct from those of mass media discourse. The impact of a socialized group activity opened greater possibilities for ideological transformation. “Most people are more liberal in an audience than as individuals,” Sahl suggested in 1960. “If I said the same thing in a living room that I say during my show, people who laugh during the show would disagree strongly in the living room.” Audiences, the *New York Times* opined, once again invoking notions of European literary authority, followed Sahl’s lead as “a sort of bistro Voltaire.” When Sahl ended a performance with the exhortation to “break off into buzz groups and discuss the real meaning of the material,” he was only half joking. As noted by sociologist Sherri Cavan, and the popular press, talk between nightclub patrons following a performance was common.⁶⁵ Supporters asserted that he “brought to the stage a type of talent heretofore unknown in this country,” which “finds its antecedents in the 17th and 18th century French and English aristocratic salons.” Sahl’s “youngish professorial” crowds

⁶⁴ “Theatre: ‘Next President’,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1958; “Nightclubs: The Sickniks,” *Time*, July 13, 1959, pp. 44-5; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 56; “Observer: Kremlin Esthetics,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1965; “The Sickniks”; Russell Baker, “Convention Show Moves Outdoors,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1960, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Murray Schumach, “Mort Sahl Knows No Party,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1960, p. 27; Sahl, *Live at the hungry i*; Sherri Cavan, *Liquor License: An Ethnography of Bar Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1966), 160-3.

recognized that he “demands a great deal from his audiences” and hoped that his political, psychological, and literary perspectives would “rub off,” elevating their late night talk.⁶⁶

While the historical record of post-show audience conversation is obviously thin, ABC’s 1962 special report on political comedy offers some insight. News cameras captured patrons after Sahl’s performance at the Chicago nightclub Mr. Kelly’s, as groups of young men milled on the sidewalk and the reporter interviewed mostly white, middle-class couples. While one self-identified Bostonian registered his displeasure at Sahl’s satire of President Kennedy, a woman in pearls and furs firmly asserted that “it’s healthy” to embrace critiques of US policy: “As Americans it brings a serious problem into focus.” Another man applauded the ability for such satire to help the public see the government “objectively.”⁶⁷ At least in front of the cameras, political discussion continued beyond the doors of the nightclub, suggesting the sorts of exchanges that took place on the sidewalks of San Francisco and New York.

Sahl therefore played two roles in the public sphere. He interpreted the news of the day for his audiences, encouraging discussion within the nightclub and, by extension, wherever the simulacra of such performances (record albums) were played and listened to in group settings. Sahl’s critiques, which were explored—and deplored—in the press, further contributed to a broadly disseminated social dialogue. Yet he was always quick to note the centrality of the hungry milieu. “I had built my own ant village and . . . I was making my own people in the lab—Enrico and Susan, and Desmond and Herb Caen,” he quipped in his memoir. “We had a little circle.” “I went to the cover of *Time* magazine

⁶⁶ John Pagonis, “Listening is Key to Sahl’s Success,” *Washington Post*, December 2, 1960, p. B-10; John Canaday, “Mort Sahl Links up String of Asides,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1964, p. 34. See also Arthur Gelb, “Cabaret Menu: Roast Politician,” *New York Times*, Jun 4, 1962, p. 32.

⁶⁷ *Bell and Howell Close-Up*: “What’s So Funny?” (ABC, 1962), New York Paley Center Archive.

without ever leaving the city of San Francisco,” he boasted in characteristically hyperbolic fashion, “and I did it by having a one-club platform. If you have a place to stand, you can move the world. Consider what a television audience is by numbers then figure what it means to have only 265 people in a club. Yet everybody knew the hungry i, and everybody knew that its connotation was Mort Sahl.”⁶⁸

LENNY BRUCE: “TRAGIC SHAMAN,” MODERN BACKWOODSMAN,
AND “SICK WHITE NEGRO”

Lenny Bruce’s infamy was equally traceable to North Beach—Lenny the Martyr, who was hounded to death by the puritan police and fig-leaf DA’s of America’s most cosmopolitan cities. As a free-speech and cultural gadfly, his story is well known. He developed a national reputation as an irreverent, “sick” comic in 1958, selling hundreds of thousands of live comedy albums for Fantasy Records, appearing on Steve Allen’s television show, and packing nightclubs across the country. Bruce’s downfall started in 1961 when he was arrested on drug charges in Philadelphia. The case was dismissed amid implications of police corruption, but was followed by more than a dozen busts in other cities for “obscene” nightclub performances, from San Francisco’s Jazz Workshop and Los Angeles’s Troubadour to Chicago’s Gate of Horn and New York’s Cafe Au Go-Go. Bruce was acquitted in San Francisco in 1962, signaling that city’s political sensibilities; his trials in New York and Chicago over the next two years had the opposite outcome and he became the victim of a de facto blacklist as club owners feared prosecution and refused to hire him. Bruce made his case to audiences in his few remaining venues, and a

⁶⁸ Comedy albums, particularly of the risqué “blue” or “sophisticated” type, were frequently referred to as “party albums” and were listened to during social gatherings. *Playboy* magazine referred to hi-fi’s and party records as part of the culture of bachelor-pad sophistication which it promoted. See “Comedy Album Sales Brighten,” *Billboard*, November 20, 1961, p. 19 and Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 238. See also Ethan Thompson, “What, Me Subversive?: Television and Parody in Postwar America,” (Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2004). Sahl, *Heartland*, 18-19.

stream of high-profile supporters from Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, and Susan Sontag to left theologian Reinhold Niebuhr rallied to his defense, but to no avail. The controversial comic died penniless of a heroin overdose in 1966. He was posthumously vindicated when his New York case was overturned on appeal two years later.⁶⁹

Bruce's status as a countercultural icon was cemented in 1974 with Albert Goldman's sensationalistic biography, *Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!!*, and the Hollywood film, *Lenny*, starring Dustin Hoffman—a more sympathetic but equally problematic portrayal that followed Goldman's formula of sex, drugs, and dirty jokes. Subsequent popular texts and documentaries apotheosized Bruce as a cultural martyr who saved America from 1950s repression and almost single-handedly freed The Word from puritanical restraint. More recently, scholars have fleshed out these one-dimensional views. Stephen Kercher, for instance, places Bruce in historical context with comparisons to the Beats and the sexual liberated *Playboy* lifestyle's.⁷⁰ Tracing his Jewish working-class roots and identity in relation to audience expectation of authenticity and social justice, Kercher also compares Bruce's work with 1950s critics' concerns about "momism," conformity, and mass society.

While Goldman's portrayal was denounced as a "cornucopia of factual errors" by many who knew Bruce well, it did provide a useful metaphor for the comic's social role, that of the modern shaman. "The shaman is not a priest, nor is he a medicine man," Goldman wrote. "The closest thing to him in the Western world . . . is the exorcist, the caster-out of demons and devils. The shaman, however, is also an artist . . . What he offers the tribe is a performance, an act of intense make-believe."

⁶⁹ Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002), 11-75, 345.

⁷⁰ Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 397-424, 438-40.

[T]hrough the use of drugs, drums, chants and other devices, he reaches the state of ecstasy. Eventually, he launches out on a spirit voyage. . . . His destination is the other world. . . . If the shaman reaches his goal in the spirit world and obtains the information or the powers which he is seeking on behalf of his people, his voyage is celebrated as a triumph for the whole tribe. If the shaman fails to reach the goal or loses control of the spirits, he must be killed. . . . As you pondered Bruce's amazing record of recent arrests, you could see that one of his troubles was simply the fact that he . . . had polarized the public . . . [and] it was clear that Lenny Bruce *was* letting the spirits get out of control. He was arousing more demons than he was defeating.

“If things got bad enough,” Goldman concluded, “Lenny might suffer the fate of the failed shaman. The tribe might turn around and kill him.”⁷¹

Goldman's compelling depiction left out three key aspects of shamanism, however. Another shamanic role is that of a healer, mostly of psychosomatic diseases, making him or her as much like an analyst as an exorcist. Moreover, shamans often rely on transvestitism—a kind of reinvention in the guise of the Other—as well as secret languages, establishing them both within the tribe and transcending it. In this sense, Bruce was another example of the Hipster-Flipster-Holy Fool, wearing the mantle of Black culture as part of the Rebel Cafe's socially-Freudian and Rabelaisian role of psychosexual catharsis.⁷² While Goldman's text also had the merit of expansiveness, tracing many of Bruce's social connections in North Beach and Greenwich Village, he artificially separated the comic from this milieu—a failing that has hobbled subsequent accounts. Lenny Bruce was directly engaged with the Beats and other overlapping Rebel Cafe circles. Similarly, he embraced their views of reinvention and authenticity, questioning powerful institutions and popular orthodoxies in favor of a liberated personal moralism. Controversy over his satire was also rooted in Cold War consciousness, with debates over individual, sexual, and racial liberation versus fears of national decline and

⁷¹ Orrin Keepnews, *The View from Within: Jazz Writings, 1948-1987* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 145-55; Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 382; Goldman, *Lenny Bruce*, 402.

⁷² Margaret Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 1-21; Goldman, *Lenny Bruce*, 204-7, 345, 456-79.

Soviet dominance. Placing Bruce within this context sheds light on his public role as a modern shaman and a subterranean critic of American culture, media, and politics, as his nightclub performances both tied him to and expressed the urban demimonde.

Bruce's comedy was the logical next step for Rebel Cafe culture: its move into the realm of satirical entertainment. Only familiar aspects of a society or culture are subject to humor; unfamiliarity with a punch line simply leaves audiences perplexed. Bruce's material not only absorbed the ethos of North Beach and Village night people, it reflected their milieu back to them—as well as broadcast it to hip mainstream patrons who wanted to show that they were in on the joke. His routines were peppered with references to the Black Hawk's Helen Noga, booking agent Joe Glaser, Chicago's nightclub Mafioso, and New York's Blue Angel, the modernism of Gertrude Stein and the Scottsboro Boys' Popular Front civil rights case, the Beats, jazz-poetry, drug addiction, gays and lesbians, interracial marriage, and Freud. This was his task as a modern shaman, to delve, intoxicated, into the underworld, and into the past, to bring back a new perspective on current events. This outsider vision allowed him to skewer the politics of the day, from the segregationist Governor Faubus to the Cold War—and intermixing them with nightclub culture, such as comparing Sahl to South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee. Bruce was no intellectual; his insights were mostly prosaic. But they were effective, allowing audiences to look directly at troubling issues, and themselves. In the process, he legitimated the underground as worthy of satirical scrutiny. "I was not born in a vacuum," Bruce told one San Francisco audience, acknowledging his trans-missive and transgressive function. "Every thought I have belongs to somebody else. . . . So I am not

placating you by making the following statement. I want to help you if you have a dirty-word problem.”⁷³

Bruce’s confrontation with taboos—what Freud defined as sacred, unclean, or forbidden aspects of people and life, each of which denotes *unapproachable* social elements—placed him squarely in the underground psychogeography. The most important precedent for Bruce’s style was Lord Buckley’s “White Negro” mystique, with its theatrically regal persona infused with hip-jive jargon. Henry Miller’s praise of Buckley, with its invocations of both Roman sewers and Christ-like secular sacrifice, was equally suited to Bruce’s oeuvre, with his Freudian “toilet” jokes and satires of religious hypocrisy, such as “Religions, Inc.” and the notorious “St. Paul Giving up Fucking.” Such juxtaposition of scatological, sacred, and profane was Bruce’s stock-in-trade—to the extent that he recited sections of Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* onstage. Bruce’s tribute to Miller was a prime demonstration of his immersion in Rebel Cafe culture; its literary usable past and street language—the humor of which rarely comes through on the written page—laid a foundation for what appeared to the uninitiated as an avant-garde brand of comedy.⁷⁴

Bruce confronted the social construction of language itself, exploding the notion

⁷³ Trial Transcript, *People v. Bruce* (San Francisco City and County Court), March 5-8, 1962, p. 291, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

⁷⁴ Even conventional comedy occasionally tackled taboos in mild form: Freud noted that one of the strictest social taboos is the one that forbids close male relations with mothers-in-law, the root of one of Western culture’s most time-worn gags. The inability of Bruce’s humor to translate onto the page, I argue, is essentially part of his role as a modern shaman. Like the music and chants that accompany tribal myths, Bruce’s routines had a flow and cadence that was intrinsic to their appeal, which aided them as a form of American mythology. Many commentators at the time noted this as part of Bruce’s charisma or animal magnetism, but anthropologically his routines were myths, the “stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.” See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, transl. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1952), 14; *Obscene*, directed by Neil Ortenberg and Daniel O’Connor (Double O Film Productions, 2007) and Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I*, transl. by John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969, 1964), 28.

that The Word is equivalent to the object it represents. In his bit, “Las Vegas Tits and Ass,” Bruce portrayed a pair of nightclub owners arguing over the limits of acceptable advertising:

“You can’t put tits and ass on the marquee!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s dirty and vulgar, that’s why not!”

“Titties are dirty and vulgar? Okay, we’ll compromise. How about Latin? *Gluteus maximus, pectoralis majors* nightly.”

“That’s alright, that’s clean. Class with ass, I’ll buy it.”

“Clean to you, schmuck,” Bruce concluded, “but dirty to the Latins!” Underlying this semantic commentary were several other themes common in Bruce’s work. Foremost was the question of what constituted *public* propriety. The routine critiqued the orthodox Christian notion that the human body is inherently sinful (“If God created the body, and the body is dirty, then the fault lies with the manufacturer.”), as well as the alienating commodification of human intimacy.⁷⁵ Bruce often intermixed this with scathing denunciations of racism, as in “Christ and Moses,” which satirized the Biblical figures’ return to a wealthy cathedral in 1950s New York accompanied by hordes of the city’s disenfranchised. In desperation, the local cardinal calls the pope. “Put them up at *your* place,” Bruce wails into a mock telephone, exchanging lines with an inaudible pontiff. “We’re up to our asses in crutches and wheelchairs! . . . What are we paying protection for?” Bruce then pauses for queries about the holy duo’s miraculous return: “What? They’re in the back. . . . Of *course* they’re white!”⁷⁶

Bruce’s work also reflected a postmodern concern with subject-object relations, paralleling the Beats’ postwar atomic consciousness. “You don’t know anything about

⁷⁵ Bruce was well-known early in his career for appearing on stage naked—yet another parallel to Allen Ginsberg’s insistence on “nakedness” as a sign of honesty. See “Enrico Banducci Interview,” *San Francisco Focus* (March 1987) clipping in Enrico Banducci Biography File, SFPL. Banducci also insisted that Bruce once hit on him sexually—an offer which the club owner apparently politely declined.

⁷⁶ Lenny Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert* (Hollywood: World Pacific, 1995), recorded February 4, 1961.

anybody but you,” Bruce insisted. “Just you live in that thing. You always live alone.” This view was inseparable from his own history, a life of reinvention in which Bruce’s ideological, sexual, and ethnic outsider status was channeled into a performative persona.⁷⁷ As Jewish and bisexual, Bruce shared a common identity with many in the bohemian underground. While he was not publicly open about his sexuality, and equally shied away from obvious leftwing alliances, his personal queer-bohemian-hipsterism influenced the content of his comedy, inflecting it with transgressive political potential.

Born Alfred Leonard Schneider in 1925 to a lower middle-class family in Long Island, he changed his name when he followed his mother into show business after World War II. Like Jack Kerouac, Bruce served in the navy and was dismissed for erratic behavior—in the comic’s case, for cross-dressing. Unlike Kerouac, Bruce saw action during the war (and also had his first homosexual experience), not seeking a psychiatric discharge until 1946, well after the guns at Anzio had stopped blazing. After a stint as a merchant marine, Bruce segued into comedy, working in Catskill resorts and at seedy burlesque joints in Los Angeles, with one brief TV appearance on the *Arthur Godfrey Talent Show*, doing rather poor impressions of Hollywood gangster movies. Bruce slowly developed his hip, transgressive style, blending the blue humor of the *spritz* spewed by comics in New York’s all-night cafeterias with the jive of jazz musicians who backed up burlesque-house strippers, before finally making a splash in 1958 at Ann’s 440 in San Francisco. Bruce’s “radical” innovation was to bring underground talk into the spotlight, making what was formerly private into public speech. As one friend recalled, he openly presented in the nightclubs of LA, North Beach, and New York “things you only talked

⁷⁷ Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 20. On aspect of Bruce’s complex persona that Goldman did suitably portray was his simultaneous libertinism and dedication to being a good father for his daughter, Kitty.

about to friends.” Like the Beats, this personal, revelatory style was driven by postwar disillusionment, a parallel to their apocalyptic consciousness. Given the US’s own history of brutal conquest and genocide against Latin- and Native-Americans foes, Bruce insisted, the fight against the Nazi’s racist aggression bore more than a hint of hypocrisy. “War spells out my philosophy of ‘No right or wrong’—just ‘Your right, my wrong’,” he wrote, “everything is subjective.”⁷⁸

BRUCE AND THE NEW BOHEMIA

It is entirely fitting that Lenny Bruce’s first arrest for obscenity and the only jury acquittal he received during his lifetime occurred in San Francisco, the city that legitimated Ginsberg’s *Howl* as a defensible use of profanity and sexual content. This is no coincidence. Many of the same actors were at work in both cases, and the same underground social networks helped bring these controversies into the public eye. Some parallels were simply the result of the area’s general bohemianism: just as Ginsberg arrived seeking the literary circles of Rexroth and The Place, Bruce found fertile soil in the ground broken by Sahl at the hungry i. Critic Ralph Gleason championed both the cause of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s sale of *Howl* and the Jazz Workshop’s presentation of Bruce. Al Bendich served as the chief attorney in both cases, and later became an executive at Fantasy Records, which released the first audio recording of *Howl*, as well as readings by Ferlinghetti, Rexroth, and Bruce’s catalog. In a city known for pushing the boundaries, conservative forces were bound to push back. But in the case of Baghdad by the Bay, as opposed to comparable prosecutions in New York or Chicago, pressure did not radiate downward from city hall, but rather boiled at street level. Absent political

⁷⁸ Goldman, *Lenny Bruce*, 73-98, 109-12, 471; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 397-8; Russ Wilson, “S.F. Turns Back on New Network Show,” *Oakland Tribune*, April 20, 1958, p. B-19; Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (New York: Fireside, 1965, 1992), 16-22, 50.

pressures, the police took it upon themselves to maintain moral rectitude, singling out troublemakers in hopes of quieting the more boisterous bohemians.⁷⁹

Bendich's defense of Bruce was also no coincidence. When performing in San Francisco, Bruce stayed in North Beach, often at the Swiss American Hotel at 534 Broadway, and he was a regular at City Lights Books. Ferlinghetti recommended Bendich to Bruce and also carried copies of the comic's self-published *Stamp Help Out*, a pastiche of photos, press clippings, letters, and routines that reflected bohemia's subterranean humor. (In 1963, Bruce sent Ferlinghetti a pair of telegrams noting his "farewell tour of the courts" and telling him to "destroy any and all books titled 'Stamp Help Out' I left with you on consignment." He insisted, "They will hang me if they catch any body selling that book.")⁸⁰ Such connections were at the heart of Bruce's career. He first came to Fantasy's notice through Paul Desmond and Mort Sahl, who featured Bruce as an opening act when performing at the Crescendo in Los Angeles. The public sometimes literally conflated Bruce with the Beats. In 1958, at the hungry i, after Bruce left a record release party for *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce* in a huff, he explained his chagrin to a reporter: "Seven people asked *me* who Lenny Bruce was. Finally, somebody asked me if *that* was Lenny Bruce and pointed over in a corner to a guy with long hair, dirty sweatshirt, blue jeans, Pernod and Peter Orlovsky—it was Allen Ginsberg!"⁸¹

This circle soon extended to New York, as former Harry Belafonte manager Jack

⁷⁹ For an overview of both cases, see Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002, 11-75.

⁸⁰ See also Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 401.

⁸¹ Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2003), 82-3; Lenny Bruce to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, January 23 and January 24, 1963, Box 2, Folder 10, City Lights Books Records, BANC MSS 72/107c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Goldman, *Lenny Bruce*, 345, 205-7, 256. It was Fantasy's Max Weiss, of course, who was responsible for using the photo of himself and the Tin Angel's Peggy Tolk-Watkins for the cover of Bruce's first album. Further, Fantasy had started as essentially a vanity label for Brubeck.

Rollins brought Bruce to the Village Vanguard. Max Gordon then booked him into the Blue Angel, where Bruce alternately entertained and offended what he called the club's "literate, erudite audience." The *Village Voice*'s John Wilcock recalled Bruce's debut at the Vanguard, where the comic characteristically turned his satirical barbs toward his own milieu. Wilcock asserted that "the very first thing . . . he came in and he looked around this little tiny room with about four hundred people crammed in, and he said, 'I don't know how Max Gordon can afford to pay me a grand a week to work a place this size. . . . I've come to the conclusion he must be a crook.'" Such cracks might explain Gordon's ambivalence toward Bruce, although he always saw the comic as "money in the bank." Gordon also recognized a generational divide, describing his nephew Barry, the club's manager and cashier, and a student at the New School, as a friend and fan of Bruce—alongside the "college kids, hookers, fags, the jet set, Harlem society, the Broadway and Hollywood crowd" who "jammed the place every night." During Bruce's New York obscenity trial in 1964, left-wing cartoonist Jules Feiffer underscored this view, testifying that Bruce's career was a reaction to "the Eisenhower administration . . . when political and social commentary were not encouraged, but were permitted in night clubs." He insisted that Bruce differed from Mort Sahl, however, as Sahl "has no connection with his audience," whereas Bruce presented a "personal kind of theater." "He's going to the very core of what the American experience is today, in terms of my generation," Feiffer concluded.⁸²

Bruce's hip style both directly and indirectly reflected a rapidly swirling milieu of

⁸² Colby, *The Bitter End*, 29; Lenny Bruce, *American* (Fantasy Records F-7011, 1959); Sukenick, *Down and In*, 83; Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 75-7; Witness Testimony Notes, Box 3, Folder 1, Ephraim London Papers, MS# 6260282, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 422. Among the literati who attended the Blue Angel was J.D. Salinger.

mutual influences, including jazz musicians and the Beats. His earliest breakthroughs were clearly modeled on Sahl's act, complete with a newspaper prop. But Bruce moved on to edgier territory. Saxophonist Pony Poindexter recalled sharing the bill with Bruce at the Red Hill Inn the night of his arrest in Philadelphia in 1961. For Poindexter, the comic represented the true oppositional sensibility of the jazz-bohemian underground: "The opening night was packed. Lenny had the big crowd cracking up—and me too. I was sitting on a chair close to the entrance to the dressing room. I was laughing my ass off, along with everyone else." Poindexter, always politically- and racially-conscious, continued:

Then Lenny told the story of the black dude that had got busted in New York for dealing cocaine, and when his buddy went to a lawyer, the lawyer asked, "yes, but does he have any money?" His buddy said, "Aw, man, he's got more money than Billy Graham!"

At that point, I fell off my chair on the floor and completely lost my decorum, bent over, kicking my feet in the air. I had to be helped into the dressing room. . . . Here was Lenny Bruce, a white comic, closer to the black dude playing jazz than any other white cat out there. And here also was white officialdom's reaction to all this. A staged raid!—with all the resultant publicity.

North Beach guitarist Eddie Duran recalled simply, "Lenny Bruce was part of the jazz scene, too. I used to run into him at the clubs all the time. Once he came into the 'hungry i' while I was playing there . . . and he did an impromptu show, just got up on the stage and started talking."⁸³

The evolution of Bruce's material was telling, as he went from jazzy comedy to satirical public confessions, all during the pivotal years that the Beat Generation came to wide acclaim. The bits on his first album, *Interviews of Our Time* (1958), were performative set-pieces. He put hip twists on familiar characters, playing Dracula as a

⁸³ George Laine, "Everybody's in Calypso Act," *Independent Star News* (Los Angeles), June 6-7, 1957, P 11-Z 1-Z 2-P 9-Z 3; Norwood "Pony" Poindexter, *The Pony Express: Memoirs of a Jazz Musician* (Frankfurt: JAS Publikationen, 1985), 189-90; Jack Lind, "When Jazz Was King," *North Beach Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall, 1985), 6-11, 34-7.

henpecked musician, intoning his best Bela Lugosi accent as the jazzy vampire complains to his kids, “Don’t bug me. . . . Shut up and drink your blood.” He portrayed an exchange between a junky saxophonist and the ultra-square Lawrence Welk: “Hey, I don’t wanna bug ya but, uh, can I get a little bread in front?” “You’re hungry, you want a sandwich?” His second album, *Sick Humor*, was transitional, as Bruce performed character-dialogue routines like “Ike, Sherm, and Nick,” but increasingly dropped imitations. Instead, he ventriloquized figures such as Eisenhower, Chief of Staff Sherman Adams, and Richard Nixon with his own hip-speak, as if in natural conversation about political scandals and Nixon’s disastrous South American goodwill tour:

Ike: Well Sherm, you goofed, baby. . . . Well, how are we gonna get out of this?

Sherm: The newspapers are really bringing all the heat on us, so if we could think of a headline to sort of wipe it out, just for four or five days . . . How about getting one of the cabinet members assassinated? . . .

Ike: I got an idea, switch on the intercom: Celia, send in Nixon. Hello Nick, sweetie, sit down baby! . . .

Nick: What’s going on here? Don’t put me on Ike. . . .

Ike: You hang around the pad and I got the greatest idea for you. How’d you like to go to Lebanon? . . .

Nick: Why don’t you stop, Ike? I don’t wanna go on any more trips . . .

Ike: I don’t know why you don’t want to go, you did great in Caracas.

In “Psychopathia Sexualis (the only track recorded in the studio, rather than in front of live San Francisco nightclub audiences),” Bruce satirized jazz-poetry, Freud, homophobia, and the KKK’s opposition to “mixed marriage,” with lines like “poor neurotica me . . . / I’m paranoid and sublimated” and “the head-shrinker said my societal concept had been warped by an Oedipus Rex / which caused me to hate the opposite sex.”

His next two albums, *Lenny Bruce—American* (1959) and *Togetherness* (1960) were even more introspective, with bits describing his own experiences with “The Steve Allen Show,” fellow comic “Shelly Berman,” square nightclub audiences in “Lima, Ohio,” and the social foibles of “Marriage, Divorce, and Motels.” *The Carnegie Hall Concert*,

recorded in 1961 but unreleased for a decade, shows Bruce at his popular and satirical peak. The performance was almost all socially critical, confessional, with few obvious routines. Bruce was clearly concerned with authenticity and couched most of his criticisms in personal terms—even if thinly veiled. In “Dykes and Faggots” (“dyke—idiomatic for lesbian,” he somberly intoned), Bruce offered a Kinsey-like redefinition of homosexuality as “anybody that’s ever been involved in any homosexual act. . . . ‘cause I assume that you’re all faggots, then—the old cliché that there’s no such thing as being a little pregnant . . . we are sometimes homosexuals, all of us.” In “The Flag and Communism,” he both savaged the fake patriotism of McCarthyism (“When they run up the flag . . . this has lost all impact . . . from being exploited, prostituted . . . from people who hid behind it.”) and offered a fair, if overly-simple, defense of American capitalism versus the Soviet system: “Communism is like one big phone company, government control, man. If I get too rank with that phone company, where can I go? I’ll end up like a schmuck with a Dixie cup and a thread.” He also recognized his popularity as generational, insisting that anyone “over forty-five” failed to understand his humor due to their lack of “exposure,” getting hung up on jive-jargon and Yiddish words, continually asking, “What’s it Mean?” Always self-critical, Bruce revealed the process of subterranean translation into the mainstream, acknowledging his own “prejudice” against small-town “Gray Line tour people,” who just wanted to learn the lingo so they could be in on the joke. Consciously or not, Bruce paralleled New Bohemia’s contradictory claims to authenticity, hip community, and personal liberation.

While it appears Bruce never overtly acknowledged Beat influences on his work, an early version of an excerpt from his autobiography is revealing, bearing a striking

resemblance to Ginsberg's "America" and its satirical denouncement of "them bad Russians. / Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Russians."

Writing in 1960 of a friend's World War II experience, Bruce declaimed in sardonic, atomic-apocalyptic terms that it was

a chance to kill . . . those poor dirty Japs, those poor pregnant women that stood in the silent Army . . . unconcerned with politics and their only association with economics is that thirty-nine cents a pound for chop meat is ridiculous, those dirty Japs. . . . that in the near future would sell us cameras . . . because now there are no more dirty Japs, there are dirty Commies and when we run out of them they'll just be dirty, dirty and then a few hippies who discovered that the earth is dirty and the whole world will just bomb the shit out of the earth and there will be no more dirty, dirty.⁸⁴

Kerouac expressly disliked Bruce's apparent nihilism and his stabs at the Catholic Church. Yet Kerouac's distaste for Bruce perhaps reflected an unconscious fear that he was being mocked: they shared an eerie similarity in the cadences and rhythms of spoken-word performance. Both were fans of Lord Buckley and each spoke with a singsong phrasing, inflected with the rounded consonants of a New York accent and punctuated by quick jabs of hip jargon. Kerouac's friend David Amram could not help but compare him to Bruce—a parallel that was most notable in the Beat writer's narration for the film on which they collaborated in 1959, *Pull My Daisy*. Similarly, Beat poet Philip Whalen noted with some aplomb after the *San Francisco Chronicle* covered a reading in 1964 that "Gleason reviewed the scene favorably . . . except he thought I can't read very well & my writing 'owes much to Lenny Bruce'."⁸⁵

THE POLITICS OF "THE WORD"

Beat disagreements over Bruce illustrate the Rebel Cafe's vitality in the public

⁸⁴ Lenny Bruce to Alvah Bessie, March 23, 1960, Box 2, Folder 12, Alvah Bessie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Theater Division, Madison, WI. See also Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, 17.

⁸⁵ "David Amram Remembers," in Paul Maher, ed., *Empty Phantoms: Interviews and Encounters with Jack Kerouac* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005), 421-3; Philip Whalen Journal (San Francisco, April 21, 1964-February 24, 1966), June 17, 1964, p. 21, Box 1 Folder 7, Philip Whalen Papers, BANC MSS 2000/93, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

sphere, not as a monolithic lock-step movement, but as pluralistic, full of contention and debate. This extended to Bruce's admittedly peripheral engagement with politics. When Bruce's New York legal troubles heated up in 1964, Ginsberg, Beat poet Diane di Prima, and bohemian author Helen Weaver quickly organized a defense committee in the Village—an echo of Village Gate owner Art D'Lugoff's support for Lord Buckley. (Apropos of his dislike for Bruce, Kerouac refused to sign Ginsberg's petition.)⁸⁶ Bruce's own activism, however, was limited to the stage. "There are words that offend me," he asserted on *The Steve Allen Show* in 1959, "Governor Faubus, segregation offend me." His recognition of desegregation's importance was appropriate given his concerns about free speech and access to public space as fundamental to American citizenship. But most often, he focused purely on the relation between language, consciousness, and racism. Power, he insisted, was in The Word. "By the way, are there any niggers here tonight?" he asked one stunned-silent audience, before launching into a rapid, auction-block list of epithets from "kikes" to "funky hunkies" and "micks." "The point," he concluded:

If President Kennedy got on television every day and said "I would like to introduce all the niggers in my cabinet," and all the niggers called each other niggers . . . in front of the ofays . . . in the second month "nigger" wouldn't mean as much as "goodnight" or "God bless you" when you sneeze or perhaps as much as "I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, so help me God."

With this stab at the heart of linguistic taboo, he declared, "Nigger would lose its impact and never make any four-year-old nigger cry when he came home from school. *Zug gornischt* [say nothing] gives it the power, Jim."

This approach was problematic, missing the larger structures of power that guide

⁸⁶ Helen Weaver to Reinhold Niebuhr, July 30, 1964, Box 3, Folder 1, London Papers, Columbia; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 419. Niebuhr later admitted he was unfamiliar with Bruce's material and that signing was a mistake, but he also never spoke out against the comic.

cultural meaning, a critique that was a source of debate, then as now. But Bruce put his money where his mouth was, donating to Bayard Rustin's Committee to Defend Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1960. Rustin responded, spotlighting the controversy over Bruce's humor among Blacks who speculated "on where you'd be without the Negro race." "Well, to reverse the situation," Rustin concluded, "I know a couple of Negro students in Montgomery who might still be in a cozy Dixie jail if it were not for your \$500."⁸⁷ Further, Bruce felt that his immersion in jazz culture and close friendships with African Americans such as guitarist Eric Miller gave him grounds to criticize the hypocrisy of liberals who threw money at the Civil Rights Movement but sat silent about northern red-lining. At least with the Klan, he reasoned, you knew where you stood: "It's very easy to criticize the South with their obvious Anti-Christ: 'Shlepp them away from the lunch counters and don't let them use the toilet.' Now I know that Philly is worse than Little Rock and New York is more twisted than Atlanta will ever be."⁸⁸ Yet Bruce's self-interest limited his activism; he refused to cancel shows and sacrifice either financially or physically to join protests on the front line—a position which, when pressed, he readily admitted ("I'm a hustler. As long as they give, I'll grab.") When it came to martyrdom, Bruce was a solo act.

⁸⁷ For a full examination of the debates around this word, see Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002); Bruce's transgressive language backfired badly when he faced Thurgood Marshall during his appeal. Attempting to perform a routine that illustrated the hypocrisy of white liberals with a scene featuring a white defendant before an all-Black jury, Bruce concluded, "They gave me twenty years for raising my voice—those niggers." With this, Marshall's "head jerked up immediately," leaving a fumbling Bruce unable to explain the joke. Collins and Skiver, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 304; Bayard Rustin to Lenny Bruce, April 19, 1960, Box 2, Folder 12, Bessie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 404. By all accounts, Bruce's relationship with Miller was close, perhaps even sexual. See Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 504-5 and "Enrico Banducci Interview," Banducci Biography File, SFPL. According to Albert Goldman, comedian Dick Gregory once asked Bruce to participate in a civil rights rally, to which Bruce responded, "No, man, I'd just bring a lotta heat on you! Besides, the marchers are sloppy: Al Hibbler [a blind singer] walks right into people!" Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 507.

Ultimately, Bruce's standpoint sat well with his left-liberal proponents in the press like jazz critics Ralph Gleason and Nat Hentoff. Both were staunch supporters of civil rights and became key interlocutors, as they wrote about controversial issues which became fodder for the comic's increasingly radical nightclub act. As Hentoff wrote in Rustin's *Liberation* magazine in early 1963, "he provides a galvanic antidote to the currently prevalent image of 'success' personalized in the dehumanized pragmatism of the Kennedys." Aligning Bruce with the democratic-anarchist wing of the Movement, and exploiting it in equal parts, Hentoff concluded, "Bruce is more likely to feel in context with the absolutist resisters . . . and radically uncompromising workers for integration in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating committee in the South, and perhaps with Jimmy Hoffa. (I'd nominate him as the Christian of the year. He hires ex-convicts.)"⁸⁹ If Christ were to come back to New York, Bruce mused, and watched the powerful Cardinal Francis Spellman from the back of St. Peter's Cathedral, "Christ would be confused, because their route took them through Spanish Harlem, and he would wonder what forty Puerto Ricans were doing living in one room and this guy was wearing a ring worth eight grand." Bruce refused to openly espouse the Left, however. He denounced the Rosenberg execution, for instance, not from a base of ideology, but rather as an act of "communal savagery," a betrayal of the human instinct for sympathy. As he wrote to his friend Alvah Bessie, the Hollywood Ten screenwriter and sound-man at the hungry i, "I am doing some lovely anarchistic material." But Bruce asked that their collaboration on a screenplay avoid any "unsafe social commentary," concluding, "It's

⁸⁹ Nat Hentoff, "The Humorist as Grand Inquisitor," *Liberation* (May 1963), pp. 27-9; Lenny Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert*.

bad enough I'm a drug addict without being a Communist."⁹⁰

Perhaps, as critic Kenneth Tynan once said, Bruce could have used a solid “reading of Marx,” but his role as the Hipster-Flipster-Holy Fool made him suitable for countercultural magazines like Wallace Berman’s *Semina* as well as the pages of *Liberation*.⁹¹ Both would have agreed, however, that urban nightclubs were his true venue. As the *New York Times* wrote in 1959, “Mr. Bruce regards the nightclub stage as ‘the last frontier’ of uninhibited entertainment.” Hentoff also placed Bruce’s affective power squarely within the nightclub, asserting that his direct connection with audiences underpinned his politically transformative potential. Audiences for other New Comedians, he proposed, were “expectant, but pleurably so. After all, they are about to be invited to witness to their own superior sophistication by laughing at the anti-Establishment impieties of the performers.” Bruce, on the other hand, was confrontational:

The expectancy of the night club is laced with anxiety. . . . Anyone in the audience who has seen Bruce before knows that he—the listener—is soon about to be the target, but he doesn’t know exactly where the shock is going to be applied. . . . By what new vulgarism is he going to embarrass *us*? And will we be able *this time* to understand why he used those words or will we be self-condemned as squares for not digging his message all the way? Bruce, in sum, continually puts his audience on trial; and there is never a final passing grade. . . . Being entertained by those satirists across the chasm from Bruce is like walking through a gallery of fun house mirrors. Your reflection goes through a succession of grotesqueries, but you know perfectly well that once you’re outside, you’ll be your comfortable, familiar, rather stale self. After an encounter with Bruce on one of his more demonic nights, however, you may look at the mirror with gnawing doubt that you indeed know who you are, or rather, what you really feel. About sex. About justice.

“Do you people think yourselves better,” Bruce whispered at the Gate of Horn in 1962, taking on the accent of recently executed Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, “because you burned your enemies at long distance with missiles without ever seeing what you had

⁹⁰ Lenny Bruce to Alvah Bessie, September 12, 1960 and June 15, 1959, Box 2, Folder 12, Bessie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society. See also Bessie to Bruce, November 5, 1960.

⁹¹ Kenneth Tynan Introduction, in Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, xiii; Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 274.

done to them? Hiroshima *auf Wiedersehen*.”⁹²

Hentoff presciently concluded that “Bruce is a distillation of the unfocused rebelliousness among more and more of the young,” that his critical subterranean spirit would soon engulf the next generation who “protest segregation and testing and the hollowness of their parents,” but “cannot yet say what they are for, what new society they desire.” As a satirist, Bruce reflected the Rebel Cafe back to itself, completing a circular form of public discourse, even as he revealed the process of its popularization to a wider public. “The hungry i has a Gray Line tour and American Legion Convention,” he quipped to the audience at the Jazz Workshop in 1961. “They took all the bricks out and put in Saran wrap. That’s it. And Ferlinghetti is going to the Fairmont.” And the task of transformation was not for patrons alone. Bruce took his shamanistic role to heart, alongside an unhealthy dose of creative self-destruction. As Hentoff proclaimed, “because of the persistent tensions endemic to his nightly act of self-exposure, Bruce is coming closer and closer to the possibility of quite literally destroying himself.” Whether or not it was Bruce’s true intention, such self-sacrifice sparked larger conversations about the notion of social justice in America. As the Reverend Howard Moody wrote in a 1965 article that ran in both the *Village Voice* and *Christianity & Crisis*, denouncing Birmingham’s fiercest segregationist, “The dirtiest word in the English language is not ‘fuck’ or ‘shit’ in the mouth of a tragic shaman, but the word ‘NIGGER’ from the sneering lips of a Bull Connor.”⁹³

⁹² Arthur Gelb, “Comic Gives Shocks With Moral,” *New York Times*, December 8, 1960, p. 44; Hentoff, “The Humorist as Grand Inquisitor”; Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 144-5.

⁹³ Hentoff, “The Humorist as Grand Inquisitor”; Bruce Trial Transcript, pp. 289-90, SFPL. Abigail Hastings and Grace Goodman, “Howard Moody, 91, Activist Pastor Who Led Judson Church,” *The Villager*, September 20, 2012. Hastings and Goodman note that “most would be surprised to learn that the first occasion of the word “fuck” to appear in the pages of the Voice was Moody’s article.”

Bruce was a subterranean mad scientist, social daredevil testing the limits of acceptable art and articulation in nightclubs like the hungry i and Jazz Workshop. Just as abstract expressionists emphasized free movement in painting, and jazzmen and Beats celebrated spontaneity and authenticity, Bruce extended improvisation, social critique, and overtones of masculine sexuality to the realm of comedy. In the liner notes to *Sick Humor*, Ralph Gleason laid out a striking, if overstated, case for the social import of Bruce's American underground satire:

Bruce's comedy is a dissent from a world gone mad. To him nothing is sacred except the ultimate truths of love and beauty and moral goodness—all equating honesty. . . . It is strong stuff—like jazz, and it is akin to the point of view of Nelson Algren and Lawrence Ferlinghetti as well as to Charlie Parker and Lester Young. . . . [which is] why his comedy of dissent has flourished in the jazz clubs. He terrifies other comics—the usual ones—by his material, in the same way the jazz musician terrifies the hotel bands and the mickey mouse tenor men. He is a threat. If he is real, he gives them the lie by his very existence. . . . The jazz musician is a rebel with humor, if with a cause, and there is no more effective putdown of the political speeches, the incongruities in the news, the fatuous posing of the tent show religious carnivals than that which goes on in the conversation of the jazz musician and the humor of Lenny Bruce.

“The jazzman may be anti-verbal, as Kenneth Rexroth says,” Gleason concluded, “if so, he has Lenny Bruce to speak for him with power.”⁹⁴

OF COPS AND COCKSUCKERS: THE SAN FRANCISCO TRIAL OF LENNY BRUCE

Bruce verbally placed bebop dissonance and Beat irreverence in direct confrontation with the constraints of postwar formality. It comes as little surprise that Bruce was the only non-musical performer ever featured at Art Auerbach's Jazz Workshop; the club owner's project of promoting a new American artistic sensibility was equally served, in this case, by the spoken word. But Lenny Bruce was also intertwined with the aura of New Bohemia, his satire a fully-formed expression of the Rebel Cafe, precisely the kind of disclosure of the personal that conservative critics objected to. As

⁹⁴ *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*, (Fantasy Records LP 7001, 1958).

Ernest van den Haag (who later testified against Bruce in New York) said of Kerouac, he “cultivates his hysteria in public.”⁹⁵ This makes Bruce’s first arrest for obscenity, in the heart of North Beach, worthy of close examination.

The routine that caused Bruce’s arrest centered on a previous appearance at Ann’s 440, primarily a lesbian bar which also enjoyed some gay patronage as part of the extended queer-bohemian scene. Throughout the routine, Bruce facetiously imitated his agent, describing their discussion about the booking:

Lenny: What kindava show is it, man?

Agent: Well, ya know.

Lenny: Well, no, I don’t know, man. . . .

Agent: Well, it’s not a show. They’re a bunch of cocksuckers, that’s all. A damned fag show.

Lenny: Oh. Well, that is a pretty bizarre show. I don’t know what I can do in that kind of show.

Agent: Well, no. It’s . . . we want you to change all that.

Lenny: Well—I don’t—that’s a big gig. I can just tell them to stop doing it.⁹⁶

Several elements of this brief routine are worthy of scrutiny in the broader context of nightclubs and the oppositional public sphere. The first and most obvious is his use of the word “cocksucker.” Clearly a source of amusement and titillation for less streetwise patrons, the word would have had quite a different connotation for local bohemians. For them, Bruce’s candid use of street lingo would have been an affirmation, a recognition of their authenticity signaled by his rejection of bourgeois language. Second, the bit itself is a commentary on nightclub culture. The agent is a synecdoche, a stand-in for the “straight” world of businessmen who are the necessary organizers of the nocturnal world populated by creative, and decidedly disorganized, folks such as Bruce himself. From this perspective, Bruce’s sympathy with the marginalized gay community was clear (despite

⁹⁵ Keepnews, *View from Within*, 150; Ernest van den Haag, “Kerouac Was Here,” *Social Problems* 6, no. 1 (Summer, 1958): 21-28.

⁹⁶ Transcribed in Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 48.

his careless conflation of gays and lesbians). The “straight” character’s suggestion that Bruce could “change all that” is met with the dismissive response—couched in jazzman jargon—that such an undertaking would indeed be a “big gig.” Notably, the audio recording of the Workshop performance reveals one of the biggest laughs following this line. In other words, the audience shared Bruce’s assessment that the agent’s request to change the character of a North Beach gay club and its patrons represented a ridiculous task.

Bruce’s bust at the Jazz Workshop fit snugly within previous patterns of police intimidation in the area, including frequent arrests at gay bars like the Black Cat and harassment of interracial couples at The Place and the Co-Existence Bagel Shop. Kickbacks to cops were also a regular part of doing business for nightspot owners.⁹⁷ Given these tensions, the exchange between Bruce and the arresting officers following the Workshop performance is revealing. “We’ve tried to elevate this street,” Sergeant James Solden complained. “I can’t see any right, any way you can break this word down, our society is not geared to it.” Bruce rejoined, “You break it down by talking about it. How about a word like ‘clap’?” “Well, ‘clap’ is a better word than ‘cocksucker.’” “Not if you get the clap from a cocksucker.”⁹⁸ Beyond showing that Bruce’s improvisational wit was razor-sharp even offstage, this exchange highlighted the issue at stake for San Francisco police: the use of street language in a performance, a formalized reflection of the bohemian underground, posed a palpable threat to the status quo. And as they had many times before, the police took it upon themselves to be the arbiters of community standards.

⁹⁷ Knute Stiles Interview, 14, 17 and John Allen Ryan Interview, 117, Papers of Writer Lewis Ellingham, MSS # 126, Box 4, Folder 7, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 50-51.

Bruce's San Francisco obscenity trial differed fundamentally from those that followed in Chicago or New York in that it was almost entirely focused on *local* issues. As Bruce lawyer Martin Garbus later suggested, "once you become a somewhat notorious defendant" in one city, police elsewhere had to arrest you or else public officials looked soft. Particularly in New York, the Bruce trial was used for political grandstanding by District Attorney Frank Hogan, assistant DA Richard Kuh, and even Judge John Murtagh. By 1964, the judge and DAs knew that the case would garner national coverage and used it to climb the political ladder.⁹⁹ In San Francisco, both the arrest and trial instead bore the hallmarks of issues that had been swirling around North Beach from 1958 through 1960: questions of sexuality, gender, race and public space. Bruce was astute when he described nightclubs as the "last frontier." Indeed, urban areas such as North Beach were American borderlands, and nightclubs were battlegrounds over the boundaries of public propriety. And while not addressed directly in the Bruce case, the general atmosphere of the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement hung in the air like gun smoke, hinted at in fleeting comments about national decline or social justice.

Prosecuting attorney Albert Wollenberg's opening statement made it clear that Bruce's use of the word "cocksucker" in "a public place, the Jazz Workshop" was the source of the obscenity charge: "Section 311 of our code . . . states that every person who knowingly sings or speaks any obscene song, ballad, or other words in any public place is guilty." The definition of "obscene," he clarified, was "whether it went to prurient interest . . . a shameful or morbid interest, in nudity, sex, or excretion. . . beyond the

⁹⁹ *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth*, dir. Robert Weide (HBO Documentary and Whayaduck Productions, 1998); Edward de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* (New York: Random House, 1992), 461-79.

limits of candor . . . [and] without redeeming social importance.”¹⁰⁰

Al Bendich’s successful defense echoed that of *Howl*—a reprise all the more familiar as Judge Clayton Horn ruled on both cases—focusing on the question of “social importance.” Bendich trotted out a series of journalist such as Gleason and literary scholars, including high school teacher Kenneth Brown, who had attended the Jazz Workshop show and testified Bruce’s satire was in the tradition of “Rabelais and Swift.” These authors, Brown argued, were “generally available to the public,” despite their graphic sexual themes—particularly Rabelais, as one scholar put it, for whom “the penis is almost, one might say, a leading character.” Bendich convinced the jury that Bruce’s “dominant tendency” was not “to deprave or corrupt the average adult by tending to create a clear and present danger of anti-social behavior.” He asserted that the “law may not require the author to put refined language into the mouths of primitive people” and that the “speech of the performer must be considered in relation to its setting and the theme or themes of his production.” In other words, the audience of the Jazz Workshop—around 150 patrons, noted by Gleason as older and better-dressed than the jazz crowd, each paying \$2.50 cover charge—sufficiently constituted a “public” worthy of judging the social value of Bruce’s routines. At the center of this argument was the nightclub itself, what Gleason called, in Holy Fool terms, Bruce’s “unorthodox pulpit.” As another of Bruce’s lawyers unsuccessfully argued to an offended judge during the case’s initial hearing, “you get a different impression hearing the word in court than you would have at the club.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Bruce Trial Transcript, pp. 14, 304-5, SFPL.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 193, 202, 234, 324, 78-9. See also pp. 48-9, 73-80, and 235-64. Ralph J. Gleason, “An Unorthodox Pulpit for Lenny Bruce,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 10, 1961, p. 35; Michael Harris, “Lenny Bombs in Court Scene,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 18, 1961, p. 3.

Just beneath the surface of the obscenity question, however, simmered concerns about homosexuality and gender—particularly women’s claim on public space and sexual expression. In a neighborhood where prosecutions against gay bars had been common despite state supreme court protections, the prosecutor’s legal logic was guided by precedents which declared that gay *appearances* were acceptable, while homosexual *behavior* (physical affection) was prohibited. Wollenberg, who referred to gays and lesbians during the trial as “deviates,” made clear that the “cocksuckers” at Ann’s 440 or elsewhere were excluded from the discussion of acceptable social codes. “Well, a person as Mr. Bruce, who has done these routines all the time,” he queried the jury, “did he do it knowingly? Well, this is manifested by the way in which he did it; what he said to Officer Solden when Solden asked him, ‘Do you think this is right to talk this way in public?’ And what does he say? The world is full of those kind of people, using that descriptive term of his. What is said by stevedores down on the wharf loading a ship, this isn’t in the same classification, and the stevedores . . . aren’t saying it in a place crowded with people. . . .”¹⁰²

This tacit dismissal of “those kind of people” from the public sphere stood in sharp contrast to the acceptance of straight male sexuality that suffused the testimony of Sargeant Solden’s partner, Officer James Ryan, about the character of North Beach. In Broadway’s nightclub culture, he said, “burlesque houses” and housewives in “amateur night” stripper contests at sites like the President Follies and Moulin Rouge were commonplace. Even more striking was the open acceptance of Finocchio’s drag shows.¹⁰³ Once again, within San Francisco’s social codes, transgressive appearances were one

¹⁰² Ibid, 199, 308.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 44-9.

thing; sexual acts—even if only speech acts—were another. Yet the defense proved successful, marshalling the *Howl* precedent (“I’m very familiar with it,” Judge Horn quipped at one point), as well as the renown of gay poet John Berryman to legitimate public discussions of homosexuality. Moreover, Gleason’s testimony pointed to the comic’s function of cultural transmission, bringing street language into mainstream vernacular: “The word was used as many similar words are used in slang and discussing homosexuals, and the nightclub . . . and he used the word ‘cocksucker’ as you might use the word ‘faggot’ or as you might use the word ‘fairy,’ and it is common in the language of these people to use it in that context.”¹⁰⁴

The logic of acts versus appearances extended significantly, if more subtly, to women. The only other Bruce routine that Wollenberg set in his sights was “To Come Is a Verb,” in which Bruce chanted, as he tapped lightly on the club’s drum kit, “Did ya come good, did ya come good? Don’t come in me, don’t come in me!” As Kenneth Brown testified, this bit highlighted “the sexual fears in our society and the inability of people to respond”—especially women’s “common fear of becoming pregnant.”¹⁰⁵ Tellingly, in Wollenberg’s closing argument, he pointed to Molly Bloom’s soliloquy in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (which focuses mostly on female sexuality with lines such as, “I never in all my life felt anyone had one the size of that . . . with a big hole in the middle of us like a Stallion driving it up into you”) as his single example of literary obscenity. The prosecutor asserted that “there are other redeeming features in the book that make it literature of some value—not Molly Bloom’s portion of it, certainly.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 29-31, 44-5, 87-8.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 201-2.

¹⁰⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1934, 1990), 742; Bruce Trial Transcript, p. 306.

The underlying double-standard of this statement was more obvious when Kenneth's spouse, Mary Brown, took the stand. Describing her occupation as a "housewife, mother," she admitted that she was not particularly "entertained" by Bruce, despite seeing some value in his social critiques. But Brown's testimony came to a head when Bendich asked, as he had of her husband and other defense witnesses, whether she was "sexually stimulated" by the performance. Judge Horn upheld an objection that the question was "irrelevant," despite Bendich's complaint that it had previously been allowed. Judge Horn erroneously declared that the question had taken "a different form," finally leading Bendich to rephrase it acceptably, "Mrs. Brown, did the performance arouse your prurient interest?" Her response: "No."¹⁰⁷ Given the trial's frank discussions of burlesque-house strippers, male genitalia, and sexual arousal—underscored by Officer Ryan's admission that "cocksucker" was considered acceptable language in the masculine environs of the police stationhouse, despite being a "public" place—Judge Horn's censorship revealed the gendered assumptions underlying the Jazz Workshop obscenity case.¹⁰⁸ Open discussion of a middle-class housewife's sexuality was strictly verboten.

The issue of race was even more submerged, yet its slender threads also tied the San Francisco trial to the public sphere. Witnesses like Gleason relied on Bruce's association with both jazz and civil rights to add legitimacy and moral weight to his defense. Others like Kenneth Brown expressed admiration for his "unusual approach" and concern with "our attitudes toward each other in a society, our attitudes toward races."

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 210-11, 214-15, SFPL. Bendich's phrasing of the question to Kenneth Brown was, "Were you excited sexually or stimulated by the performance on October the 4th?" Ibid, 196.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 50-1. This gendered concern was echoed in Bruce's New York trial, as sociologist Herbert Gans affirmed that such language was "used with groups of women together" and "in mixed company" among the subjects of his suburban studies. Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 254.

And articles by Arthur Gelb in the *New York Times* and Nat Hentoff in *The Reporter*, which cited Bruce's antiracism and satire of the "first plateau liberal" who "preaches but cannot practice genuine integration," were read into evidence.¹⁰⁹ Not only did this bring the public sphere full-circle, with the press itself used to support Bruce's value as a social critic, it spotlighted his racial cross-dressing as another aspect of his prosecution. By 1959, journalists had commonly associated Bruce with "the 'beatnik' set" and noted his use of jazz "jargon." As the British comedian and Shakespearean director Jonathan Miller wrote admiringly in *Partisan Review* in 1963, combining Norman Mailer's notion of the Hipster with the period's Freudian parlance, Bruce was the ultimate "Sick White Negro." Bruce, Miller glowingly declared, evoked "the thousand sordid images of the urban American imagination." These jazz-hipster-beatnik connotations were enough to paint Bruce symbolically Black—a significant concern for San Francisco's conservative forces that was also in line with restrictive ideas about sexuality, raising the specter of miscegenation.¹¹⁰

COLD WAR COMEDY AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Just as Sargeant Solden's effort to "elevate this street" expressed a fear of decline, public discussions of "sick" comics bore concerns about national decay signified by "all this horror and mayhem in humor." Anti-obscenity groups explicitly linked their efforts with the need to uphold American global power. "So great is the concern of the Soviet Union for the physical and mental fitness of its youth that no salacious magazines are permitted," proclaimed Operation Yorkville, an anti-smut league that urged Bruce's

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 73-9, 180, 195, 109-14.

¹¹⁰ John P. Shanley, "TV Review," *New York Times*, May 13, 1959, p. 75; Gelb, "Comic Gives Shocks With Moral"; Jonathan Miller, "The Sick White Negro," *Partisan Review* 30 (Spring 1963): 149-55. As Albert Goldman, quoting Eldridge Cleaver, noted, beatniks were often considered "a clutch of middle-class white kids adopting the life-style of 'niggers'." Goldman, *Lenny Bruce*, 189.

prosecution in New York. “*Will Soviet youth grow strong as American youth becomes weak and perverted?*” The glaring contradiction of using Soviet totalitarianism to justify censorship in order to combat Soviet totalitarianism seems to have escaped them. Yet Operation Yorkville expressed understandable dismay at the loss of their local voice in the face of Supreme Court obscenity decisions, such as *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, which cleared Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* of obscenity in 1964. Their plea for “The Forgotten People—the Community” highlights the tensions, as well as the sociopolitical relations, between the local and the national.¹¹¹ Nightclub culture and Lenny Bruce played a significant public role in this dialectic, as evidenced by his stances on race, religion, and sexuality, which made him a visible target for Operation Yorkville and Gotham prosecutors.

While Bruce’s 1964 New York trial featured several national figures as witnesses—including journalists from *Newsweek* and *Ebony*, and syndicated gossip columnist and game show star Dorothy Kilgallen—the list also included Rebel Cafe denizens such as Nat Hentoff and Art D’Lugoff.¹¹² But a letter from one supporter to Mayor Robert Wagner perhaps better reveals Bruce’s social role. “I am not a ‘beatnik,’ ‘pinko,’ or ‘left wing atheistic communist,’; just an ordinary 33 year old happily married

¹¹¹ Lawrence Laurent, “Time and the Pioneers Of Humor March On,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, July 10, 1959, p. D-5; “A Look at the Legal Obscenity Laws in the Soviet Union, in France,” *Operation Yorkville*, December 1963, p. 2 and “The Forgotten People—the Community,” November 1963, p. 4, Box 2, Folder 1, London Papers, Columbia; de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere*, 434. For his part, Bruce saw his prosecutions as an organized “conspiracy,” and went as far as filing a complaint with the FBI office in San Francisco. Unsurprisingly, the Bureau did not take him seriously. A clipping from the *Manhattan East* newspaper sent to J. Edgar Hoover by a concerned citizen was telling, as was Hoover’s reply thanking the citizen for his or her “favorable comments” about him and for alerting him to the troubling article. The journalist, supportive of Bruce, stated that the comic had little chance for justice “in a place whose standards of morality were set by Frank Hogan and Cardinal Spellman and J. Edgar Hoover.” Federal Bureau of Investigation file, “Subject: Lennie Bruce,” <http://vault.fbi.gov/Lenny%20Bruce> (accessed January 11, 2014).

¹¹² Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 251-5; Marin Garbus to Art D’Lugoff, July 13, 1964, Box 3, Folder 1, London Papers, Columbia. Collins and Skover report that Kilgallen’s testimony moved Bruce to tears, finding more validation in her middle-American viewpoint than in the *Village Voice* or ACLU.

suburbanite who occasionally sees a good show in New York,” he began. After describing the “good show” he saw at the Cafe Au Go Go, he insisted, “Neither I, my wife, nor the two other couples who were with us (all of whom are fairly normal and fairly well adjusted people) could understand why Mr. Bruce has been subjected to harassment by New York City Officials. . . . He uses four letter words as emphasis, and his interpretations of social conditions are done in a humorous vein.” The supporter, who owned a place mat company, then concluded, “This is not just unfair, but a policy of interpretation by the police department which violates the very excuse officials give for enforcing the law.” Another fan wrote simply to thank Bruce for “making me feel that there are a few people left perceptive and gutsy enough to evaluate and criticize the different institutions making up our society.” Albert Goldman was correct that an aspect of Bruce’s performances was to provide “the vicarious thrill of being a really bad boy.” (As Bruce acolyte and radical satirist Paul Krassner later asserted, on at least one occasion prosecutor Richard Kuh played Bruce’s records in his apartment to impress a date.)¹¹³ But to reduce Bruce’s work and function in the public sphere to only this would be a gross oversimplification.

Given Bruce’s posthumous apotheosis, the San Francisco defense witnesses’ references to Rabelais were more appropriate than they could have known. As Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has argued, the grotesque humor of Rabelais represented the twin “poles” of life and death as regenerative and necessary. He noted the

¹¹³ Arthur E. Bondy to Mayor Robert Wagner, April 4, 1964, Box 3, Folder 1, London Papers, Columbia; George P. Selaiden, Attorney at Law to Lenny Bruce, May 4, 1960, Bessie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society; Goldman, *Lenny Bruce*, 363; Paul Krassner, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 73. Krassner then quipped, “Maybe someday he would play for her the sound-track album from the movie *Lenny*, with Dustin Hoffman doing Lenny’s act on stage where he complains about the district attorney doing his act in court.”

significance of folk humor, especially when ritualized as part of public celebrations, as both participatory and tied to the marketplace. In the case of carnivals, it was dedicated to the reversal of social hierarchy, mocking the whole society—participants included. With parody and street speech excluded from formal modes, Rabelaisian folk humor’s bodily and scatological themes evoked universality, and therefore community. Further, the grotesque was a response to historical change, continually connecting the world and the body (and thus different from modern iterations, in which only spare remnants persist as swear words). Sometimes formalized, such as in the satire of Jonathan Swift or Voltaire, the legacy of folk humor continued as a way to “liberate” the people “from conventions and established truths.” In the Romantic period, grotesque humor mirthlessly served to express “fear of the world”; in the 1950s, to combat fears of atomic war. Bakhtin also cited the influence of classical Roman texts, such as Lucretius’s account of a descent into the underworld where the spiritual benefits of laughter are revealed—an eerie echo of the shamanic journey.¹¹⁴ As much as this suggests a parallel to Bruce’s role in Cold War America, his comedic legacy was equally provides a twentieth-century model of the Rabelaisian grotesque. Bruce’s sexual and scatological humor offered what Bakhtin referred to as the grotesque’s focus on the “material bodily lower stratum,” while his countercultural martyrdom fed the cycle of birth-death-regeneration that lay beneath the grotesque’s representation of human existence.

It is even easier to place Bruce in the tradition of the nineteenth century’s populist Backwoodsman. The comic was a clear heir to the line of American humor Constance Rourke described, in which “tales and much of the talk verged toward that median

¹¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, MA: The M. I. T. Press, 1968), 4-12, 15-17, 18-21, 23-8, 33-4, 59-66, 38-40, 62.

between terror and laughter which is the grotesque; and some plunged into the monstrous, as in the stories about slavery contrived for traveling New Englanders with a bent toward reform.” The difference, of course, was that Bruce’s frontier had turned inward, to America’s urban centers and atomic consciousness. As Paul Krassner put it, “He was an alchemist: he transformed horror into humor.”¹¹⁵ The trials of Lenny Bruce—his first in San Francisco, his last in New York—in many ways perfectly bookended the nightclub underground’s Hipster-Flipster-Holy Fool social role.

Cultural critic Andrew Ross has argued, however, that Bruce’s free-speech crusade, supported by America’s intelligentsia, was an elitist turn away from popular tastes—what DA Richard Kuh termed “reverse McCarthyism,” as liberal critics such as Columbia’s Lionel Trilling were compelled to support the comic’s “filth” or be labeled philistines.¹¹⁶ Ross suggests that Bruce’s shift from “the low-culture status of the comic to the legitimate status of the public satirist, folk philosopher, and outspoken defender of free speech” was a “fully articulated version of a *career* that was developed out of the internal contradictions of the hipster ethic.” Bruce did embody elements of the hipster, whose outsider status was itself a form of “cultural capital” that relied on quasi-intellectual elitism and exclusion. Ross is correct to assert that the largest gap in Bruce’s following was in the working class. Bruce’s fan base was largest among artistic elites and, especially, the middle-class who aspired to upwardly-mobile sophistication and, as Hentoff implied, feared “self-condemnation as squares.”¹¹⁷ The upper-working class,

¹¹⁵ Rourke, *American Humor*, 50; *Looking for Lenny*, dir. Elan Gale (Borderline Films, 2011).

¹¹⁶ Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 272-3; Richard H. Kuh, *Foolish Figleaves?: Pornography In and Out of Court* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 175-211; Trial Transcript, *People v. Bruce*, Criminal Court of New York, Part 2-C, County of New York, June 17, 1964, p. 4, London Papers, Columbia.

¹¹⁷ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989), 82, 88, 90.

whose postwar unionist gains and flight to the suburbs left them feeling economically precarious, displayed the kind of conservatism that accompanies hard-won but fragile social status—which would lead many of them into the ranks of the “Reagan Democrats” in the late 1970s.

Yet Ross misses a key group in this analysis: the urban underclass who thrived in the sub-proletarian regions of American cities. Urban “night people”—the prostitutes, barmaids, musicians, and bohemian artists with their ethos of New Poverty—flocked to Bruce’s shows (when they could afford it or had the social connections to bypass cover charges).¹¹⁸ The presence of this specific section of the working class attested to Bruce’s us of *their* language. He spoke to them and, as his routines became entrenched in the larger public sphere, he spoke *for* them. Bruce’s humor therefore was a kind of cultural translation, transforming underclass and bohemian bar talk into a form palatable to the mainstream which otherwise would have been threatened by its unfamiliarity, its dangerous (in)difference to middle-class norms. Bruce’s fans included numerous jazz musicians who either performed with him, like Pony Poindexter, or learned of him through connectors in the nightclub underground networks such as Ralph Gleason. Bruce glowed, for instance, about his friendship with trumpeter Artie Shaw, who possessed “a pretty heavy intellect, with some ideas of his own, unlike these other first plateau Time, New Yorker, pseudo-intellect jack-offs who quote esoteric passages from James Joyce and Flaubert.” As an autodidact whose formal education never went past the fifth grade, Bruce unconsciously strived to become the kind of intellectual whose social critiques

¹¹⁸ In a rare glimpse of the bohemian mutual aid economy at work in nightclub culture, Peter Orlovsky wrote to Allen Ginsberg in 1958 that he would go hear Kerouac read at a Village club, “If I can get in free but so many of Jack’s friends want to get in free so don’t know if I can do it.” Peter Orlovsky to Allen Ginsberg, March 20, 1958, Box 4, Folder 41, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford.

would spring from life experience, rather than formal academic hierarchies.¹¹⁹

Ross's one-dimensional view relies too heavily on Albert Goldman's portrayal of Bruce as the archetypal Hipster, leaving out the Flipster's apocalyptic consciousness and the Holy Fool's self-abasement. Further, even this reading of Goldman is selective, missing the biographer's insistence, condescendingly termed, that Bruce maintained a "moralistic, conservative" streak, "an almost infantile attachment to everything that was sacred to the American lower-middle class." Rather than Ross's assertion that the police who monitored his shows were the "plebeian" butt of his jokes, Bruce saw them as the "foot soldiers" whose dirty job was to carry out the will of elite authorities—prosecutors and politicians who openly feared his popularity as a sign of social decay and therefore sought to contain it. In fact, he *shared* their humor. Part of the Bruce legend grew from the outbursts of laughter which erupted during court proceedings, as gallery audiences, bailiffs, and attorneys alike were unable to contain their amusement at his routines. One regular of The Place in North Beach remarkably recalled overhearing stationhouse cops listening to tapes of his Jazz Workshop show and laughing uproariously, even as they prepared for his arrest. Bruce's rejection of *this* kind of hypocrisy, his impassioned denunciations of the "social lie," and his material's "outing of the communal Id," begat his image as America's "evangelist of the new morality."¹²⁰

Yet even this view is inadequate. Bruce also manifested the shift from modernism

¹¹⁹ Lenny Bruce to Alvah Bessie, March 23, 1960, Box 2, Folder 12, Bessie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society. This makes Bruce a prime example what theorist Antonio Gramsci termed an "organic intellectual."

¹²⁰ Goldman, *Lenny Bruce*, 452; Ross, *No Respect*, 92; de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere*, 450; Jack Lind, *Leo's Place: An Oral History of the Beats in San Francisco's North Beach* (Soborg, Denmark: Det Danske Ideselskab, 1998), 90; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 410-12. In a letter to his lawyer, Ephraim London, Bruce wrote, concerning public outrage at his conviction in New York, "Don't you know who will reap the hostility? The poor policeman, the foot soldier. The newspaper[s] . . . bring forth the statement from the liberals, 'Gestapo police, how 'bout that, the Goddamn police.' It's not the Goddamn police, but it's 'God damn you,' for denying the trial court something they can judge. Did it ever occur to you that the expert witnesses couldn't relate to the court? The words they used were too esoteric."

to postmodernism, but remained wedged between the two. He rejected moral absolutes, embraced cultural pastiche, and even exhibited the postmodern sensibility of camp in his parodies of Hollywood B-movie genres, such as prison films in “Father Flotski’s Triumph” (“All right Dutch, this is the warden! . . . Give up and we’ll meet any reasonable demands . . . except the vibrators.”) and “Thank You, Masked Man,” in which he satirized the Lone Ranger as an effete elitist “fag” (“I like what they do with fags anyway. Their punishment is quite correct. They throw them in jail with a lot of men. Very clever, hum, hum . . .”). For every onstage boast about his “erudite, pedantic” vocabulary with “words like ‘euphemistic,’ ‘anthropomorphic,’” Bruce just as quickly undercut his status as socially-constructed and relativistic. It is “how much *exposure* you’ve had” to “hip idiom, Yiddish idiom” that will “make you hip or square,” he told one audience. “I am part of everything I indict,” Bruce proclaimed. “I am a hustler like everyone else, and will continue taking the money as long as this mass madness continues. Sometimes . . . I see myself as a profound, incisive wit, concerned with man’s inhumanity to man. Then I stroll to the next mirror and I see a pompous, subjective ass whose humor is hardly spiritual.” But this introspection was always backed by a modernist faith in the perfectibility of society. Bruce’s declaration that “the world is sick and . . . I’m a surgeon with a scalpel for false values” relied on the idea that there was a cure. Like Sahl, Bruce’s self-critique tacitly recognized the nightclub’s social role, not simply to move toward consensus, but to spark debate as part of the public sphere’s democratic ideal function. “I’m not a comedian,” he insisted. “I don’t have an act. I just talk. I’m just Lenny Bruce.”¹²¹

¹²¹ Lenny Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert and Lenny Bruce—American* (Fantasy Records F-7011, 1959); Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 4, 18; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 410-11, 408.

CONCLUSION: THE REBEL CAFE AND THE NEW CULTURE OF COMEDY

While Bruce was disingenuous to separate entertainment from social commentary, the controversies over his and Sahl's content did highlight the cultural role of satirical performances. Sociological and psychological studies of the functions and mechanisms of humor reveal that it "serves as a rather safe way of self-disclosing taboo interests or values and to probe the values, intentions and motives of others." While Sahl did not consider himself part of the bohemian community, he nonetheless acted as a sort of cultural translator, communicating dissident ideas to those outside the enclaves of North Beach and Greenwich Village. Hundreds of newspaper articles in the 1950s and early 1960s associated Sahl with New Bohemia—despite his objections—to the extent of calling him a "spokesman for the Beat Generation." For many middle-class "curiosity seekers" who attended Sahl's or Bruce's performances, humor served as an acceptable, benign way of exploring the otherworldly nature of bohemianism. Moreover, by adding the Immigrant archetype to Rourke's triad of Yankee-Backwoodsman-Negro, Sahl and Bruce were part of the changing public image of American Jews, claiming secular space as intellectuals and social critics. As Stephen Kercher has argued, this was particularly true for Bruce, who used Yiddish phrases as an "authentic way of communicating" which "afforded him the vantage point of the marginal, the alienated, and the hip." This stance also drew from a tradition in which humor was intertwined with claims on morality and rights. "I am a Jew," Bruce riposted to DA Richard Kuh's request for immediate imprisonment due to the comic's "lack of remorse" at his sentencing. "I come before the court not for mercy but for justice. . . ." ¹²²

¹²² Jon E. Rocklein, *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 185; "Mort Sahl Double-Header," *Pasadena Independent*, February 3, 1959;

For Sahl, left-coast liberalism was an expression of nationalism. He saw himself in a tradition of dissent-as-patriotism, always in defense of “the country,” which combined the Yankee evocation of the Revolution with the Immigrant’s claim on American opportunity. As uncomfortable as he was with comparisons to the Beats, this was something Sahl shared with aesthetic radicals like Kenneth Rexroth and Allen Ginsberg: the notion that dissent was a fundamental part of the American Experiment, perhaps central to the belief in its continual perfectibility. Further, Ralph Gleason’s coupling of Lenny Bruce and Lawrence Ferlinghetti proved apt for Sahl as well. Many of the same themes of Sahl’s satire—from the New Deal through the War, transnational consciousness, patriotism, dissent, and the New Saloon—can be heard in Ferlinghetti’s “Autobiography”:

I am leading a quiet life / in Mike’s Place every day / watching the champs / of the Dante Billiard Parlor / . . . I am an American. / . . . I chopped trees for the CCC. . . . / I landed in Normandy / in a rowboat that turned over. / I have seen educated armies / on the beach at Dover. / I have seen Egyptian pilots in purple clouds / . . . potato salad and dandelions / at anarchist picnics.¹²³

Underscoring this dissident patriotism, humor also worked as an “unmasking tactic,” that according to theorist Jon Rocklein, “reveals the hypocrisy and pretensions . . . of institutions and nations,” thus relieving social tensions and acting as a sort of “safety valve” for common frustrations. This role was recognized by Cold War critics, who noted

“Storm Is Brewed in Pool at Metro,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1959; Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 4, 16-18, 22-3, 155-176; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 408, 439. A casual search of Newspaper Archives online found 190 matches for the terms “Mort Sahl” and “beatnik.” Moreover, nearly all of the more than sixty articles featuring Sahl in the *New York Times* carry some mention of his role as a bohemian figure. See also James D. Bloom, *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003) and Sahl, *Live at the hungry i*.

¹²³ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 60; Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 63-6. I was unable to schedule an interview with Sahl, but I did speak with him briefly on the phone in July 2012. Even during our short conversation he mentioned several times his concerns about what “liberals” were doing to “the country.”

that if the New Comedians' performances had not been "couched in humor, their ideas might be serious indeed." "The satirist," said the *New York Times* in 1959, "is out to deflate the stuffed shirt, prick the pompous, twit revered institutions and clichés." This perspective underscores the function of the nightclub as a liminal space in which new identities can be explored with relative impunity. Sociologist Sherri Cavan noted this role, as nightspots offered the "unexpected" through both social mixing within the performance spaces and the performances themselves. Adding to this the frequent factor of patrons' intoxication, the result was a scenario which was able to stretch audiences' previously perceived boundaries of acceptable outward behavior.¹²⁴ It is therefore clear how the "unmasking tactic" of New Comedian humor, combined with the nightclubs as a site of social experimentation, was a potentially powerful influence on identity formation, even to the extent of ideological transformation. As Mailer argued in "The White Negro," such existential challenges to established moral and social codes could "open the limits of the possible."¹²⁵

Yet, much like Mailer's infamous essay, the New Comedians were limited by their notions of race and gender. Sahl's memoir is peppered with disdainful comments about civil rights leaders, betraying a deep-seated antipathy to Black equality that occasionally broke through even during his most egalitarian period in the 1950s. Although the African-American press infrequently covered Sahl, and as a rule only vaguely referred to him as a cultural touchstone, an incident in Los Angeles in 1960 brought a flurry of attention his way. Sahl was booked to open for the Duke Ellington

¹²⁴ Rocklein, *The Psychology of Humor*, 17-18; Robert Shelton, "Ancient Art of Poking Fun—On LP," *New York Times*, March 22, 1959, p. X-22; Cavan, *Liquor License*, 167-70.

¹²⁵ Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," in *Advertisements for Myself*, (New York: Berkeley Medallion Books, 1959), 327.

Orchestra at the Crescendo Club but, in a flight of hubris, perhaps racially fueled, he refused to take second billing to the legendary jazz artist. The club capitulated and, consequently, Ellington refused to appear onstage as the orchestra performed. *The Chicago Defender*, long a bastion of Black political advocacy, railed against the “Canadian-born” comic for failing to recognize Ellington’s status as the nation’s foremost composer—a man who was the very embodiment of erudite sophistication in African-American arts. “It appeared, therefore, that Sahl,” the *Baltimore Afro-American* concurred, “whether or not race entered into his decision, was conforming to the popular practice on stage and on television of top-billing white entertainers over Negroes, even when the talents and greater reputation of the latter are evident.”¹²⁶ While such coverage certainly ignored the many times Sahl had previously been an opening act for Black headliners, it is nonetheless notable that once he gained the necessary show-business firepower, he had no reservations about asserting his dominance, even when doing so had deeply insulting racial implications.

While Sahl occasionally took shots at southern segregation, he never supported the Civil Rights Movement. He adopted a paternalistic attitude toward Black liberation, a failing common to postwar liberals, and often suggested that while overt racist oppression should be condemned, Blacks were not ready for full inclusion in the American body politic. In a summer 1963 interview with Paul Krassner in *The Realist*, Sahl simultaneously demanded recognition for his outspokenness against segregation and asserted that African Americans were not fully “equipped to vote.” Condemning the

¹²⁶ “Ellington, Mort Sahl Feud Over Top Billing, So Duke Takes A Walk,” *The Chicago Defender*, July 12, 1960, p. 21; “Duke Quits Date in Feud with Night Club Comedian,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 16, 1960, p. 15. See also A. S. “Doc” Young, “Duke Ellington Shuns Crescendo Bandstand In Hassle Over Billing: Mort Sahl Won't Share Top Spot,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 30, 1960, p. A-1; Langston Hughes, “Week By Week,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 12, 1960, p. 10.

upcoming March on Washington as potentially anarchistic and violent, Sahl unleashed a condescending tirade, inflected with both racism and sexism:

You *can't* march on Washington. There's no such thing. . . . Demonstrations are fine to let the Congress know that they're not insulated. . . . But I want to know how you can control that. I like hostility at times, when it's justified by the situation, but if hostility can't be controlled it then becomes an instrument of terror, even to the person who possesses it. . . .

It may end in a lot of blood, because . . . if somebody gets out of line, you will have to call in the law, because the Negroes will represent outlaws in that situation. . . . I don't think that's getting anything accomplished.

You can't *sit in* on Congress. It's *against the law*. That's the way things are. And I'm talking about getting something *done*, not expressing the individual neuroses of those Jewish girls who belong to the NAACP. Let 'em take it out on their husbands, like they used to.¹²⁷

Sahl concluded by suggesting that women's liberation, while offering potential for women to become "human beings, like men are now," would in the short term create misery for those who "don't have skills" to compete in a masculine world.¹²⁸

Bruce exhibited more enlightened views on feminism than Sahl, criticizing Hollywood's singular definitions of beauty and recognizing women's autonomous sexuality. But the majority of his transgressive material maintained a masculine cast. Far more progressive on the question of race, his limitations were revealed by a bizarre incident in 1960, a practical joke in which he sprayed singer Pearl Bailey with a fire extinguisher onstage in Las Vegas. Afterwards he left a note saying, "I couldn't take your act. All the Uncle Tom bits you did like a lazy Negro." The stunt justly earned him opprobrium in the African-American press and exposed the ugly underbelly of the Hipster ethos, with its hyper-masculine notions of authenticity.¹²⁹ It would be for others to cross the sociocultural bridges of race and gender in comedy.

¹²⁷ "An Impolite Interview with Mort Sahl," *The Realist*, Issue Number 43, September 1963, pp. 24-5.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹²⁹ Goldman, *Lenny Bruce*, 282-3; "Comic Lenny Bruce Douses Pearl Bailey with Acid," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 9, 1960, p. 15.

Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce certainly failed to live up to their sociopolitical potential. In particular, Bruce fell into the familiar trap of creative self-destruction that crashed so many fellow subterranean aviators. The difference, of course, was that Bruce's travails had sparked massive press coverage, support from those in a position to publicize the injustice such as Gleason, thereby raising his resistance to the level of a public crusade. In addition to supportive columns in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times*, tufts of grassroots encouragement arose among college students and a new generation of North Beach bohemians. During the Jazz Workshop trial, a City College student distributed pamphlets titled, "Welcome to the Farce!" which asserted that Bruce was "playing an unwilling part as a straight man in a social comedy put on by the City and County of San Francisco." Over the next three years, Bruce became a staple of the Bay Area countercultural press, featured in civil rights and antiwar journals such as *Soulbook* and *Open City Press*. "There is still no more accurate voice of social satire in America," a young reporter suggested in February 1965, opining that Bruce's critiques were "much like preaching, a very vivid description of the hell fires we live with each day."¹³⁰ The gasoline smell of napalm in Southeast Asia and the flames rising from tattered buildings in Watts would soon underscore the poignancy of his remark.

Sahl's traditionalist view of social hierarchy may have sat relatively comfortably with his oppositional stance amid the political pressure-cooker of the Red Scare. But his inability to see the contributions of women both to his own career and the bohemia which spawned him, erasing the roles of those such as Sue Babior from his material, combined with increasingly atavistic views on race, contributed to his hubris and, ultimately, his

¹³⁰ Collins and Skover, *Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 72-7; Free Speech Movement Records, Carton 2, Folder 48, CU-309, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; *Open City Press*, February 17, 1965, San Francisco History Center, Little Magazine Collection, SFPL.

irrelevance in the 1960s. Convinced that the Kennedy assassination was hatched from within the US government, Sahl became mired in conspiracy theory and an acerbic brand of social conservatism. He had lost sight of the Rebel Cafe, falling out of step with cultural change until he took a wrong turn entirely. Meanwhile, Bruce had taken Rebel Cafe comedy to its limit and left it nowhere to go. After his first trial in 1962, Bruce continued to influence the shape of American humor. But simultaneously, social satire moved out of the realm of the underground, becoming institutionalized in mainstream comedy clubs and, eventually, television. The experiences of Rebel Cafe comedy and its challenges to previous orthodoxies sparked changes—some small, some transformative—in the worldviews of nightclub patrons, which incrementally changed the wider culture. These shifts were intertwined with the literary world of the Beat Generation and the New Saloons of the Village and North Beach, and in the context of the United States' postwar global power, such transformations were significant. As the Rebel Cafe milieu expanded in the late 1950s, it both reflected and absorbed aspects of American imperial concerns, extending its experimental role to transnational proportions.

Chapter 10

“‘A Coney Island of the Mind’: Tourism and the Transnational Psychogeography of New Bohemia”

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

—T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (1943)

Of what did the duumvirate deliberate during their itinerary?

Music, literature, Ireland, Dublin, Paris, friendship, women, prostitution, diet, the influence of gaslight or the light of arc and glow-lamps on the growth of adjoining paraheliotropic trees, exposed corporation emergency dustbuckets, the Roman catholic church, ecclesiastical celibacy . . . the past day, the maleficent influence of the presabbath, Stephen’s collapse.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1934)¹

“A thin shaft of light came in from the kitchen, accentuating the darkness,” wrote Francis Rigney in his 1960 psycho-sociological study, *The Real Bohemia*. “Then a conga drummer arrived. He sat in the darkest corner of the living room, pounding out a complex, syncopated, ‘neo-‘African rhythm; his playing caused a hush to settle over what was now an audience.” Rigney was describing a bohemian party in North Beach, setting the scene for his study of the “scene”—a blur of revelry in nightspots and semi-public places like Eric Nord’s “Party Pad,” which Rigney called “a kind of combination USO and private home.” Nord was soon arrested by authorities for contributing to the delinquency of a minor, his bare-floored “two-story warehouse” ringed by mattresses shut down for lacking a dance permit.² Other similar places mushroomed, however, alongside nightspots like the Co-Existence Bagel Shop and the Cellar.

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1934, 1990), 666; The passage from Eliot made up the first public words spoken by Bob Kaufman after a ten-year vow of silence, from Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 to the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam in 1973.

² Francis J. Rigney and L. Douglas Smith, *The Real Bohemia: A Sociological and Psychological Study of the “Beats”* (New York: Basic Books, 1961), 6, 8, 160; “Eric Nord Surrenders in Girl Case,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 12, 1958, pp 1, 5.

A keen observer, Rigney captured a series of vignettes that reveal elements of bohemian transnational and literary culture, psychic and sexual exploration, and public engagement. He also participated in bohemia's celebration of the exotic, its ethnic and racial othering. At a party attended by an assortment of "college boys, Fillmore District Negroes, and a few tourists," a young man "began a dance—not an African dance . . . but a series of complex poses akin to Balinese postures" to the accompaniment of congas and a "Spanish guitar." Then "a striking-looking Negress" whose "provocative, primitive" dance—accompanied by revelers' shouts of "Go! Go! Go!"—climaxed in "hedonistic fury" as she "tore at her own body, stroked herself; her hair, her breasts, her thighs." Between the "folk songs" of Bessie Smith, Josh White, and Leadbelly played by guitar-strumming youths, bohemians played records and "mused quietly as Lotte Lenya sang about Surabaya Johnny and Mack the Knife," basking in the subversive appeal of Kurt Weill's Berlin cabaret style. Rigney portrayed the building's "Italian landlady" yelling in dialect in response to the noise, "Hey, cut dis out, go hom', go hom'," while at another soiree, a poet suddenly burst from a closet "wearing a Spanish conquistador helmet and shorts." Holding a bottle of gin, the poet demanded attention and then "rendered passages from T.S. Eliot with such vigor and impact that afterward the whole group could only sit in awed silence."³

Rigney was sympathetic to the bohemian search for authentic lifeways, and noted the cafes along Grant Avenue as landmarks in its psychogeography. He described a North Beach saloon, Mr. Otis, where "a group began to assemble in the center of the open area of the bar" as an "English fever set in" and the patrons "swirled a laughing, singing group,

³ Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 9-11.

trying as best they could to remember English madrigals.”⁴ He closed his introductory sketch with a daybreak ceremony in Sutro Park—the early time necessary because “there are no places in San Francisco where an outdoor wedding of Bohemians could take place without curiosity seekers.” Rigney detailed the wedding’s “poetry” with “the familiar ‘I do’s,’ but nothing about ‘obey’ or ‘death.’” He concluded, “The ceremony ended not with the usual, ‘by the authority, . . .’ but simply with, ‘because you are in love, I now pronounce you man and wife.’ . . . The working guests left for their day ahead; the bridal party set off for Enrico’s for a champagne breakfast.”⁵

Rigney’s essay was a snapshot of a new public sphere, in which bars and clubs were central points for a wider social engagement with bohemia. While it revealed his own assumptions about race and nuclear-family normativity, the piece also illustrated the ways in which national and even transnational concerns could affect local aesthetics and behaviors. Between 1954 and 1961, on the heels of the Korean conflict, the US attempted to command the world stage in competition with the Soviet Union, facing major global upheavals and transformations. The French defeat in Vietnam, the conference of so-called nonaligned Third-World nations at Bandung, and the Suez Canal Crisis highlighted the complex mix of European decolonization, American power, and Cold War geopolitics. As the Marxist poet and politician Aimé Césaire of Martinique wrote, there was a rising tide of “Negritude” in the global South:

And now I ask: what else has bourgeois Europe done? It has undermined civilizations, destroyed countries, ruined nationalities, extirpated “the root of diversity.” No more dikes, no more bulwarks. The hour of the barbarian is at hand. The modern barbarian. The American hour. Violence, excess, waste, mercantilism, bluff, conformism, stupidity,

⁴ Ibid, 13-14.

⁵ Ibid. Similarly, poet Ebbe Borregaard’s wedding invitations in 1957 announced “Rites by Robt. Duncan.” Ebbe Borregaard to Donald Allen, December 11, 1957, Box 61 Folder 5, Donald Allen Papers, 1912-2004, / 1935-1983, MSS-3, Mandeville Special Collections, University of California, San Diego.

vulgarity, disorder.⁶

Meanwhile, the Cuban Revolution, the failed Hungarian uprising against the Soviets and tensions in Berlin, the start of Japan's economic rise, and continued civil rights activism in the US raised questions about previous orthodoxies of power. Even Kennedy's election had a cosmopolitan aura, as the press hailed the first family's romantic, sophisticated "Camelot."

My aim in juxtaposing bohemian North Beach with these world-historical events is not to make sweeping claims about the American role in postwar global affairs, or even to make generalizations about the way average Americans thought about or influenced foreign relations. Rather, I want to present the framework in which denizens of cosmopolitan cities like New York and San Francisco lived, and to examine their interactions on a microscopic level, on the streets of North Beach and Greenwich Village, where they constructed mental maps of their place in both geography and time—in history. If streets were the grammar of movement, where Americans participated in what critical theorist Michel de Certeau calls the "practice of everyday life," the Rebel Cafe was a punctuation mark, where the motions of identity formation came to rest and manifested. Suggesting that the ambitions of science and poetry inherently share a core of utopianism, de Certeau proposes the tangled role of agency in struggles for modern self-definition between technocrats and unruly intellectuals:

In the Expert, competence is transmuted into social authority; in the Philosopher, ordinary questions become a skeptical principle in a technical field. The Philosopher's ambiguous relation to the Expert . . . often seems to subtend his procedures: sometimes philosophical enterprises aim enviously at the Expert's realization of their ancient utopia . . . ; sometimes, defeated by history but still rebellious, these enterprises turn their backs on what has been taken away from them by science in order to accompany the Subject, the king of yesteryear, today driven out of a technocratic society into his exile (O

⁶ Aime Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, transl. by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1955, 2000), 76.

memories! O symbolic transgressions! O unconscious kingdoms!)⁷

The 1950s urban psychogeography was a prime example of this struggle which, as de Certeau also suggests, was intertwined with print culture, as literature aided constructions of the self and usable pasts. The eyes of the Beat Generation therefore are a useful lens to view the microscopic aspects of American culture. Like millions of others, they grappled with their place in a new global context and responded with a variety of tactics, from travel to notions of universalism and exoticization of the Other—a dialectic in which the local (bohemia) and the global (American empire) affected each other. Americans made sense of mass culture by relating it to local experiences. Simultaneously, their consciousness of global issues fostered a transnational psychogeography that celebrated cosmopolitan sophistication at home and made foreign places seem familiar. The lives and work of the Beat Generation performed a dual task within this process. Driven by often romanticized notions of foreign places as liberating, the Beats in the 1950s took to the global road, exploring their artistic roots in Europe and exploiting the exoticism of locales from Latin America to North Africa and Asia. So doing, they both followed and helped maintain transnational dissident social networks. Moreover, the Beats peppered their prose and poetry with the flavor of their experiences, whetting the public's appetite for similar worldliness, while furthering the cosmopolitan connotations of their hangouts in Greenwich Village and North Beach.⁸ This was American

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* transl. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 1988), 7. Michel Foucault suggests that the “alienation” of science and philosophy from each other is central to modern civilization's relation to, and conceptions of, madness. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Transl. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 220.

⁸ On mass tourism as a contributor to postwar “narratives of American national identity” that inherited global power and notions of egalitarianism, see Richard K. Popp, *The Holiday Makers: Magazines, Advertising, and Mass Tourism in Postwar America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012). For a more

globalization in miniature, as the diverse influences that the nation had devoured before World War II were reconstituted into the cultural substance paraded around the globe postwar—a process that continued as this culture intermixed with others along the route.

During stateside travels as well, bohemian seekers used nightspots as nodal points for social connections and to explore the esoteric pathways of psychological, ideological, and sexual transformation. Bohemian saloons such as The Place became signposts in the psychogeography of the American underground, spaces where oppositional communities maintained and extended themselves. For the wider public, nightspots continued to be transgressive. This was most apparent in the phenomenon of tourism, which was intimately bound up with the public perception and function of bohemia, a Rabelaisian carnival in which norms were temporarily reversed, allowing a release from the pressures of modern life. As the popularity of the Beats exploded after 1957, these sites became inundated with curiosity seekers—some sincere, some merely slumming—who made the previously insulated nonconformist atmosphere impossible. Along with tourist dollars and bourgeois status-seekers came rising rents; few Rebel Cafe nightspots survived the 1960s. And as American nightlife independently established the elements formerly imported from the Continent, the Rebel Cafe took another step toward its end, its style diffused into the mainstream. Yet to pose this dynamic as a “decline” or a tug-of-war between “authentic” Beat and the “inauthentic” poseur would be overly simple. Bohemia always kept one foot in commerce, even as it supposedly planted the other in the realm of “pure art.” The tourist was as integral to subterranean nightspots as the auteur. Tourism was therefore a multivalent phenomenon that in some ways reversed the Beats’ cultural

detailed examination of various aspects of the Beat movement’s transnationalism, see Nancy M. Grace and Jennie Skerl, eds., *The Transnational Beat Generation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

role and in other ways completed it. Beat literature offered a kind of psychic travel, transporting readers across unfamiliar terrain. Visitors to North Beach or the Village, on the other hand, actively participated in bohemia. Yet this experience also relied on usable pasts and transnational imaginaries that gave entertainment districts their meaning and tacitly affirmed America's global reach by their cosmopolitanism. Why travel the world when the world could come to you, arrayed like a cultural marketplace on the streets of New York and San Francisco?

BICOASTAL BOHEMIA AND THE PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY OF THE BEATS

In her 1983 memoir, Joyce Johnson recounted her friend Elise Cowen's introduction to New York's bohemia thirty years before. "She had met someone at a party," Johnson wrote. "A Poet." The poet was Allen Ginsberg who, still struggling with his sexual identity, asked Cowen out. "She takes the subway to the Village where he's waiting," Johnson recalled, "and they walk through those blocks that were the geography of my adolescent yearnings to the San Remo Bar, where an amazing number of people seem to know him. This is where the subterraneans are, Allen says—he has the scholarly gentleness of a guide." Johnson's account illustrates several aspects of the Beat phenomenon, not least of which has been memoirists' tendency to condense events and place them within the aura of well-known Greenwich Village nightspots. The San Remo, like all such bohemian-literary bars, was critical to the memory of the Beat Generation, to make a usable past out of their ecstatic revelry.

Well before post-1960s accounts mythologized a legendary 1950s underground, Cold War bohemians thought of these sites in symbolic terms. Rebel Cafes marked the entry points to the underground psychogeography itself, as subterranean signposts and way stations on the journey. "There was a restlessness in everyone I knew," wrote

Johnson, recalling her bicoastal bohemian milieu, “whose network would stretch [from North Beach] as far as Greenwich Village and even Paris.” Following a 1956 *Mademoiselle* magazine article on the San Francisco Renaissance featuring “a photo of Allen with three other men, a cherubic hoodlum named Gregory Corso, a scholarly Philip Whalen, and a writer who had a crucifix around his neck and tangled black hair,” the subterraneans began to surface. “This was Jack Kerouac,” Johnson said, “whose reputation was underground. Like the others, he was said to frequent North Beach, a run-down area where there were suddenly a lot of new coffee shops, jazz joints, and bars, as well as an excellent bookstore called City Lights that was the center of activity for the poets. Thus several thousand young women between fourteen and twenty-five were given a map to revolution.”⁹ In this rebel cartography, San Francisco, New York, and Paris stood culturally closer than their geographical counterparts like Sacramento, Buffalo, or Strasbourg.

As sociologist Ned Polsky has suggested, San Francisco’s cultural impact on New York was a new phenomenon; by 1960 “most of the San Francisco beats had by then become so harassed by tourist hordes and police that they fled to New York.” This statement’s hyperbole, however, was matched by its lack of historical context. Not only did North Beach remain a bohemian center for another three years, before a slow shift to Haight-Ashbury with the flowering of the Counterculture, but bicoastal movements had been increasing since the late 1940s. Already in 1953, Kenneth Rexroth had bombastically crowed to Lawrence Lipton that “due to me & [Henry] Miller,” San Francisco “has become the capital of the New Bohemia. Once I was the only literate

⁹ Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), 73-4, 113, 117-19.

anarchist left in the USA.”¹⁰

Rexroth was plugged into a bicoastal network that included left-anarchists such as Paul Goodman and Peter Martin of City Lights Books, San Francisco State College, and Golden Goose Press, whom he recommended to Lipton as a potential publisher. The Place owner Knute Stiles, recalling his own connections to the City Lights founder, also illustrated the Rebel Cafe’s literary networks. “I think that Peter Martin . . . had a big influence on San Francisco political life, intellectual life,” he said. “And also in New York he was always present at the Cedar Bar; a regular there. And you see, one of his wives was a former paramour of Franz Kline, and so forth. He was a good friend of John Putnam, who was art director of *Mad* magazine; the two of them talked popular culture in the Cedar Bar and I think consequently that dialogue spread out to various other people, like myself. . . .”¹¹ These bicoastal connections only intensified with San Francisco’s eastward influence on the New Bohemia’s cultural community. Like Martin and Stiles, poets and subterraneans such as Philip Lamantia, Betty Keck, Gerd Stern, and John Allen Ryan each spent considerable time on both coasts through the 1950s.¹² In his search for literary success, even the curmudgeonly Jack Spicer suffered a season in Gotham, where he attended one of Goodman’s gestalt therapy sessions.¹³

¹⁰ Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967, 1969), 148; Kenneth Rexroth to Lawrence Lipton, January 27, 1953 and January 22, 1953, Box 2, Folder 5, Lawrence Lipton Papers (Collection 819), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

¹¹ Knute Stiles Interview, May 30, 1982, East-West House, 733 Baker Street, San Francisco, CA, p. 36, Ellingham Papers, UCSD. Putnam was also one of the founders of *The Realist*, with Paul Krassner. Paul Krassner, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 43.

¹² John Allen Ryan to Jack Spicer, March 20, 1956, Box 3, Folder 27, Jack Spicer Papers, BANC MSS 2004/209, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹³ Spicer was less than taken with Goodman’s techniques, suggesting they “seemed designed to browbeat straight boys into acting out on latent homosexual impulses. When Spicer argued with a point made by one acolyte, Goodman jumped in and said, ‘You’re only disputing him because you want to fuck him, own up to it!’ Spicer stumbled out into the snowy street, reeling, he said later, as if after an encounter with the Red Queen.” Spicer compatriot George Stanley later recalled the radical poet’s awareness of the bicoastal shift’s

As Francis Rigney's statistics on North Beach bohemians indicated, "over four-fifths came from outside the Bay Area," with 20% from New York City alone—the same percentage as Los Angeles.¹⁴ This bicoastal trend continued into the early 1960s, as younger North Beach bohemians such as Russell FitzGerald and George Stanley moved to New York. On arrival, the San Remo and Cedar Tavern were places to connect with like-minded Villagers, as well as fellow North Beach expatriate Bob Kaufman. "What poor style to have Barney Google stagger into the San Remo less than twenty minutes after I first crossed its venerable bohemian threshold," FitzGerald noted in his diary. "'I just had a drink with Bob Koffman less than a block away.' 'Which direction?' 'That way, I think.' How should my two hour search through the Village bars be viewed? Viscious [*sic*] and predatory or love-sick and pathetic? The cold was scorching. The kind of city winter night when the pavements ring airily under rapid feet. The bars: alternately Italian or bohemian, dirty or clean, full or empty. A nightmare of unknown faces in a familiar light." Even on such unfortunate evenings, nightspots were central to FitzGerald's Village life: "Ugly night of Cedar Tavern & Ed Marshal taking us to Kaufman's party but it wasn't. Then the White Horse and Dillon's and back to the Cedar where an Evening Planned by Jack Spicer to Prove His Point continued to unfold."¹⁵

economic implications, asserting, "Spicer was right: this was the very period in which the final consolidation of California into the capitalistic nexus located in New York was taking place." Stanley was speaking from a bohemian point of view concerning avant-garde arts, literature, and music, ignoring Hollywood's long history within this nexus. Exchanges of alternative ideas about art and community between Los Angeles and San Francisco were also significant, as seen in the relationship between LA artist Wallace Berman and Beat poet Michael McClure, for instance. But Venice Beach never rivaled Greenwich Village or North Beach as a national symbol of bohemianism. Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), 35; George Stanley Interview, with Lewis Ellingham, 1982, San Francisco, CA, Box 7, Folder 16, Papers of Lewis Ellingham, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California San Diego; Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 212-68.

¹⁴ Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 20.

¹⁵ Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 192; Russell FitzGerald Diary, January 12, 1958 and May 31,

For FitzGerald and many others, nightspots were respites from frigidly impersonal and tumultuous city life, as well as crucial centers of socializing and personal or aesthetic exploration. Spicer's own pessimistic outlook offers further insight into the bohemian psychogeography in which the Village and North Beach were often conflated, as well as the role of nightspots in soothing the sense of urban overload. "The trouble with New York is not that it overwhelms you with superiority. It doesn't; it overwhelms you with sheer number," he wrote to John Allen Ryan. "I'd simply find another New York in San Francisco if I returned there. I think I underestimated the toxic qualities of American civilization."¹⁶ On Spicer's return, The Place and other North Beach bars were his path back into the radical poetry scene. Similarly, Peter Orlovsky wrote to Ginsberg after arriving in New York in 1958, saying that he had tapped into the Village scene with "poetry . . . in 5 Spot." Reporting that he "will dig there next Monday," Orlovsky hinted that these nightspot connections were central to his sense of community and self. "Yes, I [am] awakening thank God," he wrote. "Will start seeing others, some at Cedar Bar."¹⁷

THE (TRANSNATIONAL) SUBTERRANEANS

This dynamic was perhaps best illustrated by Kerouac's 1958 novella, *The Subterraneans*, which literally collapsed the distinctions between North Beach and Greenwich Village as it expressed the Beats' wider cosmopolitan consciousness. A *roman à clef* ostensibly set in San Francisco, the people and places it portrayed were actually in New York. "It began on a warm summernight," Kerouac wrote, introducing "the history of the subterraneans of San Francisco" through his alter-ego Leo Percepied's

1960, Box 9, Folder 1, Ellingham Papers, UCSD. See also Knute Stiles Interview, p. 51 and John Allen Ryan Interview, p. 36, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

¹⁶ Jack Spicer to John Allen Ryan, October 7, 1955, Box 3, Folder 26, Spicer Papers, Berkeley.

¹⁷ Peter Orlovsky to Allen Ginsberg, February 10, 1958 and February 19, 1958, Box 4, Folder 41, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

view of the literary-bohemian scene: “Julien Alexander is the angel of the subterraneans . . . a name invented by Adam Moorad [Allen Ginsberg] who is a poet and friend of mine who said ‘They are hip without being slick, they are intelligent without being corny, they are intellectual as hell and know all about Pound without being pretentious or talking too much about it, they are very quiet, they are very Christlike.’” Perceived moves quickly and impressionistically through the nocturnal underground—lifeblood of his literary identity—where he meets Mardou Fox (bohemian Alene Lee):

I was coming down the street with Larry O’Hara old drinking buddy of mine from all the times in San Francisco in my long and nervous and mad careers I’ve gotten drunk and in fact cadged drinks off friends with such “genial” regularity nobody really cared to notice . . . a crazy Irish young businessman of San Francisco with Balzackian backroom in his bookstore where they’d smoke tea and talk of the old days of the great Basie band . . . they were sitting on the fender of a car in front of the Black Mask bar on Montgomery Street, Julien Alexander . . . apocalyptic angel or saint of the subterraneans, certainly star (now), and she, Mardou Fox, whose face when first I saw it in Dante’s bar around the corner made me think, “By God, I’ve got to get involved with that little woman” and maybe too because she was Negro.¹⁸

The swirling world of the Black Mask (San Remo) and Dante’s (probably the Cedar) was crucial for Kerouac’s depiction of the subterranean psychogeography, with its exuberant bar talk and literary atmosphere. “Out of the bar were pouring interesting people, the night making a great impression on me,” he wrote. Among them were “some kind of Truman-Capote-haired dark Marlon Brando” and a boho-sage with “a crazy Isadora Duncan girl” who was “in the Black Mask sitting there with head thrown back thin dark eyes watching everybody as if in sudden slow astonishment” or “talking about Pound and peote,” and the son of a Hollywood director telling stories about “Greta Garbo parties at dawn and Chaplin falling in the door drunk”—the atmosphere awash with the quintessential “North Beach words, ‘What are you reading?’”¹⁹

¹⁸ Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 1-2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-7.

But the subterraneans were also Kerouac's "urban Thoreaus," sexually-Whitmanian existentialists who reconceived their society through their street-life experiences. As Michel de Certeau has argued, echoing the radical French artist Guy Debord, walking in the city is itself a kind of creative fiction—the city-as-text, written by its Dedalus-like inhabitants, yet unreadable at ground level. Walking, they argued, was "enunciation": an appropriation of the topography, a "spatial acting-out" of the "relations among differentiated positions." For Kerouac, street life was an attempt to close the gap opened by print culture—which was the source of the Enlightenment idea, de Certeau suggests, that progress could be *produced* by "inscribing" it on nature and the body politic, even as writing is excluded, existing only in the space between "presence and the system." As Debord's Situationist International announced in 1958, "The domain we mean to replace and *fulfill* is poetry."²⁰

The immediacy of Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody" was intended to reconcile psychogeography and text. "I got out of the house and walked along and didn't know which way to go," he wrote:

my mind kept turning into the several directions that I was thinking of going but my body kept walking straight along Columbus altho I felt the sensation of each of the directions I mentally and emotionally turned into, amazed at all the possible directions you can take with different motives that come in, like it can make you a different *person* . . . suppose instead of going up Columbus as I usually did I'd turn into Filbert would something happen that at the time is insignificant enough but would be like enough to influence my

²⁰ Ibid, 15; de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92-3, 97-8, 106-7, 144, 161; Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 170, 154-73. Marcus describes the "constructed situations" of the Situationists, placing them within the "smoky, subterranean tradition" of Cabaret Voltaire Dada: "Each situation would be an 'ambient milieu' for a 'game of events'; each would change its setting and allow itself to be changed by it. The city would no longer be experienced as a scrim of commodities and power; it would be felt as a field of 'psychogeography,' and this would be an epistemology of everyday time and space, allowing one to understand, and transform, the 'specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the motions and behavior of individuals.' . . . [This] could not produce art but only a new kind of life. . . . a technique that could not mystify because its very form was a demystification. . . . It would be to begin to live a truly modern way of life . . . [with all past radical texts merely] part of a legend of freedom."

whole life in the end?²¹

In this passage, as throughout the novel, Kerouac fused the creative fiction of walking in the Village-as-North-Beach *with* the act of writing: text-as-praxis.

Kerouac also captured the mediating role of race and gender in the character of Mardou Fox, whose sexuality was inseparable from her Black-Cherokee heritage. Mardou's character lacks full subjectivity, as do all the characters in *The Subterraneans*. The novella's Joycean stream of consciousness allows only a single subjectivity—that of authorial existential exploration; all others are the objects of that experience, no more or less than modes of testing the self. Yet Kerouac presented Mardou as the very symbol of the new consciousness, of resistance to the violence of America's history that was embedded, hidden, in 1950s affluence and felicitous consumption. "Quick to plunge, bite, put out the light," he wrote, "for it was she who later said 'Men are so crazy, they want the essence, the woman is the essence. . . . Instead they rush off and have big wars and consider women as prizes instead of human beings, well man I may be in the middle of all this shit but I certainly don't want any part of it' (in her sweet cultured hip tones of new generation)." Even as Percepied confesses that "still I have to rush off and construct construct—for nothing—for Baudelaire poems," Kerouac returned to Mardou as the subterranean conscience indicting the crimes of the nation and of the West:

She squats on the fence, thin drizzle making beads on her brown shoulders, stars in her hair, her wild now-Indian eyes now staring into the Black with a little fog emanating from her brown mouth, the misery like ice crystals on the blankets on the ponies of her Indian ancestors, the drizzle on the village long ago and the poorsmoke crawling out of the underground and when a mournful mother pounded acorns and made mush in hopeless millenniums—the song of the Asia hunting gang clanking down the final Alaskan rib of earth to New World Howls (in their eyes and in Mardou's eyes now the eventual Kingdom of Inca Maya and vast Azteca shining of gold snake and temples as noble as Greek, Egypt . . . till the Cortez Spaniards, the Pizarro weary old-world sissified pantalooned Dutch bums came smashing canebrake in savannahs to find shining cities of

²¹ Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*, 21-2.

Indian Eyes high, landscaped, boulevarded, ritualled, heralded, beflagged in that selfsame New World Sun the beating heart held up to it)—her heart beating in the Frisco rain, on the fence, facing last facts . . .

If Kerouac left Mardou alienated from her own heritage—if he failed to actualize Alene Lee’s full subjective history as an African-American woman within Mardou Fox—he nonetheless gave her the subjectivity of vision. As with “Percepied,” her “Indian Eyes” bore witness to history.²²

Despite his tendency to exoticize Black culture, Kerouac used Mardou’s race and gender to call for the public abdication of American moral superiority. In this, he denied the superiority of Western culture, sloughing off the White Man’s Burden with the assertion of “Inca Maya and vast Azteca shining of gold snake and temples as noble as Greek, Egypt.” This was partly a reflection of Kerouac’s outsider ethnic identity, what one scholar has termed an “antitriumphalist immigrant mysticism” growing from his Catholic French-Canadian background.²³ But it was also a Spenglerian rejection of Western technocracy as unalloyed progress—a failure made apparent in the horrors of the Bomb.

“This is the age of miracles,” proclaimed Henry Miller in his introduction to Grove Press’s original edition of *The Subterraneans*.

Day of wonders, when our men of science, aided and abetted by the high priests of the pentagon, give free instruction in the technique of mutual, but total, destruction. Progress, what! Make it into a readable novel, if you can. But don’t beef about life-and-letters if you’re a death-eater. Don’t tell us about good “clean”—no fallouts!—literature. Let the poets speak. They may be “beat,” but they’re not riding the atom-powered Juggernaut. Believe me, there’s nothing clean . . . about this age of wonders—except the telling. And the Kerouacs will probably have the last word.

²² *The Subterraneans*, 16-17, 25. Alene Lee did contribute directly to the novel, rewriting one scene. Even here, however, she is ultimately ventriloquized by Kerouac. As he wrote to editor Don Allen, Lee would give permission to publish “on condition now that she write up the chapter on ‘flipping’ she says how it really happened and *I can pop-bop-prose it from her version*.” [emphasis added] Jack Kerouac to Donald Allen, December 20, 1956, Box 66, Folder 5, Allen Papers, UCSD.

²³ John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 62, 186-7.

Celebrating the liberation of language itself, Miller crowned Kerouac the heir to Rabelais and Rimbaud, “always alive to the idiomatic lingo of his time.”²⁴ For Kerouac, “the word” was an extension of bar talk—even to the extent that he began to tape record private conversations in an effort to catch “the secret of LINGO in telling a tale,” as “the only way to express the speed and tension and ecstatic tomfoolery of the age.” According to Kerouac biographer Ann Charters, it was “as if Jack imagined himself in a bar drinking his sweet wine and telling a long, wild tale, his friends listening and shouting and urging him to go higher and higher.” In a letter to Miller in 1958, Kerouac proclaimed he wanted to write novels that echoed what “Trotsky said about Céline ‘He walked into literature like a guy coming into a bar and starting to talk to the entire mob at the barrail, in a loud voice.’”²⁵

Like Miller, the Beats mixed literary and sociopolitical radicalism with psychosexual experience. Of course, Kerouac’s notion of “spontaneous prose” was as much self-made myth as real technique. As he wrote to New Directions and Grove Press editor Donald Allen, after having finished “five exhausting nights correcting the galleys of *The Subterraneans* restoring the original freeflowing prose according to the original manuscript”: “Hemingway has nothing over me when it comes to persnickitiness about ‘craft.’”²⁶ Similarly, the notion of literary bars as sites of wild spontaneity was equally exaggerated. Instead, they were just as often *structuring* forces, offering a kind of routine and social attachment for those who were otherwise disconnected by their nonconformity.

²⁴ Henry Miller, “Preface to *The Subterraneans*,” in *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* ed. Anne Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 408-9.

²⁵ Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 171-2; Jack Kerouac to Henry Miller, c. Nov 1958, Box 27, Folder 2, Henry Miller Papers, (Collection 110), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

²⁶ Jack Kerouac to Donald Allen, November 11, 1957, Box 66, Folder 5, Allen Papers, UCSD.

Just as Blabbermouth Night and The Place gave structure to bohemian debates and Jack Spicer's poetic politics, the Beats relied on nightspots as familial sites, offering reliable environs for their aesthetic, sexual, and transnational explorations.

Such explorations were always more complicated for women, as nightspots sometimes held as much danger as shelter. As poet Sylvia Plath noted in her journal, her teenage wanderlust was blunted by the obstacle of fear, that being "a girl, a female, always in danger of assault," she was forced to temper her "consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors, and soldiers, barroom regulars—to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording . . . to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night."²⁷ Yet, as Ronna C. Johnson has argued, Beats such as Joyce Johnson resisted and reinvented this trope of "the road" as personal liberation. Johnson's first novel, *Come and Join the Dance* (1962), culminated with her semi-autobiographical protagonist's sexual awakening, followed by her move to Paris. The novel, Ronna Johnson suggests, "transgresses the road tale's traditions by making a women the protagonist of its quest narrative," by having her "authorize her own adventure." Moreover, travel to Europe and Asia was increasingly a real option for bohemian women, from Nemi Frost and Fran Herndon to Joanne Kyger, who sought to broaden their horizons of experience.²⁸

Kerouac's barroom prose and Joyce Johnson's Parisian plot device also highlight

²⁷ Quoted in Christina G. Larocco, "Fractured Front: Gender, Authenticity, and the Remaking of the American Left after World War Two," PhD. Diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2012, p. 244.

²⁸ Ronna C. Johnson, "'And then she went': Beat Departures and Feminine Transgression in Joyce Johnson's *Come and Join the Dance*," in Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, eds., *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 70, 88-9; See also: Nemi Frost Interview with Lewis Ellingham, East/West house, San Francisco, 1982, Box 6, Folder 9 and Fran Herndon Interview with Lewis Ellingham, June 6, 1982, San Francisco, Box 6, Folder 11, Papers of Writer Lewis Ellingham, MSS # 126, Box 4, Folder 7, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

the streak of nostalgia that ran through Beat writing, as they looked to the Old World as a source of cultural authority. Yet even this was not straightforward and was mixed with sometimes radical notions of global universalism and political consciousness. “The long street / which is the street of the world,” wrote Lawrence Ferlinghetti in *A Coney Island of the Mind*—a phrase which he borrowed from Miller’s *Into the Night Life*:

filled with all the people of the world . . . / spaghetti salesmen and sandwichmen /
milkmen and orators / boneless bankers / brittle housewives / sheathed in nylon
snobberies / deserts of advertising men . . . / all talking and talking / and walking
around . . . thru all the cities and all the scenes . . . / continents in rain / hungry Hong
Kongs / untellable Tuscaloosas / Oaklands of the soul / Dublins of the imagination . . . /
And the street goes rocking on / the train goes bowling on . . . / in all the streets of the
world / bowling along / thru the light of the world / . . . lost lights flashing / crowds at
carnivals / nightwood circuses.

Ferlinghetti—Sorbonne-educated (with a thesis on “the *city* as a symbol in modern poetry”) and rooted in San Francisco’s libertarian-anarchism—displayed an awareness of increasing globalization and raised the question of who would hold the reins of power. Calling for the next stage of society to be on a higher plane, he longed for “revolution with a capital E,” proclaiming that “capitalism has got to go,” to be replaced by a “supranational nonpolitical . . . form of humanitarian socialism.” These views sat cozily beside his embrace of the literary tradition as a form of resistance, a rejection of capitalism’s hunger for creative destruction and constant growth—the *conservative* aspect of Marxism. “Capitalism just lays waste to too many resources,” he concluded simply.²⁹

The Beat movement was woven through with multiple threads of anti-materialism, anti-militarism, and transnational political and aesthetic sensibilities. For Ginsberg, this was partly an extension of his interest in Spengler, whose often bizarre notions of

²⁹ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 71-2, 78; Interviews: “Lawrence Ferlinghetti I” (1969) and “Lawrence Ferlinghetti II” (1999) in David Meltzer, ed. *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 76-7, 84, 100.

“organic” cyclical history also contained surprising elements of proto-multiculturalism. Spengler insisted that the “empty figment of *one* linear history” belied “the drama of a *number* of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region” and each with “its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, decay, and never return.” Hints of Spengler are sprinkled throughout Ginsberg’s bitingly satirical 1956 poem, “America,” alongside healthy doses of international leftism and the “anarchist-wobbly tradition” which was “still a force among painters and writers” in San Francisco:

America when will we end the human war? / Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb . . . / When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites? / . . . America when will you send your eggs to India? . . . / Burroughs is in Tangier I don’t think he’ll come back it’s sinister / Are you being sinister or is this some form of practical joke? . . . / America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies / America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I’m not sorry. . . . / America I still haven’t told you what you did to Uncle Max after he came over from Russia. / . . . It occurs to me that I am America . . . / Asia is rising against me. / I haven’t got a chinaman’s chance. / I’d better consider my national resources. . . . / I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged who live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns. / I have abolished the warehouses of France, Tangiers is the next to go. . . . / America save the Spanish Loyalists / America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die / America I am the Scottsboro boys.

The poem closes with Ginsberg’s claim on identity that was inseparable from his rejection of the military-industrial complex, the declaration of an oppositional consciousness: “It’s true I don’t want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision parts factories, I’m nearsighted and psychopathic anyway / America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.”³⁰

As in Ginsberg’s “America,” a consistent theme in postwar bohemia was a

³⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality, Volume One* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 21-2, 111-13, 119; Allen Ginsberg to Louis Ginsberg, April 26, 1956, Box 7, Folder 15, Allen Ginsberg Papers, MS# 0487, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Allen Ginsberg, “America,” in *Collected Poems, 1947-1997* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 155-6. Spengler continued, arguing that “the series ‘ancient-medieval-modern history has at last exhausted its usefulness. . . . [as] it has become impossible to conceal the fact that this so-called history of the world is a limited history . . . of West-Central Europe.”

romantic, colorful evocation of Spanish culture, blended with Popular Front memory of its civil war—what Rexroth sneeringly called “cocktail Spain.”³¹ This was filtered through the lens of Hemingway’s war journalism and the Iberian excursions of *The Sun Also Rises*, and found its ubiquitous expression in bohemian pads with Miles Davis’s *Sketches of Spain* on the turntable and bullfight posters on the walls. A kind of radical romanticism was also visible (and audible) in Village bars, where according to activist-poet Tuli Kupferberg, anarchist groups like Resistance “were still living in the Spanish Civil War” or, as Michael Harrington recalled, veterans “sang about the Spanish Civil War rather than happy college days.”³² White Horse regular Dan Wakefield connected this left-Latin appeal to a broader range of radicalism, recalling that in the tavern’s back room, “the Irish rebellion and the Spanish civil war seemed to blend together in one grand battle of noble underdogs against tyrant oppressors . . . and any rousing song of freedom stood just as well for . . . any of us who had left home to come the Village.” Such romantic left-bohemianism was soon attached to Cuba, as Castro’s revolution in 1959 became, in Ferlinghetti’s words, “the Spanish Civil War of my generation.” Ned Polsky also noted this attraction, stating that “some beats became enamored of Fidel Castro, and not only because of his tweaking the lion’s tail; they also concluded that he must be hip and use marihuana because he sported a ragged beard and refused to wear a suit. These beats became quickly disenchanted with Castro as soon as his particular brand

³¹ Kenneth Rexroth to Lawrence Lipton, January 15, 1953, Box 2, Folder 5, Lipton Papers, UCLA.

³² David M. Earle, *All Man!: Hemingway, 1950s Men’s Magazines, and the Masculine Persona* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2009), 49, 63-5; Albert Goldman, from the journalism of Lawrence Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!* (New York: Random House, 1971), 56; Alice Denham, *Sleeping with Bad Boys: A Juicy Tell-All of Literary New York in the Fifties and Sixties* (No Location: Book Republic Press, 2006), 28; Ronald Sukenick, *Down and In: Life in the Underground* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987), 22; Michael Harrington, *Fragments of the Century* (New York: Saturday Review Press/E. P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 35. Richard Reuss argues that Spanish Civil War songs were an early aspect of Popular Front solidarity culture. Richard A. Reuss and JoAnne C. Reuss. *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 118-19.

of authoritarianism set in.”³³

This antiauthoritarianism was also expressed in the Beat revolution of consciousness, which Gary Snyder detailed for Japanese left-intellectuals in the magazine *Chuo-koron* in 1960—an attempt to bring Beat sensibilities into “the just-beginning Japanese industrial renaissance and rising affluence.” He began by describing the 6 Gallery reading as a seminal moment, after which “there was a poetry reading in somebody’s pad, or some bar or gallery, every week in San Francisco.” He continued, placing Beat consciousness at the center of liberatory postwar global politics and soaked in the language of universalism:

We had a sudden feeling we had finally broken through to a new freedom of expression . . . beyond the tedious and pointless arguments of Bolshevik versus capitalist that were (and still are) draining the imaginative life out of so many intellectuals in the world. What we had discovered, or rediscovered, was that the imagination has a free and spontaneous life of its own, that it can be trusted . . . and that this is more basic and more revolutionary than any political program based on “civilized abstractions” that end up murdering human beings in the name of historical necessity or Reason or Liberty; Russia and America are both huge witless killers of the heart of man.

Snyder further detailed the Beats’ transnational psychogeography and its social networks: “This new generation . . . traveled easily, bumming from New York to Mexico City to San Francisco—the big triangle—and traveled light. They stayed with friends in San Francisco’s North Beach or on New York’s Lower East Side (the Greenwich Village of the beat, really a slum)—and made their money at almost any kind of work.” He concluded by claiming “the beat generation as another aspect of the perpetual ‘third force’ that has been moving through history with its own values of community, love, and

³³ Wakefield quoted in Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 84; Interview: “Lawrence Ferlinghetti I” (1969) in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat*, 69; Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*, 157. Ginsberg also asserted in 1961 that “to my generation, the Cuban scene is similar to the old Spanish Civil War scene—with many of the same stresses and interior conflicts.” See Allen Ginsberg, *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, Bill Morgan, ed. (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), 245.

freedom,” linking it with Gnostic and Taoist mysticism, as well as the literary past of Thoreau, Whitman, and Miller, and the philosophies of existentialism and Zen Buddhism. “The beat generation can be seen as an aspect of the worldwide trend for intellectuals to consider the nature of the human individual, existence, personal motives, the qualities of love and hatred, and the means of achieving wisdom,” he affirmed. “It would do no harm if some of their attitudes came to liven up the poets of Japan.”³⁴

The literary connotations of the New Saloon were intimately tied to this transnational radical consciousness. Ferlinghetti’s City Lights bookstore was originally part of the Black Cat-Iron Pot milieu, an extension of North Beach’s bohemian-literary history and the Rebel Cafe’s anarchist principles of maintaining independent oppositional voices and mutual aid, which continued at Vesuvio and The Place. Yet change was also visible, aesthetically and socially. As Ferlinghetti concluded in “Pictures of the Gone World” (1955):

love comes harder to the aged / because they’ve been running / on the same old rails too long . . . / while the bright saloon careens along away . . . / its windows full of bluesky and lovers . . . / whispering to each other / and looking out and / wondering what graveyard / where the rails end.

In bohemian bars, these notions could be put on public display—as Kerouac portrayed in *The Subterraneans*, situating himself within the literary psychogeography of the Village-as-North Beach. “Around the corner from the Mask to 13 Pater,” he declared, the fictionalized 12 Adler symbolizing the community’s contradictory currents, “a dike bar slummish now and nothing to it, where a year ago there were angels in red shirts straight

³⁴ Gary Snyder, “Notes on the Beat Generation,” in Anne Charters, ed., *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 516-21.

out of Genet and Djuna Barnes.”³⁵

Genet, Céline, Spengler, and even Miller himself were part of an oppositional usable past; they interpellated America for the Beats and allowed them an outside view of their own culture by use of a literary imaginary. Yet this sat in tension with the literary advances the Beats proposed. *The Subterraneans* was the closest Kerouac ever came to true spontaneous prose, and many of his editorial efforts strove to “allow the subconscious to admit its own uninhibited interesting necessary and so ‘modern’ language what conscious art would censor.” This was bound up with a notion of “rebellion” that simultaneously embraced the vernacular of the jazz club—with Kerouac exhorting Don Allen to join him at the Five Spot “with Cecil Taylor on piano, playing wild Bartok chords”—and the past of Goethe, Proust, Balzac, and Rimbaud. The Rebel Cafes of North Beach similarly offered Peter Orlovsky the chance to put his poetic identity on public display, along with his brother Lafcadio. “I took him to The Place last Saturday,” he wrote to Ginsberg, “and I’ll be damned if he didn’t look like Rimbaud sitting there, the exact same pose Rimbaud had in that painting with all the old poets.” Ginsberg simply acknowledged, “I want to be Balzac in New York.”³⁶

“THERE IS A GOD DYING IN AMERICA”: THE REBEL CAFE AND THE BEATS ABROAD

In 1957-8, the core of the Beat Generation, intent on experiencing this cultural viewpoint firsthand and flush with early success—if not huge royalty checks—made their

³⁵ Interview: “Lawrence Ferlinghetti I” (1969) in Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat*, 89-91; Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, 78, 84-5; Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*, 84-5. This milieu included the mundane as well. As Ferlinghetti recalled of his time living in Paris, “I lived with the family of an old Communist” on Place Voltaire, “in the workers’ part of town.” He then took a place in Montparnasse, which he found by chance when he “met a plumber in a bar” who needed to vacate the cellar apartment. See also Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “City Lights,” in “Whole Earth Catalog” <http://www.wholeearth.com/issue/2097/article/82/city.lights> (accessed June 30, 2013).

³⁶ Kerouac to Allen, March 19, 1957 undated “Dear Don” (c. Winter 1958), and December 20, 1956, Box 66, Folder 5, Allen Papers, UCSD; Orlovsky to Ginsberg, undated (c. 1958-9), Box 4, Folder 41, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford; Ginsberg to Orlovsky, undated “Dear Peter, sweet Peter,” 1958, Box 4, Folder 14 Ginsberg Papers, Columbia.

way to Europe and Tangiers, where William Burroughs had settled. “So I think what my next work will be,” Kerouac wrote to Don Allen, “I’ll get an advance from whoever wants to make it, say a grand, and go to Paris and write a huge halo for Balzac’s Paris . . .” Soon after Ginsberg’s European arrival he wrote from Spain, interweaving the literary imaginary with romantic leftism and a whirlwind of subterranean nightspots:

I took long walks and double deck buses by big filmy fountains and wide Mexico City downtown Madrid streets and back to Porta del Sol old-time center and new hep center of town . . . and into Genet’s Barrio Chino, swinging cheap slum, half gothic, half bombed out (Spanish Civil War, and my father’d written a poem then “When the Bombs fell on Barcelona Burst (1937) / I was 10 thousand miles away / but all the walls around me cracked / and fell apart in disarray”), whorehouses, little art restaurants . . . and Rembrantesque workingman’s restaurants . . .

Ginsberg concluded disappointedly, however, that while he was “digging” the “Spanish sidewalk cafes and gay mall life,” he “went out but couldn’t find any wild Genet life.”³⁷

Throughout their often drunken antics, the Beats sought connections with European literary figures and landmarks, even as American saloons served as familiar touchstones. In 1957, Ginsberg wrote to Peter Orlovsky and Alan Ansen that he began his tour of Rome with a “big round of bars,” where “the people are fascinating.” In London the following spring, it was “Big Bars & Pubs & I talked to everybody beautiful all nite.” Back in Paris, determined to “meet other oldtime literary people here & get out more”—between museums and a series of late-night drug-hazed “soultalks” and sex with “hipsters” and bohemians, male and female—Ginsberg met poets and political dissidents in places like the Bonaparte Cafe. These were also sites of sexual adventure. “I went out & got drunk in queer bar Carrefour (near Fiacre—remember the glass front & juke & arabs & boys),” he wrote to Orlovsky, noting the psychogeography of Paris. After a series of

³⁷ Kerouac to Allen, September 16, 1958, Box 66, Folder 5, Allen Papers, UCSD; Ginsberg to Kerouac, August 13, 1957, Ginsberg, *Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, 159, 164-5.

“long talks” with friends Ginsberg “picked up an Arab boy, friendly in the Bonaparte with them, we kept drinking, he came home with me.” Quickly, however, “I saw he was going only to rob me. . . . I was too careless & drunk & wanting to vomit to care.”³⁸

After popping back to London with Gregory Corso, where they gave a pair of controversial poetry readings and cavorted with Soho characters at bars like Mandrake’s and Clochard’s, Ginsberg returned to Paris, where he and Burroughs connected with the Cabaret Voltaire Dadaists. Having “met some of the old geniuses—Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray & Benjamin Peret” at a party, Ginsberg and Burroughs “got drunk & conversed with Duchamp, finally kissed him & made him kiss Bill” and “begging his blessing . . . since he always was interested in Duchamp’s dada style, high style, & puns & destructive wise intelligence—but with us he kept insisting he was only human, which I liked in him.”

Ginsberg continued, further reveling in Montmartre’s literary-cafe heritage:

Also the day before at Deux Magots we met Tristan Tzara who actually was the most interesting of them—in a way the best writer—I’ve been reading his Dada manifestos carefully for the first time and they are good poetry (one famous phrase—Dada is a virgin Microbe)—but I see he essentially realized that Dada was very similar to Buddhism—that is that the weird incomprehensible jokes of Dada are very similar to the Zen Koans—like Duchamp’s birdcage is to language the same as the goose in the bottle to poetry—a riddle to free the mind.³⁹

More matter-of-factly, Ginsberg captured a glimpse of Parisian psychogeography when he wrote to Don Allen, suggesting that a bookstore located “between Deux Magots & [the Cafe] Flor[e]” would be a prime site to sell Grove Press editions.⁴⁰ When fellow Bay

³⁸ Allen Ginsberg to Peter Orlovsky and Alan Ansen, March 23, 1957, Allen Ginsberg to Peter Orlovsky, February 27, 1958, Series I, Box 1, Folder 3, and February 15, 1957 [*sic*] (1958) and March 16, 1958, Box 1, Folder 4, Peter Orlovsky Papers, MSS# 0954, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Butler Library, Columbia University.

³⁹ Ginsberg to Orlovsky, June 15, 1958, Box 1, Folder 4, Orlovsky Papers, Columbia.

⁴⁰ Allen Ginsberg to Donald Allen, November 13, 1957, Box 64, Folder 8, Allen Papers, UCSD. Ginsberg also reported that he wanted Allen’s help getting published in the USSR as a form of cultural exchange, excitedly referring to publishing in the home of Dostoyevsky’s subterraneans as “intercultural miasmas.” Previously, Allen had written to Ginsberg, recommending that he make contact with Peggy Guggenheim, as “there’s always a large American colony around Florence and Venice,” and that he was currently

Area poet Maya Angelou first visited Paris in 1953, she also found the milieu remarkably familiar. Going to the cafe where “F. Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway did some flamboyant talking and serious drinking,” the “cafe’s wide windows were bare of curtains” and the “boreness of the bar surprised me.” “It could have been the Coffee Shop in San Francisco’s North Beach,” she said, if it were not for “a canvas awning on which was stenciled the romantic name DEUX MAGOTS.”⁴¹

Meanwhile, Orlovsky reported to Corso that Kerouac was disappointed with Tangiers and had returned home. Corso persisted, undaunted in his search for a literary usable past. “Yes, I went to Rimbaud’s room, when I first came to Paris,” Corso replied. He continued with a bizarre story of his dramatic debut on the Left Bank scene, which has since become enshrined in Beat lore. On his arrival from southern Europe, Corso “stood in front of the Deux Magots (big cafe here where all girls and bohemians and creeps hang out) I put [a] gun to my head and laughed and called everyone a dirty sonofabitch for letting me starve in Nice.” After dodging the police, “I ran back to cafe and broke down crying and was very drunk and wanted to die, but didn’t.”⁴²

Of course, the notion of radical continuity often ran in reverse, with North Beach proclaiming itself the heir to Europe’s former cultural capital. “So we would go across town to The Place, and they would have their Blabbermouth Nights which were really Dada demonstrations,” painter Wally Hedrick recalled. “We didn’t know it at the time, but it was just a rerun of Zurich, 1912-1914, where people could get up and say anything

working on translations of the poet Leopold Senghor, founder of Negritude and compatriot of Césaire. “Mad long Lorca-Whitman lines about the Congo, New York, etc.,” he wrote, “all to be chanted with drums and African instruments.” Ibid, May 15, 1957.

⁴¹ Maya Angelou, *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 535.

⁴² Gregory Corso to Peter Orlovsky, undated “Dear Peter” (c. 1958), Box 1, Folder 1, Orlovsky Papers, Columbia University.

they want and then everybody'd pound on the tables and drink their beer and just generally raise hell." Even within the US, exotic and unfamiliar places were given this gloss. In 1955, Orlovsky had written to Ginsberg, as he traveled with Elise Cowen from New York to New Orleans, and described the "Art Area, the Bourbon place, like Black Cat in S.F." where they "talked with [a] few Artists," wandering "to everyone else's table" in the "static stickey [*sic*] atmosphere of Cat."⁴³

At times, the feeling of dislocation and sentimental longing for community surfaced between the lines of the Beats' European missives. Always conscious of The Place's aesthetic and communal connotations, Ginsberg wrote an open letter from Paris in 1958 to be displayed at Robert LaVigne latest art showing. Recalling LaVigne's work, such as "Scene in Foster's," and "The Dangerous Garden, which Hung in the Place," he bemoaned his inability to attend: "Now a new exhibit—I wonder if anyone in SF will pick up on his genius this time. If I were there I'd try to write about it precisely—as I did, composing a long private poem form him to hang on the Place wall with the Dangerous Garden. . . . I wish with all those drear streets and yelling about art and poetry and beat and renaissance, it will be recognized that this is It . . . I wish I were there to cry at his opening—the years are too short to let them go by without understanding."⁴⁴

By this time, Ginsberg was pining to return to Orlovsky in New York, where he also hoped that a round of psychotherapy might bring "more liberation." But through the course of his European sojourn, interactions with a variety of avant-garde and oppositional figures had heightened his apocalyptic political consciousness. He wrote to

⁴³ Oral history interview with Wally Hedrick, 1974 June 10-24, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 12-18; Orlovsky to Ginsberg, undated "Friday 6:00 PM" (1955), Box 4, Folder 38, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford.

⁴⁴ Allen Ginsberg, "Preface to Robert LaVigne's *Lion Exhibition*," May 25, 1958, Box 1, Folder 10, Robert LaVigne Papers, MS#0747, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Butler Library, Columbia University.

Orlovsky about “how everyone, underground, getting hip or enlightened while both Official Ameroca [*sic*] & Russia put out more shit trying to keep war going.” Ginsberg continued, proposing a bold, if naive, universalist vision of transformed global consciousness that also addressed Kerouac’s apolitical aesthetic:

Tell Jack, I will write Politics poems, but addressed to soulhip underground, saying we all, Amer. & Russ., should stop with arbitrary conceptions of self-ideanity [*sic*] identity with illusory Governments & their wars. I . . . am not writing pro communist polemics liberals, but Bill & I hatching big lamby revolution against the Senders & Powerdrags on both sides. . . . Bill says the answer is not in Politics, I agree, tell Jack don’t worry, I will write Bible saying why doth Jerusalem war against Arabia, and why doth Arabia prepare spears against Albion, and why doth Dulles preach sexless Christ to the crucified Tonkenese . . . Pretty Bibles to tell everyone it’s here, at hand & foot.

And just as he had situated Tzara’s ideas within his own notions of Eastern mysticism, Ginsberg simultaneously put his Continental experiences into a familiar psychogeography, comparing Soho to “Time Sq.-Village” and the “yond hip cats of Allemande”—who call “everybody ‘Man’”—with a mix of American expatriates who “stay up all joint night babbling in Halles . . . and in front Iris, one pornography writer girl, and Al the Shades Levett, drummer, and a spade named Money, and another tall blond nervous hype with a west mustache like Frisco.”⁴⁵

Jazz clubs also provided familiar frames of reference for the Beats’ peripatetic explorations, maintaining social connections and even contextualizing transnational experiences. As Ginsberg casually wrote to Ferlinghetti that he “saw Ronnie Bladen in Jazz Joint on 3rd Ave.” in New York, instantly communicating the tenor of the evening and noting the position of a mutual North Beach friend within the bicoastal bohemia. And in September 1957, a newly mustachioed Orlovsky wrote to a mutual friend that Kerouac was back from Tangiers, staying in an apartment in the Village, “Tho he’s likely to be at

⁴⁵ Ginsberg to Orlovsky, May 30, 1958, June 8, 1958, and April 1, 1958, Box 1, Folder 4, Orlovsky Papers, Columbia University.

the Five Spot more.” Ginsberg also made the nightclub underground a source for stateside contact during his extensive travels abroad, writing from Tangier to ask about the latest news at the Cellar (which “sounds charming. Everybody must be having a ball.”) and later proclaiming, “I do think India is really great—all North Beach should move to Rishikesh . . . Like the greatest moments of jazz, spontaneous telepathic excitement & freedom.” Similarly, the poet Dora Dull wrote to Jack Spicer in 1961 that she preferred Munich to Paris because it was like a “big north beach area—lots of bars, jazz, pinball & all young kids all getting drunk every night & looking fresh & beautiful next day—their trouble was no leader—thought Henry Miller the great white light.”⁴⁶

Throughout *On the Road*, Kerouac structured scenes around jazz clubs, from Birdland to the Fillmore’s “Little Harlem” district, as places for hedonistic “kicks” and cross-racial interaction, anchoring the bicoastal “underground beat generation” with destinations that marked the (psycho)geographical “end of America.” This also included invocations of transnational bohemia. In a central moment of the novel, as Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty spend a pair of days spilling in and out of nightclubs listening to “the great jazz of Frisco,” they decide to leave the “motherless feverish life across America” for redemption in Italy. “We’ll go dig all the crazy women of Rome, Paris, all those places,” Paradise declares, “we’ll sit at sidewalk cafes; we’ll live in whorehouses.” In 1957, Kerouac wrote to Joyce Johnson, pleading with her to join him in Mexico rather than going to San Francisco, asking: what could she see in North Beach that was not already in the Village? Mexico, by contrast was “new and foreign and strange.” And

⁴⁶ Allen Ginsberg to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, December 7, 1956 and April 3, 1957, Box 5, Folder 1, and Ginsberg to John Kelley, June 26, 1962, Box 5, Folder 3, City Lights Books Records; Peter Orlovsky to Henry Schlachler, September 4, 1957, Box 1, Folder 23, Orlovsky Papers, Columbia; Dora Dull to Jack Spicer, undated (1961), Box 2, Folder 3, Spicer Papers, Berkeley.

besides, when they got tired of its exoticism, its “sex-orgy” white-tiled hotels and Aztec pyramids, they could go dancing in “mad joints with 10¢ beers.”⁴⁷

For *On the Road*'s Sal Paradise, Mexico was a Spenglerian land of “Apocalypse of the fellaheen,” whose difference from the staid US validated his rebellion. “Just like we are but with a difference of their own,” proclaimed Paradise, Mexico was “one vast Bohemian camp.” While radical bohemians such as Ginsberg, John Allen Ryan, and Knute Stiles were typically less exuberant, many sojourned south of the border to soak in the local culture, from Mayan ruins to marijuana, the “sour stink of pulque saloons,” the sounds of “street bands, fireworks,” and cafes full of “marimba musicians.”⁴⁸ Equally (if not more) important, the strong dollar made the global South attractive financially, allowing them to stretch savings or GI Bill funds. Yet some were not immune from the temptation to exploit economic advantages: sexual tourism was not uncommon. Burroughs was notorious for bringing “Arab boys” to his house in Tangiers in exchange for a relative pittance. And Gary Snyder wrote to Ginsberg from Japan in 1957, describing his exploits in cynically masculine tones, “balls being alike everywhere & never quite as entertaining as they should be, there’s no use in describing all the whores, bars, dirty movies, sexual exhibitions (between girls with a giant two-way dildo) etc I took in, Tokyo is a mad city of nihilistic workmen who have no money & no hope so they spend what they do earn on millions of little bars and whorehouses while their wives sit at home in frayed kimonos wringing their roughyhands in chilly rooms over feeble

⁴⁷ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 54, 126-9, 188-93, 251; Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 177.

⁴⁸ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 230-35, 248; John Allen Ryan to Allen Ginsberg, August 1, 1955, Box 5, Folder 15, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford. See also William S. Burroughs, *Queer* (New York: Viking, 1985) and Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse*, 180-86.

charcoal fires & weeping.”⁴⁹

Mostly, however, bohemians simply sought connection, feeling solidarity with those who, like themselves, did not fit the mainstream “American” mold. Nightspots, as always, provided places of interaction, in addition to offering less intrusive environs to connect with fellow anarchists. “Saturday night I took my first night tour alone in the city, found one Bohemian type jernt right on the Reforma—the main drag,” Ryan wrote to Spicer from Oaxaca in 1955, “stays open 24 hours . . . piano upstairs and down, fancy and unfancy whores of both sexes, a lot of old queens from the big US companies here, some college students, a few crazy people, and a couple of kids.” He continued, describing an interaction that exemplifies both the identification with and sense of difference from the “fellaheen” that separated bohemians from the vulgar “tourists”—who often simply pestered locals—even as they drank in the exotic Other: “I got myself very drunk . . . had a long talk in Spanish with a Mixican [*sic*] whore who claimed the name of Yagga Middleberg (she was quite definitely an Indio), and betook myself home at five [*sic*].” Ryan wrote to Ginsberg that he and Knute Stiles, with whom he was sharing a house on an isolated hillside, often went into the nearby town to “drink & talk & watch the people.”⁵⁰

During his own Mexican sojourn the previous year, Ginsberg had conjured Spenglerian sensibilities in his poem, “Siesta in Xbalba,” with allusions to the “impossible syntax of apocalypse,” the ruins of Chichen Itza, “cocks a thousand old grown over with moss,” and “alien hieroglyphs of Eternity.” But Ginsberg’s reverie is jolted back into familiarity and memory, “an eternal kodachrome souvenir of a gathering,”

⁴⁹ Gary Snyder to Allen Ginsberg, January 7, 1957, Box 5, Folder 25, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford.

⁵⁰ John Allen Ryan to Jack Spicer, October 10, 1955, Box 3, Folder 27, Spicer Papers, Berkeley; Ryan to Ginsberg, June 28, 1955, Box 5, Folder 15, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford.

images of “a great party in the apartments of New York,” saturated with “cigarettes, suggestions, laughter in drunkenness, broken sweet conversation . . . the culture of my generation.” The poem expressed a dialectic of identification and difference, reflecting the New World in decay as a passage through the Old World:

So I dream nightly of embarkation . . . / Brooklyn across the waters . . . / As Europe is my own imagination . . . / though it's only the old familiar world . . . / I see that continent in rain, / black streets, old night, a / fading monument . . . / toward ports of childish geography . . . / What vagrant rooms and streets / and lights and in the long night / urge my expectation? What genius / of sensation in ancient / halls? What jazz beyond jazz / in future blue saloons? / what love in the cafes of God? . . . / the motionless buildings / of New York rotting / under the tides of heaven.

“There is a god,” Ginsberg declared, “dying in America.” As a North Beach newcomer in 1955, he sent “Siesta” to Ryan in Oaxaca seeking approval. “As to the feeling of being in similar places myself—yes!” Ryan replied. “The same visions of big city parties come to me often here.”⁵¹

For the Beats, nightclubs and cafes were often a refuge of familiarity in an otherwise ever-changing landscape—even as Dora Dull’s letter hinted that the European cultural geography had adopted more and more American landmarks. American culture—including Beat literature itself—was rapidly filtering into Europe, making the task of cultural translation easier for those on both sides of the Atlantic. “Lots of crazy looking girls in Paris, but they dig new sports cars and American actors,” Corso complained, “not poets or angels.” By 1959, when *Neurotica* publisher and Crystal Palace owner Jay Landesman traveled from St. Louis to London, he found that the “angry young men were well on the way to the English marketplace, but it was the American Beats they were buying.” Landesman also disclosed his own psychogeography, which lingered from his younger days in New York. “By accident we walked into the Markham

⁵¹ Ginsberg, 105-13; Ryan to Ginsberg, August 1, 1955, Box 5, Folder 15, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford.

Arms on Kings Road and we thought we were back in a Greenwich Village bar of the early Fifties,” he recalled. “The accents might have been different, but the conversation was early Beatnik. When I mentioned Kerouac and Ginsberg, they knew more about them than I did.”⁵² Of course, this process was not uncontested. As historian Richard Pells has argued, Europeans (and, presumably, Asians and Africans) were “able to preserve [their] cultural distinctiveness no matter how strong the temptation to imitate America,” through a “process of resistance and modification.” Yet, as Pells also suggests, the US counterculture was one of the most absorbed aspects of American cultural imperialism—perhaps because it contained within it an inherent resistance to domination, the essence of democratic freedom.⁵³

Echoing Gary Snyder’s expansive view of the Beat movement, Burroughs asserted that a “whole migrant generation arose from Kerouac’s *On the Road* to Mexico, Tangier, Afghanistan, India.” Such statements tell us less about the Beats’ actual global influence than about how they saw themselves. Yet they were influential in very particular ways. The Beats functioned as transnational, socially-Freudian symbols, but on *American* terms, with an implicit insistence that transformation would radiate from the US outward, even as they situated this millenarianism within a challenge to notions of American infallibility. Their glorification of experience, travel, and “the real” questioned the idea that simply consuming the news—and thinking, or even talking, about it—meant Americans were solving the world’s problems, when the reality was much more

⁵² Gregory Corso to Peter Orlovsky, undated “Dear Peter” (c. 1958), Box 1, Folder 1, Orlovsky Papers, Columbia University; Jay Landesman, *Rebel without Applause* (New York: Paragon House, 1987), 239.

⁵³ Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), xiv, xv, 239-43, 246-52, 283-91. See also Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It’s So French: Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

complicated. The Beat desire for difference, coupled with an equal desire for community, was a recognition of the complexities and limitations of politics—the art of devising ways for humans to live together despite their conflicting interests and struggles for power—even as their universalism paralleled the pluralism of North Beach and the Village. With *difference* came both opposition and unity, as the Beats mobilized transnational alliances within the familiar framework of bohemian identity as a tactic of resistance to the mainstream. As Ginsberg wrote from Chile in 1960, “I’m really getting to know Santiago as if it were a little San Francisco.” Detailing the aesthetic feuds among the Chilean poets he had befriended, Ginsberg couched his account in terms reminiscent of the fractious but familial community of North Beach: “Parra thinks he’s greater than Lorca but he looks like a big fat old Kenneth Patchen. Rokha is jealous and always fighting with Neruda—calling him a degenerate senile betrayer of the people—it’s just like S.F.”⁵⁴

“THE MOST ABSOLUTE COMMUNION WE KNOW ON EARTH”

Beat literature did provide a “map to revolution” for neophyte readers. But, as always, the revolutionaries were not immune from the upheavals they produced. On a local level, print culture complicated the beatnik phenomenon, making it public, taking some measure of control away from the bohemian denizens of North Beach and the Village, and exposing the problem of exclusive “community.” As Robert Duncan’s social theory of “re-membering Mother” suggests, the appearance of any serious separation between bohemia and the mainstream was an illusion; they were two sides of the same coin, united by their opposition.

⁵⁴ William S. Burroughs, “Remembering Jack Kerouac,” in Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 63; Ginsberg to Orlovsky, c. January, 1960, Box 1, Folder 5, Orlovsky Papers, Columbia University.

As Beat literature and the press publicized bohemian lifeways, an influx of tourists to bohemia solidified the New Saloon's socially-Freudian role. Many came aboard Gray Line bus tours, which spotlighted beatniks as exotic commodities and stopped at nightclubs such as the hungry i. "The Beat Generation is being kept by the squares," said the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1958. "Their regular forays into North Beach have made commercial successes of a half-dozen Beat bars or delicatessens. Their interest has earned for them the Beat nickname of 'Week-End Bohemians.' Why are these Week-End Bohemians interested in the Beat Generation?"

Said one poet: "These squares usually are highly literate, thinking people. They've held steady jobs all their lives, making payments on their new cars, getting all hung up with child psychology and income taxes and fancy clothes and bills, bills, bills, doing their best to live the kind of lives someone else says they SHOULD live.

"And now, suddenly, they've begun to wonder whether the rat race is really worth it. To a Beat nonconformist, this growing unrest is encouraging." . . .

"I'm a nurse," said one recently at The Cellar. . . . "and I'm going to keep nursing."

She smoothed her black skirt and continued: "But I don't like being told by Madison Avenue what I should think and what I should buy and who I should vote for. Sometimes it's hard to be independent . . . There are times when you feel the pressure they are putting on you to make you like and think like everyone else. When that happens, I come into North Beach.

"After a few hours listening to the Beatniks—they're against EVERYTHING, you know—it's easy for me to go home and live with my quiet little protests."

Lurking beneath such "quiet little protests" also were questions of transgressive sexuality and challenges to Judeo-Christian nuclear-family "Togetherness." "I'm too moral for all this crazy sleeping around," the nurse said. "I like to date men, not women." Showing bohemia's psychosocial function, she concluded that "it's good to know that there ARE nonconformists who go all the way."⁵⁵

It is easy to see why Week-End Bohemianism was perceived as socio-sexual voyeurism by North Beach or Village residents who had come seeking freedom from

⁵⁵ Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 161; Brown, "Life and Love Among the Beatniks," 4-6.

prying eyes. Yet the lines between insider and outsider were not drawn so clearly. For many gays and lesbians, open sexuality carried economic as well as social threats, making bohemia a welcome safe space. “I have a good job and I don’t want to lose it,” said one San Franciscan. “But by the weekend the masquerade gets to be too much. I want to be with my own kind. So I pull on an old sweater and come into the Beach and have dinner in one of the gay little restaurants and just look around and realize I’m not alone.” Even this aspect of North Beach was multidimensional. As gay activist George Mendenhall recalled, “Occasionally I used to go out there on a bus, and I guess I used to enjoy watching all that like I was a tourist in my own city, but I never got into it or took part.”⁵⁶

Race further complicated the psychosexual dynamic. As cultural historian Richard Cándida Smith has argued, the popular Beat image “vicariously satisfied needs for rebellion, while enforcing the correctness of responsible behavior” by artificially separating bohemia from the larger society.⁵⁷ However, Cándida Smith misses the racialization of this discourse, again by both sides, as conservatives mobilized blackness as a sign of degeneracy and bohemians used Black culture as an anti-bourgeois weapon. The press rarely covered bohemia without suggesting that “Some Beatniks are satisfied only by inter-racial love-making.” Euro-American bohemians themselves held problematic ideas about cross-racial taboos, affirming that attraction to blackness was part of “the existentialist thing, the death-wish” and that “the Negro represents the primitive.” To “wed the primitive” was to eschew “the trappings of modern life.” But Black bohemians, many of whom also arrived seeking social space and personal

⁵⁶ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 125.

⁵⁷ Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, 156-7.

liberation, or work in the jazz clubs, seldom gained a voice in the mainstream press, which usually posed them as symbols of white rebellion. Of course, this public discourse was divided from the lived experience of Black bohemians. “Suddenly, I *was* free, I felt,” recalled Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) of his arrival in the Village. “I could do anything I could conceive of.” Yet even Baraka knew that this freedom was contained within the bounds of the Village and that south of 4th Street he risked violent attack by racist residents.⁵⁸

TOURISM, TRANSNATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE EXPANSION OF NEW BOHEMIA

Aspiring artists often hoped Village bars would help legitimate their talents. Jazz collector Ernest Smith, who came to New York to be a painter in the mid-1950s, stated that he hung out at the Cedar “hoping to run into de Kooning and people like that.” And as early as 1953, Dylan Thomas’ casual mention to audiences that he drank at the White Horse began a deluge of “every English major in the Northeast corridor.” The Thomas-White Horse case illustrates the complexity of this nocturnal phenomenon. The Welsh poet only frequented bohemian bars when visiting the States on reading tours, leading one Villager to insist that, “The White Horse was already well established before Dylan Thomas went there. I mean he was like a tourist . . . [and] people took him there because that was the place to go.”⁵⁹ While it does appear that it was the nightspot where he felt “most of all, at home,” Thomas was almost as likely to be found in one of many Midtown bars, or at Goodie’s or the Remo in the Village (although he did express a distaste for the uptown Rainbow Room). Rather, it was his “Dionysian” public image, and death after a last beer at the Horse, that proved most significant. “The tight-ass Eisenhower age needed

⁵⁸ Brown, “Life and Love Among the Beatniks,” 4-6; Sukenick, *Down and In*, 18.

⁵⁹ Whitney Balliett, “All-Consuming,” *The New Yorker*, November 25, 1961, p. 46; Michael Harrington, *Fragments of the Century* (New York: Saturday Review Press/E. P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 46; Sukenick, *Down and In*, 46.

a Dionysus real bad,” asserted one White Horse poet, “and Thomas was elected it. Right. Thomas was the man who relived that myth for us, in the flesh, the poet as provocateur of joy, frenzy, drugs, drink, and sex.” The result was that “Thomas was torn to pieces by the throng, destroyed by his public.” By 1954, Judith Malina, who the year before had fled a boring symposium for the White Horse “if only to hear Dylan carry on,” complained privately that the crowd attracted by his mythical status was “ruining a perfectly good bar.”⁶⁰

Bohemian rebellion’s primary aim was to establish an alternative to the dominant postwar paradigm of consumerism. Among the Village’s Abstract Expressionists, for instance, there was a concern to maintain “complete control” of the “10th Street social scene”—an effort to keep it “pristine pure”—or at least delimit access to “outsiders with a genuine interest in art, and not sensation-seeking tourists.” As places of convergence for both tourists and artistic hopefuls, Village nightspots were arenas where the boundaries of inclusion were contested. As the *Village Voice*’s John Wilcock noted in 1961, “probably the first bastion that will fall to the enemy, is the Cedar Street Tavern,” where “for the first time in years, the artists are beginning to be outnumbered by sight-seers—for much the same reasons, one assumes, as the White Horse is filled on weekends by posthumous worshippers of Dylan Thomas.”⁶¹

While the “Cedar Tavern’s memorial celebrity” was Jackson Pollock, who died in 1956, the bar’s regulars like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline drew aspirants through the late 1950s. As evoked in Fielding Dawson’s “Emotional Memoir,” encounters

⁶⁰ John Malcolm Brinnan, *Dylan Thomas in America: An Intimate Journal* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 189, 248, 263-9, 145-6, 12, 21, 44; Sukenick, *Down and In*, 47-8; Malina, *Diaries*, 300, 320.

⁶¹ John Wilcock, *The Village Square* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1961), 170-1.

between artists and admirers in the city's nightspots—a dialectic between fame and the aura of culturally hallowed ground—offered validation and authority to both, confirmed by a usable past that he eerily portrayed as his possession by the spirit of T.E. Lawrence:

“Nell, this is Fielding Dawson. He went to—” . . .

“FIELDING!” Her dry tight lips sprang open, shrieked.

“DAWSON! . . . Her body rose, she brought open palms together in a clap and fell on the barstool bubbling.

“I’ve read some of your WRITING!” . . . I felt my old narrow crack split open and angle rapidly across my back, down my spine . . . and out of the corner of my eye I saw a thin man with his face in a shadow rise from a booth, and start toward the bar. . . .

I realized a sigh of submission, as T.E. Lawrence, as he slipped into the narrow crack, a warm and thrilling sensation which sent a hard chill up my spine, and then his triangular face wedged in, and then he was in me, and my anus warmed. I looked at Round Face and then at Pretty Little. I looked at The Boy whose eyes twinkled orange and chartreuse circles and stars. I began talking and laughing and ordering drinks, and soon we were chuckling and chattering like four old friends as I became the dominant figure in the crowded Cedar.⁶²

For those like Dawson, the Cedar was where literary status could be publicly displayed.

Bohemia's aura also grew from its transnationalism, its cosmopolitanism interwoven with the urban psychogeography. Letters to the *Chronicle* regarding North Beach complained about the beatnik's “unkempt” lack of cleanliness or asserted that “he conforms to nonconformity with more zeal and fortitude than most conformists conform to conformity.” But they just as often defended the area as “the ‘Left Bank’ of our ‘Paris of the Pacific’,” a “vital and moving element in our populace,” its denizens the “literary and artistic vanguards of our democratic rights.”⁶³ Village stalwart Michael Harrington, seeking a change of scenery in the early 1960s, debarked for France, then planned a move to San Francisco, “the Paris of America,” where he hailed the scene around the Co-Existence Bagel Shop and City Lights. Yet the Village carried similar Continental

⁶² Ibid; Dawson, *An Emotional Memoir*, 194-7.

⁶³ See the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Letters to the Editor”: Patricia D’Alessandro, “Clean Beats?” February 9, 1960, p. 26, Theodore C. Teixeira, “(Non)Conformists,” February 2, 1960, p. 22, Robert Prussing, “Poetry and Law,” August 25, 1959, p. 34, and W.E. Harris, “Beatniks,” April 13, 1959, p. 38.

connotations. In 1951, Judith Malina had found that the San Remo offered talk and community in an inclusive yet cosmopolitan style. “It’s a good bar,” she wrote in her diary, “gay and intellectual, rather close to my notion of a Paris café.”⁶⁴

Harrington’s and Malina’s Parisian amour fit comfortably beside a broader American sentiment toward Europe, as seen in best-selling novels such as Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), which set its tale of murder and false identity against a background of cafes, nightclubs, the Voltaire Hotel, and Italian resorts. With doses of southern European exoticism, and even a hint of romantic leftism, Highsmith posed Paris and the seaside town of San Remo as authentic antidotes for shallow American consumerism. “It was as if something had gone out of New York—the realness or the importance of it—and the city was putting on a show for him,” she wrote of the novel’s namesake, “with its buses, taxis, and hurrying people on the sidewalks, its television shows in all the Third Avenue bars . . . and its sound effects of thousands of honking horns and human voices, talking for no purpose whatsoever. As if when his boat left the pier on Saturday, the whole city of New York would collapse with a *poof* like a lot of cardboard on a stage.”⁶⁵

For many, bohemia became a psychological substitute for a Continent that was out of reach—physically, financially, and perhaps ideologically. As Kenneth Rexroth

⁶⁴ Isserman, *The Other American*, 60, 199, 203-4, 222-3; “Me Boheme” Notebook, Box 3, Folder 1, Michael Harrington Papers, TAM.209, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University; Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 159. Mary McCarthy, noting the plethora of writers who counted the San Remo as a home base in the early 1950s, termed in the “American Café Floré.” Notably, Harrington and his wife Stephanie found Paris café life to be less interesting than the Village. Stephanie asserted in a *Village Voice* article that a “good weekday night at the Limelight or White Horse can provide better booze, better conversation, and better stories to tell later.” And while Harrington never settled permanently in San Francisco, his experiences there extended to both Left political organizing in Berkeley and North Beach nightlife—a typical combination for both him and the Rebel Cafe more broadly.

⁶⁵ Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955, 1999), 25, 84, 125-6, 136-7, 152.

wrote in his biweekly column for the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1960, a night out in North Beach with “some foreign friends” included a Chinese restaurant, followed by espresso at Enrico’s—a coffeehouse owned by hungry impresario Enrico Banducci, compared to “a sidewalk cafe in Napoli” by the local press. “Then to the Cellar,” he wrote, “where a whole band of visitors was blowing up a storm behind Pony Poindexter. All the town was out. It looked like the Boulevard Montparnasse on a warm June night.” He continued with a thumbnail sketch that suggested both America’s postwar global ascendancy and North Beach’s egalitarianism:

We agreed that these California crowds . . . were different. Obviously, they had more money. But they had something else, something that Europe once had far more than America, and now, it seems each year, has less and less. Good manners and a kind of radiant good will . . . that is the sign of a full, confident, civilized life. Americans are supposed to be driven, frustrated, competitive, predatory, sex ridden. These people certainly didn’t look it. . . . Our marriages fail, our juveniles are delinquent. Nobody seemed to be noticing. Strontium 90, the Berlin Corridor, failure to plant the Stars and Stripes on the moon, everybody should have been harried and worried, but they weren’t. They were far from being the idle rich, either. Most of them were young white collar workers, but plenty were blue collar workers, out for the evening, in Ivy League suits, and all their wives looked, as my friend said, like fashion models.

“Back to the sidewalk café at midnight,” Rexroth concluded, “and it was easy to understand the difference between these crowds and those you’d see on a similar night from the terrasse of the Coupole or the Deux Magots. ‘The Image of Modern Man’—like . . . those French crowds, too, have an image of themselves. It is a badly battered image, a lot of them don’t like it, in fact they hate it, and one of its principal social functions is precisely that so many do reject it—‘alienation’ they call it. But it is there to reject.”⁶⁶

Coffeehouses were the less controversial side of bohemian cafe life. Cheaper and less boisterous than beer-and-wine joints, they nonetheless served much the same

⁶⁶ Kenneth Rexroth, “A Night Out in the City,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 21, 1960; “Doing the Town,” *The San Franciscan*, December 3, 1958 (Fall-Winter), p. 11.

purposes as New Saloons, but in a more restrained and less male-dominated form. One Village coffeehouse owner asserted their significance for public life within the dizzying bustle of New York, noting that they “offer meeting places, which provide an atmosphere conducive to informal conversation, a sort of small-town atmosphere in the city.” Diane Di Prima recalled that they offered “safe” locations for single women to explore and develop their own intellectual perspectives, as they “read Baudelaire” while crossing paths with fellow bohemians and “nursing twenty-five cent cups of espresso for hours.”⁶⁷

Coffeehouses also denoted bohemian authenticity, often by invoking the Parisian tradition. A 1960 *New Yorker* article on the Figaro Cafe, opened by NYU students Tom and Royce Ziegler at MacDougal and Bleecker Streets in 1956, captured much of its Rabelaisian role:

The streets [of the Village] were teeming when we arrived . . . [with] little kids, bigger kids, boy gangs, man gangs, girl gangs, young couples, old couples . . . black-garbed Italian ladies in their seventies, panhandlers, book carriers, and Beats of various shapes, sizes, and natures. . . . Out of this festival, like a ghost, there suddenly loomed a formerly subdued artist we know . . . “I have just moved down here from the upper East Side. If you want to see something peculiar, go to the Cedar Street Tavern, on University Place. It’s full of painters.”

“You Beat?” we asked.

“It’s a legitimate thing to be a Beatnik, even though most of the time it’s the provincial thing,” he said. “It draws me. It’s the Power of innocence.”

Inside the Figaro, the power of innocence was going full blast—a jukebox playing Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, two *espresso* machines hissing, a white-aproned, blond-bearded dishwasher playing chess with a customer, an old Chaplin film flickering on a movie screen in a corner, abstract paintings hanging on the walls . . . a grand piano (quiet) . . . the customers brooding, reading, or buzzing with discussions, polemics, and harangues on faith and life. . . .

“We’re sometimes called the square coffeehouse . . .,” Ziegler told us. “[Because we] don’t permit the weekend tourist Beatniks—a lot of them come down from the Bronx sporting day-old beards . . . who read about press-created-image Beatniks and try to be like them, to work out their psychic difficulties here. . . . Our Beatniks are the real, true, old fashioned, wonderful bohemians. . . . The coffeehouse fills a real need; people have to congregate. There are two possibilities for a young girl, say, who comes to New York and doesn’t know anybody—Y.W.C.A. dances and coffeehouses. . . . For a young man, a coffeehouse is a place for him to sit down and talk to people without being jostled by

⁶⁷ *Manhattan East*, “The Village Coffeehouses: Are the Golden Days Gone?” June 27, 1963; Diane di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1969), 90, 91.

drunks.” . . .

“This place is what Beatism is all about,” Royce said. “It’s an authentic old-fashioned bohemian place, the kind of place Edna St. Vincent Millay would have liked.”

“A truer bohemia than the Montparnasse of the late twenties,” a chess player next to us threw in. . . . “[Rapport is the cafe’s] . . . basic meaning. Trying to feel things. Instead of getting all tied up with things that distort the meaning of life. People come here to look at us and laugh, but we’re laughing right back. . . . The coffeehouse is a life line against compromise . . . [which] is a synonym for defeat. Admittedly an anti-conformist, adolescent attitude, but a good one.”

Tom Ziegler went on to describe the Figaro’s function within the Village mutual-aid economy, as he hired local artists, writers, lawyers, and academics for remodeling work or to be among its fourteen waiters and waitresses “from all over the world.” He also revealed the limits of his willingness to challenge gender norms, however, asserting, “I make it a point to avoid hiring any girl who just left home to get away from her parents or her husband.” Instead, “each of our waitresses is an adult woman,” meaning that “they have plenty of understanding of themselves and of other people.” Yet, on the whole, the Figaro exemplified the New Saloon ideal of independent ownership, cosmopolitanism, and social engagement. “Look around,” Ziegler concluded. “What you see is a young society reacting.”⁶⁸

The *Village Voice*’s John Wilcock implicitly recognized the coffeehouse’s New Saloon role, placing it alongside back-room literary talk at the White Horse and the interracial bohemianism of Johnny Romero’s bar on Minetta Lane. At Romero’s, he quipped, “even the inscriptions on the men’s-room walls are in Latin,” while Le Figaro featured signs proclaiming “Tourists Go Home” and “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” Fielding Dawson later offered an even more expansive recollection of the Village scene that encompassed jazz, bohemianism, sex, and even America’s new status as a global cultural capital:

⁶⁸ “Life Line,” *The New Yorker*, August 6, 1960, pp. 21-3.

New York, in 1956, was the wildest, greatest city anywhere; American painting had just been taken seriously for a first in history, and the city was the art center of the world. . . . You could walk along 10th Street and . . . have a beer with de Kooning, walk over to the Cedar and have a few with Creeley, Dan Rice, or Kline, and that night fall by the Riviera or Romero's and then cross up to the Vanguard on 7th Avenue, dig Getz and Brookmeyer, and then walk down to the Cafe Bohemia, and get your head torn off by Miles, and around one, fall by the Cedar, and pick up some friends and go over to the 5 Spot and completely flip over Cecil Taylor, then afterwards go to Riker's for breakfast, and around dawn head home, maybe with a chick. . . . What not many people knew was Romero's was an essentially middle-class place. Black guys and their chicks drove downtown in their big cars, or their sports cars, and went to Johnny Romero's.

Dawson recognized this blend of tourism and cross-racial interaction as tentative, stitched together by the sense of community fostered by Romero's owner. "It was the downtown place to go," he wrote, "but it didn't matter to me . . . because what the place was all about, which you could feel, I mean even when it was crowded there was a nice quality, and people were friendly, and that's what I learned. It was Johnny's effect."⁶⁹

Providing a more cynical and sardonic view, Berkeley professor Thomas Parkinson wrote in 1961 that the North Beach scene was comprised largely of college grads unsure of their life direction who, in Whitmanesque terms, "take a year off and loaf and invite their souls on Grant Avenue or Bleeker Street or the Left Bank." Despite his condescension toward Beat writers he offered insight into the beatnik's social role. "They shaped a way of life at once public and arcane," Parkinson said. "No wonder that the spectacle of Grant Avenue has produced so many dances of uncompromising rage. . . . The beatnik provides the atmosphere and audience of Grant Avenue and analogous areas, and he is frequently an engaging person. He may write an occasional 'poem,' but he has no literary ambitions." Politically, the beatniks "compose a social refusal rather than a revolt," he argued, "he is a rebel, not a revolutionist." The Beat author, he concluded

⁶⁹ Wilcock, *The Village Square*, 17; Fielding Dawson, "Pirate One," in Ishmael Reed and Carla Blank, eds., *Pow Wow: Charting the Fault Lines in the American Experience—Short Fiction from Then to Now* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 118-19.

sneeringly, “writes for the man in the street, but he chooses a street full of *Nation* subscribers and junior-college graduates.”⁷⁰

Setting aside Parkinson’s intellectual one-upmanship, his evaluation strikes a nerve. As a regular of The Place, he knew the urban jungle’s dangers, that a wild lost weekend could be extended until the explorer was simply lost, trapped in a sodden sinkhole with only an “occasional ‘poem’” to show for it. The *New York Times* leveled a similar critique. “Neither bohemianism nor graduate school is going to make anyone a poet,” he opined. “Dylan Thomas will remain in vogue as long as someone in the crowd can tell stories about him, yet no amount of drinking at the White Horse will make a man a Welsh poet.” As critic Dwight Macdonald quipped in 1960 about Greenwich Village bohemians making their living “selling leather sandals and silver jewelry to the tourists”: “Nowadays everyone lives on the reservation.”⁷¹

Perhaps. But meanwhile, at The Place, remembered one North Beach bartender, “Blabbermouth Night was quite a tourist attraction, and people tipped.” Frequently, however, visitors who simply sought beatnik thrills went home disappointed. Contrary to their projected image, the Beats were not out every night, making the wild scene. In 1958, bespectacled *San Francisco Call-Bulletin* reporter Paul Speegle went on a quest through The Place, the Bagel Shop, the Coffee Gallery, and the Cellar on an unsuccessful Beat hunt inspired by a self-admitted “tourist” who had anxiously approached him in a cafe and whispered, “Are you a beat?” In the end, he found only a *Harper’s* magazine journalist, a *Life* photographer, and a smattering of bohemians in Vesuvio. “Knock off

⁷⁰ Thomas Parkinson, “The Beat Writers: Phenomenon or Generation,” (1959) in Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 450-3. The term “loaf and invite their souls” is a reference to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

⁷¹ Donald Hall, “It’s Not Bohemia or the Beard That Makes the Poem, It’s the Poet,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1959, p. BR-4; Dwight Macdonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1962), 60.

that ‘beat’ jazz willya?” the magazine photographer complained to Speegle. “I’ve been sitting around these places for the last couple of days, waiting for some characters to show up. I was hoping you’d be one. So far, the closest I’ve come is meeting an account executive from Merrill Lynch, Fenner and Smith and a secretary from B.B.D.& O.” At The Place, bartender Jack Langan simply quipped, “Be right with you. There are some cats here from AP and UP [that] I gotta give a little service to.”⁷²

Speegle’s failed quest illustrated the false division between “authentic” bohemians and the multitude of nightspot habitués. Most patrons in Rebel Cafe bars were anything but beat; and the Beats themselves *were* focused at least as much on writing as on psychosexual escapades. But that does not diminish the power of the exploratory nights they did have. While those nights were blown out of all proportion in both *Life* and Beat writing, they were significant, if only for the works that came out of them. “And if, out of all this muck,” Speegle proclaimed, “another Ernest Hemingway or Thomas Wolfe manages to emerge, who’s to cry ‘Shame!’”⁷³ It is beside the point that only a tiny minority of visitors to bohemia went on to create significant works of art. To demand such a visible demonstration of its effects is to underestimate the Rebel Cafe as a social phenomenon. Like the physical scars that mark our bodies with signs of past adventures, we mark our travels and carry with us the psychological traces of experience. Week-End Bohemians situated these memories in relation to North Beach and Village nightspots,

⁷² Bartender Bill Gardner also offered details of work conditions: “We had short shifts, we only worked six hours each. . . . The minimum wage was a buck and a half . . . but the tips were great. . . . Most bartenders stole, but Leo had a pretty good judgment of people, ‘cause he hired some very competent people.” Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 34; Paul Speegle, “How Beat Is My Beach?” *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*, May 12, 1958, n.p. clipping in “Jack Kerouac” File, Biography Collection, San Francisco History Center, SFPL.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

and their traces slowly compounded, rippling through the broader society and eventually transforming it.

The satirical novelist Thomas Pynchon wrote in 1963 that “tourists bring into the world as it has evolved part of another, and eventually create a parallel society of their own in every city”—a “kind of infiltration.” He concluded, “Tourism is thus supranational, like the Catholic Church, and perhaps the most absolute communion we know on earth; for be its members American, German, Italian, whatever, the Tour Eiffel, Pyramids, and Campanile all evoke identical responses from them; their Bible is clearly written and does not admit of private interpretation . . .” Yet Beat publicity blurred the borders of the tourist’s internal world and expanded the bohemian counterpublic into the national public sphere. As Knute Stiles recalled, “Actually there were so many people that had arrived with all the publicity of the Beat Generation; they had made Upper Grant a drawing card for bohemians from all over the country. Young people, very often. . . . I think the Beat Generation probably brought about greater numbers in the movement and so forth; it was impossible to really run The Place anymore, and it did spread out—there were other bars.”⁷⁴

Artistic poseurs, alongside tourists who visited bohemia to gawk at the “freaks,”

⁷⁴ Pynchon, *V.*, 384, 386; Stiles Interview, pp. 19-20, Ellingham Papers, UCSD. Clinton Starr offers an excellent summary of tourism as a sociological phenomenon: “The sociologist Erik Cohen posits five modes of tourist experience, two of which are relevant to understanding ‘weekend bohemians.’ In the ‘experiential’ mode, people who are increasingly conscious of their alienation from modern society attempt to find meaning through vicarious experience (for example, people who travel to a sacred religious site of another culture and observe indigenous pilgrims who journey to the site as a rite of their own faith). In the ‘experimental’ mode, individuals not only observe but actively participate in alternative ways of life for brief periods of time (for example, people who live for a short duration on a hippie commune or an Israeli kibbutz and then return to more conventional ways of living and working). . . . Weekend bohemians engaged in both experiential and experimental tourism, frequenting urban districts in which they directly or indirectly participated in and gained a broader understanding of alternative ways of life.” See Starr, “Bohemian Resonance,” 153 n. 21 and Cohen, “A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,” *Sociology* 13 (May 1979): 186-189. For a more critical view, including the racialization of service workers, see Barbara G. Brents, Crystal A. Jackson, and Kathryn Hausbeck, *The State of Sex: Tourism, Sex, and Sin in the New American Heartland* (New York and London, Routledge, 2010), 20-23.

complicated the more radical anarchist aspects of North Beach. Soon after Stiles' return to The Place in 1958, he sensed Krikorian's patience with the bar's countercultural status coming to an end. "Because it was impossible to discipline his customers anymore," he recalled, "And it had gotten so crowded with tourists that it was no longer a profitable dialogue, as far as I could see."⁷⁵ This dialogue was hindered by the inability (or unwillingness) of bohemians and tourists to bridge cultural gaps. Just as, in the words of Francis Rigney, beatniks adopted the language of the hipster as "protective coloring" to establish trust, sartorial style and cultural codes were gatekeepers protecting a fragile community. Amid Beat publicity, it was a losing battle. "It's all a newspaper image now," complained Co-Existence Bagel Shop owner Jay Hoppe in September 1960. "Last week a pair of fur-stoled dowagers came into the Bagel Shop and actually asked for bagels!" Meanwhile, Krikorian had already decided to call it quits in January. "I got rid of The Place," he said, "because I didn't dig the crowd anymore. It changed."⁷⁶

The spectacular aspects of North Beach and the Village certainly played a crucial role in establishing San Francisco and New York as the twin poles of American radical culture and politics. A similar ethos did appear in places all over the country, from Venice Beach's Cosmo Alley, Chicago's Gate of Horn, and St. Louis's Crystal Palace to innumerable back-room bars in college towns from Madison to Austin. But the mythology of the Village and North Beach (or soon, Haight-Ashbury) proved as

⁷⁵ Stiles Interview, p. 18, Ellingham Papers, UCSD.

⁷⁶ Brier, "Beatnik Problem"; Ralph J. Gleason, "Beatnik Poets Move Out, the Tourists Move In: North Beach Haunts Are 'Going Commercial'," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 30, 1960, pp. 1 and 6. Krikorian went on to open the Kettle in Sausalito, before moving to Paris in the late 1970s. There he continued to work on his art and participate in the local cafe scene. "I like the socializing here," he said in 1986, true to form. "In the States, you burn yourself out going to bars. I have my regular cafes. . . . And the women aren't as uptight as American women about older guys. In the States women call older guys 'dirty old men.'" Here they call them '*bien mure*' which means well-ripened. I guess that tells you something of the difference . . ." Lind, "Paris, North Beach," 35.

important as the reality. The promise itself was often the impetus for change. “The Village,” declared John Wilcock in 1961, quoting a local sociologist, “is one of the few remaining open communities where people can live a reasonable social life in what is an asocial city. Virtually everybody who comes into the Village accepts the tradition that newcomers are welcome, and that is the Village’s strength—there has always been a constant influx of a certain kind of person from all over American who isn’t congealed in his ideas.”⁷⁷

In his memoir, Michael Harrington examined the dual nature of the Village, as a place of both “cultured superficialities” and the vanguard. He quoted Mary McCarthy, who asserted in 1950 that bohemia was “where young people throng for a few years before settling down to ‘real life,’ where taxis full of tourists pursue the pleasure principle outside the ordinary time, where bands of teenage nihilists, outside of everything, from nowhere, rove the streets like a potential mob, and where certain disabled veterans of life, art and politics exercise mutual charity and philosophize all night long, as though already translated into the next world.” McCarthy, as Harrington argued, was “partly right and utterly wrong.” The Village was all these things, but it was also transformative; it always offered “the possibility that the sophisticated inanities could become serious and substantial, that one would hear or say a truth or even be incited to create.”⁷⁸

THROUGH THE DOORS OF THE SALOON . . .

The expansion of bohemia meant the end of insular community, the start of a transition into the national public sphere. In 1967, Fielding Dawson wrote about the slow

⁷⁷ Wilcock, *The Village Square*, 14-15.

⁷⁸ Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 45-6. Mary McCarthy’s piece first appeared in the *New York Post* in 1950.

erosion of the Cedar Tavern's community ethos after Jackson Pollock's death a decade before, which he impressionistically recast as a catastrophic burn-out and the demolition of the bar's original location in 1963: "Love, loneliness, jealousy, hate and violence in those dense mobbed Cedar nights of blended stinks of food, whiskey, beer, smoke, perfume and vomit and piss and shit, we were all bored and lonely . . . That old bar—when it closed, how great that it burned! The words and emotions of gone faces yet alive in the wood and paint. . . . Names, dead and alive—up in smoke and fire! Wonderful! The spirits—the spirits were released."⁷⁹ And once the spirits were loose, there was no stopping them from inhabiting the broader body politic.

Bohemia was a kind of party, a carnival that turned mundane streets into a motley spectacle—sometimes thrilling, sometimes disturbing, but rarely dull. And its revelry respected few boundaries, either social or geographical. As Michael Harrington recalled, "I attended that party for about two decades in New York, San Francisco, Paris, Ibiza, and quite a few other places." He also noted that, by the early 1960s, the soiree was in its last throes, as the wobbly wee-hours of the morning crept toward daybreak and partygoers faced the choice of slipping quietly off to bed or taking their festivity out into the daylight. With the rise of the Counterculture, many chose the latter. "Bohemia could not survive the passing of its polar opposite and preconditioned middle-class morality," Harrington wrote. "Free love and all-night drinking and art for art's sake were consequences of a stern morality: Thou shalt not be bourgeois. But once the bourgeois

⁷⁹ Fielding Dawson, *An Emotional Memoir of Franz Klein* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 86-7. In reality, the Cedar was simply demolished for a new apartment building and reopened a few blocks away at 82 University Place. As with all such revered places of pilgrimage, however, some of its aura was lost without its original relics. The second location closed in 2006, squeezed out by large real estate and corporate interests. See Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in New York: A Walking Tour of Jack Kerouac's City* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 74, 76 and Whitney Pastorek, "My New York Haunt," *New York Times*, December 3, 2006, p. CY-17.

itself became decadent . . . Bohemia was deprived of the stifling atmosphere without which it could not breathe.”⁸⁰ The death of bohemia fertilized the ground in which the inchoate politics of the Cold War underground burgeoned into the social movements of the sixties, which were both similar and very different.

While Harrington was right about bohemia as a community, the Rebel Cafe staggered on, still projecting an alternative ethos which took solid form as nightclub performances absorbed, and then disseminated, subterranean styles. If The Place’s closing in 1960 marked the beginning of the end of New Bohemia, that year was only the midpoint of Rebel Cafe nightclub culture’s peak, as places like the Black Hawk and the Village Gate both thrived on the popularity of jazz and participated in a renewed personal politics.

⁸⁰ Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 33-4.

Chapter 11

“The New Cabaret: Jazz-Poetry, the Cultural Front, and the Personal Politics of Sophistication”

Aesthetic values may function in life for cultural adornment and elevation or as private hobbies, but to *live* with these values is the privilege of geniuses or the mark of decadent Bohemians.

—Herbert Marcuse (1955)

Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right.

—Denise Levertov (1962)¹

From 1958 through 1961, a bumper crop of new bohemian nightclubs bloomed, from the Coffee Gallery, the Cellar, and Turk Murphy’s Easy Street in San Francisco to the Cafe Au Go-Go, the Gaslight, Cafe Bizarre, Gerde’s Folk City, the Bitter End, and Cafe Wha? in New York. These clubs were points of connection between the mainstream and the machinery of night, where the uninitiated came to experience the Rebel Cafe’s starry dynamos and the molten subterranean culture that boiled and churned and occasionally burst through to the surface. Later, they became launching pads for 1960s music icons from Bob Dylan and Joan Baez to The Fugs, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix.² But in their early period, these small venues played an equally fundamental socio-cultural role for bohemia, bringing together modern jazz, poetry, and the folk revival, carrying on elements of the European cabaret tradition, and even serving as bases for local community and national political activism.

Dylan arrived in the Village in 1961 seeking this milieu—an event which Michael Harrington suggested marked “the beginnings of [its] end,” when the singer “showed up

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, 1966), 172; Denise Levertov, “A Cure for Souls,” quoted in *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry*, Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 43.

² See Paul Colby, with Martin Fitzpatrick, *The Bitter End: Hanging Out at America’s Nightclub* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002).

at the Horse in a floppy hat.” Dylan absorbed and then transmitted the Rebel Cafe sensibility into the national culture, as he did three years later in the cryptic liner notes for his album, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, channeling a diverse field of phenomena into a single identifiable point:

In times behind, I too / wished I’d lived in the hungry thirties / an blew in like Woody / t New York City / . . . passin the hat / an hittin the bars / on eighth avenue / an making the rounds / t the union halls / but . . . those bars that Woody’s guitar / rattled . . . they’ve changed / they’ve been remodeled / an those union halls / like the cio / an the nmu / come now! can you see em / needin me / for a song / or two / ah where are those forces of yesteryear? / . . . A Russian has three an a half red eyes / five flaming antennas / drags a beet colored ball an chain / an wants t slip germs / into my coke machine / . . . “poison the sky so the planes wont come” / yell the birch colored knights with / patriotic shields / “an murder all the un-Americans” / . . . as my friend, Bobby Lee, / . . . free now from his native Harlem / where his ma still sleeps at nite / hearin rats inside the sink / . . . aint there no closer villains / then the baby-eatin Russians / rats eat babies too . . . So at last at least,” he concluded, “the sky for me / is a pleasant gray / meanin rain / or meanin snow / constantly meanin change / . . . echain thru my mad streets / as I stumble on lost cigars / of Bertolt Brecht / . . . drownin in the lungs of Edith Piaf / an in the mystery of Marlene Dietrich / . . . love songs of Allen Ginsberg / an jail songs of Ray Bremser / . . . thru the quiet fire of Miles Davis / above the bells of William Blake / an beat visions of Johnny Cash / an the saintliness of Pete Seeger / . . . to the depths of my freedom / an that, then, shall / remain my song³

More succinctly, in “Ballad of a Thin Man,” Dylan sang to the everyman “Mr. Jones,” whose confusion grew more deranged as he failed to get onboard with the changing times, “There’s something happening here, but you don’t know what it is.”

But more and more, the Mr. Joneses of America wanted to know. It was no less true for mainstream audiences than for underground bohemians that live performances acted as a kind of modern ecstatic ritual of discovery. Nightclubs such as the Village Vanguard, the Black Hawk, and the Five Spot continually welcomed crowds of college students, suburban seekers, and tourists who came to soak in the otherworldly entertainment, particularly the quintessential beatnik style of poetry and jazz. In North

³ Harrington, *Fragments of a Century*, 50; Bob Dylan, “Outlined Epitaphs,” *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (Columbia Records, 1964).

Beach, the Gray Line bus company ran regular tours, shuttling groups into clubs such as the hungry i and Purple Onion. Such tours were seen as intrusions by bohemian regulars and as necessities by club owners stitching together always-tenuous profits. But these nocturnal excursions also had a significant social function for suburbanites. The 1950s were largely defined by the sudden independence of the nuclear family from traditional urban structures that tied them to multi-generational homes and communities. By necessity, many young people in American cities before World War II maintained residences either with or near their parents. By contrast, in postwar sociological surveys, respondents noted that independence from their parents was one of the primary attractions of the suburbs. The Rebel Cafe, therefore, offered new substitutes for traditional guidance and community.⁴ And in both a metaphorical and anthropological sense, the role of performers as “shamans” paralleled the rise of mass-media evangelicals like Billy Graham, whose charismatic revivals served much the same purpose, albeit on a larger scale. They brought a certain kind of knowledge from the otherworld, and translated it into the language of material existence.

During the Rebel Cafe’s peak, nightclubs became a mode of transmitting subterranean sensibilities into the mainstream—a partial return to the social role of Cafe Society and the Village Vanguard in the years of the Popular Front. Most notably, the notion of “sophistication” applied social pressure to accept more assertive public roles for

⁴ Herbert Gans noted in his sociological study of the 1960s suburbs that one of the central desires of suburbanites was to create an independent family space that broke from urban multi-generational housing and close quarters with neighbors. Interestingly, men reported that distance from parents and in-laws improved their marriages at three times the rate of women, 50% to 14%. Meanwhile, Gans suggested, organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars became “a suburban substitute for the city’s neighborhood tavern.” Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 26, 36-7, 260. See also James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

both middle-class and Beat women, as well as bolstered support for the Civil Rights Movement as a sign of hip politics. But throughout the underground, oppositional figures pushed against the boundaries of dominant sexuality, masculinity, and Cold War militarism. These elements came together in a series of conflicts over urban space—the “Battle of the Beatniks” and the “Battle of the Black Hawk” in San Francisco, the Village Coffeehouse Crisis in New York—that pitted Rebel Cafe owners and patrons against municipal authorities and mainstream social forces. These social protests bloomed from the seeds of previous oppositional generations—bridged by key figures such as the activist-poet Bob Kaufman—as they vitalized the broader movements of the 1960s, a genealogy of twentieth-century American activism.

This budding renewal of Left politics also demonstrated the continued function of nightspots within the urban fabric. Yet, at the same time, it marked the beginning of the end of the Rebel Cafe. Rather than attrition brought by municipal moralists or citizen calls for “decency,” bohemian nightspots in San Francisco and Greenwich Village were victims of their own success. Especially for suburbanites who otherwise had little connection to urban culture, nightclubs were spaces for exploration and sensual experience, and where experimentation could have significant socially-conscious effects. But the personal-political consciousness the Rebel Cafe helped spawn soon made its Cold War social role obsolete.

JAZZ-POETRY: REVENGE OF THE WORDS

In December 1957, Jack Kerouac appeared at the Village Vanguard, reading poetry and excerpts from *On the Road* to jazz accompaniment (including Steve Allen on piano). The readings marked a turning point in both the Beat Generation and nightclub culture, as Kerouac was thrust into the spotlight (literally) and the Vanguard firmly

established itself as a jazz venue. Earlier that year, Max Gordon had ended its early-fifties sojourn as a supper club by featuring the modern jazz of Miles Davis and the edgy comedy of Lenny Bruce. Kerouac's reading was also a pivotal example of the nightclub's translational role. By associating with the Beat Generation, the Vanguard rejoined the Rebel Cafe dialogue between live experience and media. As records raised familiarity with the new sounds of jazz and poetry, live performances drove literature in new directions.

Symbolizing the advent of Beat sensibilities into mainstream entertainment, Kerouac's Vanguard stint was panned by subterranean critics as an artistic failure, a betrayal of bohemian authenticity. Reporting for *The Nation*, Dan Wakefield described one performance, with Kerouac under "several smoky beams" of stage lighting, reading a poem about the Cellar in North Beach, obviously drunk and disheveled in "a gold-thread open-neck sportshirt that glistened in the dark and hung out over his belt." Kerouac continued with one of Ginsberg's poems, with its refrain of, "Mother, with your six vaginas," sparking Wakefield's sneering review:

It seems only yesterday that Ginsberg was sitting on a deserted railroad tie in California with Jack Kerouac, writing poetry about his beat friends who challenged the status quo and bewailed the rape of American letters by Philistine forces. . . . only yesterday that Ginsberg dedicated his almost-banned book of poems, *Howl*, to Jack Kerouac, 'the new Buddha of American prose' whose eleven books were published in heaven . . . And now one is published by the Viking Press and the others are being read at the Village Vanguard.

Wakefield concluded that the "glow-in-the-dark, gold-thread shirt worn by the Buddha seems to be the principal symbol of his 'protest' still remaining."⁵

Wakefield was not alone in disparaging the Vanguard readings. Even the generally supportive Joyce Johnson was hard pressed to defend the Vanguard readings as

⁵ Dan Wakefield, "Night Clubs," *The Nation*, January 4, 1958, pp. 19-20.

anything more than “an enormous fiasco.” A transitional moment, caught in a bind between authenticity and social transformation, Kerouac’s *Holy Fool* was reduced to “acting like a drunken clown.”⁶ His own ambivalence was clear in a letter to Kenneth Rexroth in early 1958 as he alternately put down the performances and propped up his subterranean *boa fides*:

I raced to the Village Vanguard for my \$540 a week stint and blew my heart out but lots of drunks talked on tho some people did hush. Generally I did well, because the musicians (Lee Konitz, etc) said they could hear the music, the jazz. I didn’t want music behind me because that’s really hearts & flowers Victorian poetry . . . But the boss made the house pianist make chords behind me anyway. . . . Steve is rather good at it . . . He sat in the opening night. It was a mad night. Madison avenue was there, as well as guys with rucksacks who got thrown out (I was in the back, oblivious, drinking pernod, listening to colored musicians tell me wild stories.)⁷

With the Vanguard’s beers at \$1.25 a pop and a \$4 minimum per person, few such genuinely “beat’ characters” could afford to attend, leading to accusations that Kerouac was selling out. “The applause is like a thunderstorm on a July night,” wrote the *Village Voice*. “He smiles and goes to sit among the wheels and agents. . . . He is prince of the hips, being accepted in the court of the rich kings. . . . He must have hated himself in the morning—not for the drinks he had, but because he ate it all up the way he really never wanted to.”⁸ Yet this view denied the performativity of bohemianism itself, its long history of pretension, posturing, and exclusivity. In fact, Kerouac’s performance exposed them, revealing an uncomfortable truth that the notion of spontaneous authenticity was a myth. If his Vanguard shows failed, it was because he believed in the myth too deeply for his own good, showing up drunk and unrehearsed. Rexroth was correct when he insisted

⁶ Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), 221. Johnson also suggested a level of self-sabotage at work, with Kerouac *predicting* that the readings would be a failure. Legends about his drunkenness at the Vanguard abound, including that he threw up into the piano during one performance.

⁷ Jack Kerouac to Kenneth Rexroth, January 14, 1958, Box 11, Folder 18, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

⁸ Quoted in Ronald Sukenick, *Down and In: Life in the Underground* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987), 38.

that even jazz-poetry required rehearsals and serious forethought.

It was no coincidence that *New York Times* critic Gilbert Millstein had arranged the Vanguard readings. The critic who first brought attention to *On the Road* was a longtime supporter of the Vanguard. Millstein talked up Gordon's *boite*, even as he bewailed its move to a "jazz policy" as a betrayal of the club's original intent to harbor "intellectuals looking for a refuge from bourgeois life." And like Kerouac's editor at Viking Press, Malcolm Cowley, Millstein subtly translated Popular Front sensibilities into 1950s terms by supporting the New Bohemia's socially-charged art forms.⁹ As Ronald Sukenick has cogently written about the Kerouac-Vanguard readings:

Many subterraneans want to violate the taboos of the middle class, while simultaneously needing its indulgence, as if you could bite the hand of oppression and then expect it to feed you. . . . Cowley's career is exemplary. Cowlies are indispensable to the underground. . . . It is the cowlies who always sooner or later discover the commercial value of the underground and figure out how to vend it to the middle class, either diluted by time, or in denatured imitations, or filtered through de facto censorship . . . But when you do want in, these middlemen to the middle class are among the few connections available. And why shouldn't you want in? There's a difference between selling and selling out. . . . But something new will soon start happening to this familiar dynamic of cultural opportunism [in the sixties counterculture]. To an unprecedented degree it will become the artists themselves . . . who sell themselves to the middle class. . . . And when you start selling yourself, you may stop selling your art and wind up selling your lifestyle.¹⁰

The mistake of those who failed to recognize this dialectic, who thought that the inevitable next step for bohemian opposition was straight into the bop apocalypse, missed the fact that *On the Road*, for all its spontaneous iconoclasm, was the product of five years of edits, rewrites, and the promotion of a large corporate publishing house—and a

⁹ Gilbert Millstein, "O Tempora O Vanguard," *New York Times*, June 16, 1957, p. SM-7; Malcolm Cowley, "Personalism: A New School of Fiction," *New Republic*, October 18, 1954, pp. 16-18. Already in 1954, Cowley praised the work of Ralph Ellison and Nelson Algren for a postwar return to "affirming the value of separate persons in conflict with social forces." Foreshadowing his attraction to Kerouac he wrote of Algren: "Instead of leaving us with a feeling of defeat, he celebrates the unconquered personality and humor in the lowest of men: hustlers, junkies, stoolies, dips, stewbums, 'the Republic's crummiest luses . . .'" For a discussion of Cowley's views, see Lawrence Lipton to Kenneth Rexroth, August 21, 1954, Box 14, Folder 7, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

¹⁰ Sukenick, *Down and In*, 38-9.

book whose very essence was self-promotion. But equally important, critics like Sukenick have missed the subtle ways in which past sociopolitical programs like the Popular Front threaded their way through even the culture industry's large corporations, carried forward by those like Cowley and Millstein.

“MUSIC OF REVOLT”: JAZZ-POETRY AND POSTWAR AMERICAN LEFTISM

Nightclubs were simply the most tactile form in which the underground made contact with the mainstream. Jazz clubs connected poets and patrons alike with underworld figures, sometimes literally, but more often psychologically. The Cellar's Bill Weisjahn, for example, provided both musical accompaniment and a supply of illicit intoxicants for Beats seeking to simultaneously expand their poetic expression and their consciousness. Painter Wally Hedrick later noted the Cellar as a space that bridged the New Saloon, the underground drug and jazz scenes, the Beat Generation, and the counterculture that followed it in coming years:

The Place was all verbal. Once in a while we'd have a Dixieland band there, and it would sit up in the balcony and play on Sunday afternoon. But around the corner on Union was another place called The Cellar which was really subterranean, I'm sure that's where the title of that book came from, because it was underneath the sidewalk, a very dark, dim kind of place. The owner there was John Wiesjahn [*sic*] who was a piano player . . . [and] into the drug scene. The beatniks had their drug scene which was the equivalent of what goes on now but it was deeper, darker and sort of mysterious. . . . [T]he center of that was sort of The Cellar . . . the place with the connection between avant-garde jazz, and they were playing the most progressive. They'd gotten way past chords. Coltrane wasn't even playing it then, but these guys were. . . . San Francisco was way ahead of New York with progressive jazz but there were only a small group of people doing it.

Reprising the jazz-Flipster trope, Hedrick concluded, “They all ended up in the looney bin.”¹¹

Poet David Meltzer recalled the Cellar as a symbol of left-bohemian rebellion.

The basement club's key form of expression was poetry and jazz, with bards and

¹¹ Oral history interview with Wally Hedrick, 1974 June 10-24, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 16-17.

bandsmen “pushing each other into deeper dialogue.” While in the “good old bad old days” of 1958, Meltzer earned only \$20 a night, one night a week, for his performances, jazz-poetry was inseparable from hip apocalyptic politics: “My workingclass immigrant Brooklyn popularfront coming of age propelled both by Old World and New World energies: *shtetl* orthodox Judaism and CP/USA storefront; Euro classical music and High Culture backup systems back to back (or toe to toe) with Boogie Woogie, Duke Ellington, Bebop, hipster culture, comicbooks, radio, movies, and sanctuary in Public Libraries, pushed me out into a new world that ultimately couldn’t renew itself, fixed as it was in irreconcilable oppositions made more acute in 1945 in the faces of the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” Meltzer described the Beats as populist, but also bebop as having taken “jazz away from the body, the dance floor, into the mind of a seated person in a club . . . while the Beat poets celebrated and fetishized in African-American expressivity, black Bebop innovators were relocating into a new formalism.” Meltzer then traced this development through 1960s Free Jazz and the Black Arts Movement, which “worked to unite factions and redefine the cultural perimeters in the same ways the Beat movement worked,” eventually finding full expression in hip-hop.¹²

Meltzer was right to note that the Beats hogged the spotlight, too often leaving Black innovators in the shadows. But his demand for authenticity and spontaneity led him to dismiss the importance of the nightclub’s translational role for those on “Gray Line bus tours,” the “suburban wannabes” who “donned black tights, berets, shades goatees,” came to the Cellar, and declared “it’s the looks (style, surface), not the books” that

¹² David Meltzer, “Poetry and Jazz,” in Anne Charters, ed., *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 399-403.

counted.¹³ This adoption of sartorial style symbolized the broader cultural embrace of bohemianism, as the underground moved from the cellar to the street-level “surface.” Although the Cellar closed in 1963, by that time its tradition of cutting-edge performance had already carved out a significant space in a changing San Francisco culture, helping open new possibilities of social discourse in the public sphere.

Dismissal of the nightclub underground’s “spontaneous” authenticity has its caveats, however. As Judy Holliday once quipped about the terror of nightclub performances, in contrast to the protection of the theater’s formality, you were “out there playing yourself, where they can get at you.” This lower bar of pretense meant a certain amount of unity between performers and audiences—reflecting a larger postwar process that eroded distinctions between high and low culture. Lawrence Ferlinghetti noted in a 1958 essay that the poetry of urban clubs used “street” language, the argot of the jazz musician, the hipster, and others left down-and-out by having fallen through the cracks of the Affluent Society: “Some of it has been read with jazz, much of it has not. A new ‘ashcan’ school? Rock and roll? Who cares what name it’s called. . . . in some larger sense, it all adds up to the beginning of a very inevitable thing—the *resocialization* of poetry. But not like in the Thirties.” In 1960, Ferlinghetti described Beat poetry as both public and integrated with the everyday, asserting, “The trouble with poetry for the last twenty years is that it was not saying anything of great importance except to other poets. . . . That’s why we are getting an audience. *We’re seeing the world again*. Our poems make you say, ‘I never saw the world like that before.’”¹⁴ This emphasis on

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 42; Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “Note on Poetry in San Francisco”: *Chicago Review* (Spring 1958), quoted in Charters, ed.,

changing consciousness, rather than on class consciousness, underpinned Ferlinghetti's brand of Marxism, which indeed differed from Depression-era radicalism, as well as the coming New Left. But while the messy work of formal politics still lay ahead, Beat poetics helped pave the way.

In response to the Beats' rising visibility in 1958, Rexroth published "San Francisco's Mature Bohemians" in *The Nation*, championing the new poetic movement and tracing it to the city's proletarian, anarchist-libertarian, and conscientious objector roots in the 1930s and 1940s. Calling it the "potent social leaven in their community," Rexroth laid out his (somewhat vague) view of the poet's social function in San Francisco: "The role of poetry out here has been compared to that of jazz in Chicago of the twenties, or to the heroic age of bop in New York. That is true, though jazz itself is a big factor in the literary life of San Francisco—another long story. Poetry out here, more than anywhere else, has a direct, patent measurable, social effect, immediately grasped by both poet and audience." But he soon excoriated the Beats in "Some Thoughts on Jazz as Music, as Revolt, as Mystique"—which he apparently continued at his poetry readings as well—denouncing them, according to Philip Whalen, as "professional debauchers of women, who call themselves Zen Buddhists" and who "don't know anything about Negroes &/or jazz, ain't socially responsible, ain't real San Francisco."¹⁵

This conflict helps illuminate Beat resistance to comparisons with the Old Left made by those like Rexroth and Lipton. "This is getting kind of tenuous but your

Beat Down to Your Soul, 168; Francis J. Rigney and L. Douglas Smith, *The Real Bohemia: A Sociological and Psychological Study of the "Beats"* (New York: Basic Books, 1961), 178.

¹⁵ Kenneth Rexroth, "San Francisco's Mature Bohemians," in Grana and Grana, eds., *On Bohemia*, 212-18; Kenneth Rexroth, "Some Thoughts on Jazz as Music, as Revolt, as Mystique," *Bird in the Bush* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 19-41; Philip Whalen to Allen Ginsberg, October 12, 1959, Box 5, Folder 49, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

criticism is relatively tenuous,” Ginsberg retorted to Rexroth in 1959. “Who’s stealing your San Francisco? There is nothing to be ‘stolen,’ this is all madness. . . . For you must remember, re[garding] my work and Kerouac’s—the whole conception of it as social protest fitting into westcoast-wobbly-political-responsible-etc context is your interpretation. With which I have differed, actually (particularly in seeing my poetry as an outgrowth of proletarian 30’s).” For Ginsberg and Kerouac, the 1930s meant doctrinaire adherence to the Party line, reflecting the postwar Scylla-and-Charybdis fear of both Left and Right totalitarianism. Kerouac wrote to Rexroth in 1958 that “on publication of *On the Road* last fall I disassociated myself from your sphere of influence, and that was because I knew you were too political, past, present, or future, to join with my own sphere of ‘beatitude’ religious beatness and lush. I’ve never, never will, join even a rotary club.” Instead, Kerouac’s notion of liberation was to avoid the crushing power of an oppressive state, to withdraw from politics and drain power relations from the very system itself. “All I want is stars, wine, friends, talk, mebbe guitar music,” Kerouac concluded. Ginsberg extended this to Rexroth’s racial criticism, asserting that cross-racial interaction at ground level—in daily life in New Saloons and poetry readings—was an effective source of anti-racism. He suggested that Rexroth listen to Fantasy’s recent recording of a Beat reading and its audience interaction as evidence of such affective connections.¹⁶ For the Beats, jazz-poetry was part of an expansive project to transform the nature of daily life, making nightclubs sites of potential liberation.

Rebel Cafe nightclubs from the Jazz Workshop and the Black Hawk to the Five

¹⁶ Allen Ginsberg to Kenneth Rexroth, October 21, 1959 and September 29, 1959, Box 8, Folder 1, Jack Kerouac to Rexroth, January 14, 1958, Box 11, Folder 18, Kenneth Rexroth Papers (Collection 175), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

Spot Cafe and the Village Vanguard featured jazz and poetry.¹⁷ Rexroth himself undertook a tour of nightclubs that included the Jay Landesman's Crystal Palace in St. Louis and the Five Spot (with Ivan Black as MC), while Langston Hughes and Kenneth Patchen read with Charles Mingus in Gotham venues such as the Vanguard and the Living Theater.¹⁸ Rexroth noted that his tour offered both sociocultural edification for nightclub crowds and much-needed income for struggling poets. "If jazz is music of revolt, it is a revolt towards more natural, wholesome, normal human relationships," he wrote in 1958, temporarily adopting the Beat position, his vacillations about aesthetic politics showing the transitional nature of the period. "After all, a revolution in basic human relationships is a very important revolution indeed. Just incidentally, nothing shows better the way in which the arts play a social role—secretly, behind the scenes, seldom understood by the official critics of art and literature, and, eventually, totally subversive." The new poetry of the Beats directly invoked this language, "the natural rhythms of American Speech" that were "from one point of view, 'social,' but it makes

¹⁷ Jazz-poetry was not limited to San Francisco or New York. In 1958, *Chicago Review* editors Irving Rosenthal and Paul Carroll contacted Ginsberg and Kerouac about a poetry reading at the Gate of Horn, to benefit the magazine which was fighting censorship by its publisher, the University of Chicago. Rosenthal noted that the club's owner, Albert Grossman, "sponsors folk singers mainly, I think Jazz too," adding excitedly that he "is also the *manager* of Odetta." This tentative connection became solidified in the early 1960s when Grossman began to manage Bob Dylan—a dedicated fan of Ginsberg, with whom he sometimes collaborated. Grossman was well-known as a tough and streetwise manager. (Dylan later recalled that Grossman often carried a gun.) Rosenthal made it clear that, "You dig he wants to make money on the reading . . . and so it is not strictly a benefit for the publication." Yet other scenesters such as Suze Rotolo also remembered him as sensitive to his artists needs and dedicated to racial justice. Irving Rosenthal to Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, "Dec. 123456789, oy," 1958, Box 5, Folder 12, Ginsberg Papers, Stanford; Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 97; Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), 138-9. For a fascinating view of Grossman in action, negotiating contracts and attending to his most famous client, see *Bob Dylan: Don't Look Back*, dir. D.A. Pennebaker (Pennebaker Hgadus Films, 1967).

¹⁸ Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), 278-83; "Talk of the Town: Daddy-O," *The New Yorker*, May 3, 1958, pp. 29-30; Les Matthews, "Oust Coleman From School Board Post; Baker Czar?" *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 11, 1958, p. A-9; John S. Wilson, "Jazz and Poetry Share Program: Charles Mingus Quintet and Kenneth Patchen Attempt Accompanied Readings," *New York Times*, March 17, 1959, p. 42.

the past generation of proletarian poets look like ignorant bumblers.”¹⁹

Amiri Baraka used even stronger terms for this intersection of social commentary and art, stating that all poetry is political, but that it must be backed by effective activism. “The words of an incendiary poet are finally less frightening than a political organizer,” he wrote. “The one can be used merely to titillate, the other assumes a functional presence in the world that can intimidate.” Norman Mailer agreed, suggesting that the Beat movement offered only rebellion, not revolution, asserting that it “has no center to its rage, and so is sentimental enough to assume that the world can be saved with words. It is going to take more than that.”²⁰

Yet as the beatniks gained national press, they offered the kind of incendiary poetry that helped spark a larger conflagration. “Their characteristic literary theme is the decline and fall of practically everybody, delivered in a tone that wavers between a yawp and a whimper,” reported *Time* from the Cellar in late 1957. “At the GHQ of the San Francisco poets, a tiny joint on Grant Avenue known simply as The Place, the non-squares were invited to gather on Sunday afternoons to ‘snarl at the cosmos, praise the unsung, defy the order.’” *Time* quoted Rexroth’s ode to Dylan Thomas, “Thou Shalt Not Kill”: “Who killed him? / Who killed the bright-headed bird? / You did . . . / You drowned him in your cocktail / brain . . . You killed him! You killed him. / In your God damned Brooks Brothers / suit, You son of a bitch.” As Rexroth told the reporter, “Poetry is a dying art in modern civilization. Poetry and jazz together return the poet to his audience.” *Time* sneered (somewhat justifiably) that the “poetry was usually poor and the

¹⁹ Kenneth Rexroth, “Some Thoughts on Jazz as Music, as Revolt, as Mystique” in *Bird in the Bush: Obvious Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 39-40; Rexroth, “San Francisco’s Mature Bohemians,” 217.

²⁰ *The Beat Generation*, dir. Janet Forman (Winstar, 1987); Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 427; J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 240.

jazz was worse,” yet a crowd of 500 flocked to the tiny Cellar, lining up to hear Rexroth and Ferlinghetti declare their oppositional verse.²¹

THE POETRY AND POLITICS OF “BOMKAUF”

Poet Bob Kaufman’s life in North Beach in many ways exemplified the Cultural Front’s legacy in jazz-poetry, as well as demonstrating his role as an activist who bridged time periods, art, and politics. A talented and irascible poet, Kaufman was a legendary Rebel Cafe figure who concocted an autobiography of stories that portrayed a romantic, cosmopolitan, and radical bohemianism past. Born to a German-Jewish father (a New Orleans nightclub owner) and an Black mother from Martinique (a schoolteacher), Kaufman was keenly aware of the instability—and absurdity—of race as a social category. He left the oppressive US South for Mexico at age fifteen, taking up with a twenty-eight year old prostitute, then worked as a merchant marine, circling the globe nine times, suffering multiple shipwrecks, before heading into Left activism. Kaufman also spoke of his grandmother’s arrival in the Americas on a slave ship directly from Africa and his mother’s grounding in Catholic-voodoo culture, all of which added to his mystique and betokened pride in his African roots.²² These stories circulated widely in North Beach, and in the press well past his death in January 1986. They were also largely fictitious.

The facts were both more mundane and far more significant. To borrow a term from Manning Marable in reference to Malcolm X, Kaufman’s was a “life of reinvention.”

Robert G. Kaufman was born on April 18, 1925, in New Orleans, but neither of his

²¹ “The Cool, Cool Bards,” *Time*, December 2, 1957, Vol. 70, Issue 23. See also Sascha Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1997), 61-88.

²² Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 67-9; Tom Clark, “A Hipster Poet’s Nocturnal Muse,” unidentified clipping in “Bob Kaufman” File, San Francisco History Center Biography Collection, SFPL; A. D. Winans, “Bob Kaufman,” *The American Poetry Review* 29, no. 3 (May/June 2000): 19-20. In Rigney and Smith, Kaufman is identified under the pseudonym “Ed.”

parents were foreign-born. Instead, both were African-Americans from Louisiana. His father worked various hospitality jobs, as a hotel porter and later as a waiter at the Arabic Club Cafe and a Pullman Porter; his mother, married at age twenty, a homemaker and former schoolteacher who raised thirteen children with a love of learning and literature.²³ Far from undermining Kaufman's complex understanding of race, his actual background reflected New Orleans' intricate and shifting racial hierarchy, with an interracial family line that straddled social distinctions between black and white.²⁴ As cultural critic James Smethurst has argued, "Kaufman experienced life, or recreated his life, as a sort of symbolic field in which his work was not clearly distinguished from 'real life,'" in which

²³ *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29, National Archives, Washington, D.C, New Orleans Ward 5, Orleans, Louisiana, Roll: T625-62, Page: 7-B, Enumeration District: 84; Maria Damon, *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 32-4. Louisiana records list Joseph E. Kaufman and Lillian Rose Vignes' marriage date as January 5, 1914.

²⁴ Lillian Vignes was from a prominent family, light-skinned and classified as "mulatto" in the 1910 and 1920 Censuses (and likely able to pass as "white"), as was Kaufman's father, Joseph. Joseph's racial ambiguities are further implied by his family name and eye color, listed on his 1917 draft card as "Grey," supporting that Bob's claim of German-Jewish ancestry. Tellingly, as racial lines hardened with Jim Crow policies, by 1930 the Kaufmans were simply labeled "Negro." Lillian's ability to pass is supported by the fact that two of her sisters, Leontine Vignes and Cora Vignes Wilson, did precisely that: in the 1920 and 1930 Censuses, they were listed as "white," along with Cora's husband Robert Wilson, who had also been "mulatto" in 1910. Moreover, the 1920 Census shows Lillian's race marked originally as "octoroon," which was crossed out and replaced with "mulatto," suggesting that she too might have been able to pass, had she not married the more visibly African American Joseph. The Kaufman family lived in and around the French Quarter, often just blocks from Storyville where Joseph worked at nightclubs like the El Oreilles, as did some of his neighbors. By 1940, Lillian was widowed and heading the family with support from sons Joseph and George, and daughter Marion, who did library research for the National Youth Administration. Bob himself began work by age seventeen, shipping out not as a merchant marine but as a waiter on the Army transport ship Yarmouth. For a full examination of New Orleans' racial categories and the history of Storyville, see Emily Epstein Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 48-76. United States, Selective Service System. *World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*, NARA, Registration State: Louisiana, Registration County: Orleans, Roll: 1684917, Draft Board: 4; Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*, Census Place: New Orleans Ward 4, Orleans, Louisiana, Roll: T624-520, Page: 6-A, Enumeration District: 0057.; Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, NARA, Census Place: New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana, Roll: 804, Page: 24-A, Enumeration District: 104; Ibid; Bureau of the Census. *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*, NARA, Census Place: New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana; Roll: T627-1424, Page: 5-B, Enumeration District: 36-183; *Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1910-1945*; NARA Microfilm Publication: T939; Roll #: 285; List or Manifest of Aliens Employed on the Vessel as Members of Crew, U.S.A.T. Yarmouth, Arrived at New Orleans, LA, November 19, 1946, from the Port of Spain.

his “invention of biographical ‘facts’” were a “sort of self-creation, or biography as artistic statement.” His claim of Martiniquan origins, for example, symbolically placed him in the radical heritage of that French colonial island’s poet-politician, Aimé Césaire. Kaufman was also rooted in a very real tradition of Left activism, leading Smethurst to situate him within the legacy of the Popular Front.²⁵

Kaufman did eventually join the merchant marine, was politically active with the NMU, and helped “smuggle Jewish refugees from Europe into Palestine.” He was reportedly once severely beaten by southern police for working as a Communist organizer. Personally, he was involved with nightclub singers and prostitutes as he worked up and down both coasts, and in the early 1950s, he was part of the Village jazz-bohemian scene. One North Beach poet recalled meeting Kaufman from the days when he “hung around the Village in New York,” where the two “went to the same bars.” Radical poet and activist Jack Micheline remembered Kaufman as a “well-read human being” and a “street poet” who counted jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, and Cecil Taylor among his close friends, declaring that “Mingus loved him.”²⁶

One story has it that Kaufman’s shift from merchant marine to poet occurred when he was “stranded in Bombay,” which “made him think about who he was . . . and he decided that what he was doing was trying to find a home.” He soon found one, stumbling into North Beach while ashore in the mid-1950s. Kaufman settled down,

²⁵ James Smethurst, “‘Remembering When Indians Were Red’: Bob Kaufman, the Popular Front, and the Black Arts Movement,” *Callaloo* 25, no. 1, “Jazz Poetics: A Special Issue” (Winter, 2002): 146-164.

²⁶ While Taylor has talked extensively about the influence of Robert Duncan, LeRoi Jones, and Jack Kerouac on his work, apparently Kaufman took the cake: the pianist declared that an all-night talk session with Kaufman after meeting him at the Five Spot left him “completely transformed.” Jack Lind, “The Lives of Bob Kaufman,” *North Beach Magazine* vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 28-32, 42-4 in San Francisco History Center Periodicals Collection, SFPL; Christopher Funkhouser, “being matter ignited: An Interview with Cecil Taylor,” *Hambone* 12 (1995): 17-39. For more evidence of Kaufman’s NMU and CP activism see Damon, *The Dark End of the Street*, 33, 248 n. 2, and David Henderson’s introduction in Bob Kaufman, *Cranial Guitar* (Minneapolis: Coffee Table Press, 1996).

marrying journalist Eileen Kohl in 1958 and focusing on writing.²⁷ “Settled down” is a relative term when describing Kaufman, however. He cultivated friendships with local radicals like Richard “Specs” Simmons—a self proclaimed “rough Boston sheet metal worker Communist” (who later opened his own bar in the site of the old 12 Adler in 1968).²⁸ And Kaufman developed a reputation as the “Black American Rimbaud” for his outrageous and often drunken behavior, as well as sexual escapades with women and men.

Kaufman crafted a performative public persona within North Beach boîtes like The Place, the Coffee Gallery, and the Bagel shop, where he “would speak spontaneously on any subject, quote great poetry by Lorca, T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, or himself,” and boisterously spout verse from atop tables and upright pianos. Kaufman was virtually the embodiment of the beatnik as a social phenomenon, carving out a living from tourists and fellow scenesters, who bought him food and drinks in order to bask in his ecstatic monologues. He also published his work with City Lights Books and in his own magazine, *Beatitude*, founded with Ginsberg and North Beach poet Bill Margolis. Eileen recalled that “tourists were delighted to buy a pitcher of beer, bottle of champagne, or anything we wanted—just to be a part of the Life emanating from our table.” Fellow bards enthused that it was like being “thrust back into the Elizabethan Era” as they “felt the excitement of being around this pure poet.” Of course, Kaufman was no saint. He

²⁷ Lind, “The Lives of Bob Kaufman.”; Eileen Kohl Kaufman Interview, Collection of Bob and Eileen Kaufman Papers, circa 1959-1996, BANC MSS 2007/159, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Various accounts place his arrival as early as 1953 or as late as 1957. The documentary record shows he married Eileen in 1958, making even the later date plausible. It is just as likely that he visited San Francisco as a port of call, making contact with the scene several times before moving there permanently.

²⁸ Lind, “Lives of Bob Kaufman”; Scott Lettieri, “Peering in at Specs,” *North Beach News* (Summer 2004), n.p., clipping in “Specs” File, Biography Collection, SFPL. Simmons is another example of the North Beach nocturnal tradition, who met his wife at Vesuvio and whose daughter became a documentary filmmaker. Specs bar has since carried on the Rebel Cafe tradition, with its Spanish Civil War posters, “living room” feel, and declarations of “No sexism or racism allowed” and “There’s no juke box or TV here. It’s really about people sharing stories and their lives.” One stories goes that when Kerouac biographer Dennis McNally first arrived in the Bay Area, he went to Specs, telling Simmons, “I just moved to San Francisco,” to which the bar owner simply replied, “Welcome home.”

regularly conned unwitting tourists and “college girls” out of money and underscored his howling reputation by breaking windows at his favorite haunts.²⁹

Of course, Kaufman’s performative poetic persona was also part of an often necessary African-American tactic, living up to Euro-American expectations as a way of making do. As fellow beatnik Russell FitzGerald wrote of Kaufman in 1957, “He’s a negro . . . Alive as only negroes are. Spiteful to those he cons . . . There are times when he has a fire about him that seems to come from a knowledge of life’s ugliness and a passionate commitment to human dignity.” As historian Clinton Starr has argued, this dynamic was apparent in Kaufman’s interactions with tourists, as “racial exoticism intersected with countercultural tourism [and] predominantly white middle-class slummers enjoyed the dual spectacle of an ostentatious and irreverent poet who was both beat and black.” Despite Jack Micheline’s insistence that Kaufman “totally transcended color,” that “he didn’t know he was black,” race was an ever-present vexation. The Place’s Leo Krikorian later suggested that Kaufman was “pissed off at society, I think because people didn’t accept him as being Jewish instead of black,” concluding: “That was a big hangup with him. He used to talk about it. It really fucked him up.”³⁰

Kaufman’s rambunctious, rambling life means he left little in the way of personal correspondence for the historical record. Instead, his poetry is the best way to gain insight into his rebellious cultural perspective. “Shadow people, projected on coffee shop walls /

²⁹ Michelle Marin Boleyn, “‘Black American Rimbaud’: Legendary Beat Poet Bob Kaufman Dies,” undated clipping in “Bob Kaufman” File, Biography Collection, SFPL; Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 131-8, 164; Eileen Kaufman, “From *Who Wouldn’t Walk with Tigers?*” in Knight, *Women of the Beat Generation*, 113; Lind, “Lives of Bob Kaufman,” 29, 43-5. Leo Krikorian recalled that “customers did things like that because they wanted to be out of the ordinary” and that Kaufman would “break my front window every three or four months.” Jay Hoppe resignedly took a pragmatic approach at the Bagel Shop and “divided the window into smaller panes, so when they broke, it was only a matter of spending ten dollars at a time.” See Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 66-8.

³⁰ FitzGerald Diary, November 7, 1957, Ellingham Papers, UCSD; Lind, “Lives of Bob Kaufman,” 29; Lind, *Leo’s Place*, 66.

Memory formed echoes of a generation past,” Kaufman wrote in “The Bagel Shop Jazz”:

Nightfall creatures, eating each other / Over a noisy cup of coffee . . . / Mixing jazz with
 paint talk, / High rent, Bartok, classical murders, / The pot shortage, and last night’s bust,
 / Lost in a dream world, / Where time is told with a beat. / . . . The ancestral cross, the
 Othello laid curse, / Talking of Bird, Diz, and Miles / The secret, terrible hurts / Wrapped
 in cool hipster smiles, / Telling themselves under the talk, / This shot must be the end, /
 Hoping the beat is really the truth. / The guilty police arrive.³¹

“In writing poetry I try to create the sound of music in the poetry, but it’s not music in the
 orthodox sense,” Kaufman insisted. “The juxtaposition of words, use of syntax, use of
 idioms, use of metaphors. . . . It has to contain music.”³²

While his poetic approach hinted at the mystical, Kaufman’s radical leftism and
 elements of social protest continuously threaded through his work. “Of life, of love, of
 self, of man expressed / In self determined compliance, or willful revolt,” he wrote,
 expounding the dialectic of solidarity and individual autonomy that characterized the
 postwar Left. “Secured in this avowed truth, that no man is our master, / Nor can any ever
 be. . . .” Specs Simmons placed Kaufman’s work directly in a genealogy of social justice
 activism, asserting, “Back in the 40s he had been involved in the civil rights movement in
 New Orleans and New York City. . . . Later he spun off into doing his own protest and
 getting known at the poetry sessions, just at the time when the newspapers created all the
 beatnik bullshit. There was something serious going on that later became countrywide,
 and Bob Kaufman had been a part of it.” But Kaufman also exhibited a satirical streak
 and counted the hipster Popular Front comedian Lord Buckley among his influences. One
 jazz drummer who met Kaufman at the Co-Existence Bagel Shop in 1957 recalled the
 poet’s iconoclasm and “sense of humor,” declaring that “he was concerned with current
 events, just like Lenny Bruce.” African-American poet Tony Seymour also noted

³¹ Quoted in Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 119-20.

³² Tony Seymour, “Don’t Forget Bob Kaufman,” *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, April 25, 1976, n.p. clipping in “Bob Kaufman” File, Biography Collection, SFPL.

Kaufman's wry humor. On first meeting Seymour at City Lights, Kaufman immediately satirized the era's racial codes, remarking, "What would you do if your daughter married a black man?"³³

These various threads came together most vividly in Kaufman's "Abomunist Manifesto," in 1959. A parody of Marx's "Communist Manifesto," published under the pseudonym "Bomkauf"—a sly nod to Cold War atomic politics—the poem captured the Rebel Cafe's oppositional sensibility. "IN TIMES OF NATIONAL PERIL," he declared, *a la* Rimbaud, "ABOMUNISTS, AS REALITY AMERICANS, STAND READY TO DRINK THEMSELVES TO DEATH FOR THEIR COUNTRY." Bomkauf then laid out the public duties of Abomunists:

ABOMUNIST POETS, CONFIDENT THAT THE NEW LITERARY FORM "FOOT-PRINTISM" HAS FREED THE ARTIST OF OUTMODED RESTRICTIONS, SUCH AS: THE ABILITY TO READ AND WRITE, OR THE DESIRE TO COMMUNICATE, MUST BE PREPARED TO READ THEIR WORK AT DENTAL COLLEGES, EMBALMING SCHOOLS, HOMES FOR UNWED MOTHERS, HOMES FOR WED MOTHERS, INSANE ASYLUMS, USO CANTEENS, KINDERGARTENS, AND COUNTY JAILS. ABOMUNISTS NEVER COMPROMISE THEIR REJECTIONARY PHILOSOPHY. . . .

This declaration of public purpose was followed by a series of "Craxioms":

Jazz never made it back down the river. . . .
Men who die in wars become seagulls and fly.

Bomkauf then offered a list of definitions from the "Lexicon Abomunon":

Abommunity: n. Grant Avenue & other frinky places. . . .
Abomunasium: n. Place in which abomunastics occur, such as bars, coffee shops, USO's, juvenile homes, pads, etc. . . .
Abomunette: n. Female type Abomunist (rare). . . .
Abomunicate: v. To dig. (Slang: to frink.) . . .
Frink: v. To (censored). n. (censored) and (censored).

He closed with a series of political demands ("low-cost housing for homosexuals,"

"suppression of illegal milk traffic," "statehood for North Beach," "universal frinkage,"

³³ Ibid; Lind, "Lives of Bob Kaufman," 30, 32, 42; Eileen Kaufman, "From *Who Wouldn't Walk with Tigers?*" in Knight, *Women of the Beat Generation*, 107.

“the reestablishment of the government in its rightful home at ?”) and satirical news briefs: “Cubans seize Cuba, outraged U.S. acts quickly, cuts off tourist quota, administration introduces measure to confine all rhumba bands to detention camps” and “Both sides in Cold War stockpiling atomic missiles to preserve peace, end of mankind seen if peace is declared, UN sees encouraging sign in small war policy, works quietly for wider participation among backward nations . . . End of news.”³⁴

Kaufman intertwined what he saw as the inherent role of the poet as a voice of protest with the Beat concern for authenticity, declaring in 1960: “The United States has failed to produce real people. It has produced everything else—but not real people. We intend, above all else, to be real people.”³⁵ The existential claims reflected in his poetry often took the form of outspokenness in the Coffee Gallery or Bagel Shop—particularly in resistance to police brutality and harassment. One officer in particular, William Bigarani, made a one-man crusade out of “cleaning up” North Beach, arresting beatniks for wearing sandals, for example, and especially focusing on interracial couples like Bob and Eileen. Bigarani arrested Kaufman multiple times, often violently (once on the poet’s birthday), and bohemians frequently complained that he was assaulted by police while in custody—complaints that were summarily ignored. In response, Kaufman and Margolis penned a pair of poems in protest, placing them in the window of the Bagel Shop. “I am sitting in a cell with a view of evil parallels,” Kaufman wrote:

O we know some things, man, about some things / Like jazz and jails and God / . . . This is the greatest country in the world, ain’t it? / . . . One day Adolph Hitler had nothing to do / All the Jews were burned, artists all destroyed, / So he moved to San Francisco, became an ordinary / Policeman, devoting himself to stamping / out Beatniks.

Bigarani responding by arresting the poets, sparking a wave of protest that resulted in his

³⁴ Bob Kaufman, “Abomunist Manifesto” in *Charters*, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 262-72.

³⁵ John O’Connor, “The Beatnik Disease,” 14.

transfer. While organizing in local nightspots, Kaufman came across one reluctant owner, concerned about his pending beer license. “Okay,” Kaufman spat, “but he better hadn’t go around any more calling himself a poet.” This case illustrated both the role of literary bars in conflicts over what constitutes “material offensive to the public”—as the city’s charges drew criticism from ACLU *Howl* lawyer Al Bendich as a “violation of freedom of speech”—and the public role of the poet as a voice of social critique.³⁶

While jazz and poetry’s popularity waned by the end of the decade, Dave Brubeck’s comment about its cultural value proved prescient about styles to come: he was “reminded by the union of jazzmen and poets of ‘the Bards and Meistersingers.’”³⁷ It is easy to forget the cultural significance of poetry in the 1950s, its penchant for avant-gardism and social commentary having been absorbed into the massively popular folk and rock & roll acts of the 1960s. Dylan Thomas had set the tone for poetry’s prominence through the 1950s, as he drew thousands to his readings and was accorded the kind of celebrity we now most often associate with pop stars. It is perhaps the most prescient move in popular culture that Bob Dylan took Thomas as his namesake: both skirted the line between poet and popular performer and the folksinger’s public fanfare mimicked

³⁶ Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 170-5; Arthur Hoppe, “Beatniks Go After Cop—in Verse”: Lawman Rips poems off Wall,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 14, 1959, pp. 1, 4 and “Beatnik Cop Wins, Is Moved,” August 31, 1960, p. 4. The episode also showed the conflicts over definitions or claims on community. Bigarani came from a local San Francisco family, his father a watchman; his aunt—like Kaufman’s sister—worked for the NYA. His stance was like that of many ethnic whites who resented the influx of Blacks amid war mobility in the 1940s—despite the objective similarity of their working-class, New Deal backgrounds. Bigarani was later charged with corruption, stemming from unrelated incidents. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*, Census Place: San Francisco, CA, S.D. No. 5, E.D. No. 38-243, Sheet No. 15-A.

³⁷ “The Cool, Cool Bards,” *Time*, December 2, 1957. Brubeck had backed up Jack Spicer’s poetry readings at the Black Hawk in the mid-1950s. This was a rare intersection of jazz and the gay community—and by distinction spotlighted the uneven hierarchies of sexuality and race that persisted in the Rebel Cafe—as well as another overlap of different cultural and political cliques within the nightclub underground. Spicer also interacted trumpeter Chet Baker at the Black Hawk. Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), 54-5.

the poet's to an eerie degree. Although the poetry and jazz of the late 1950s failed to represent the best of either—even its most adventurous explorations fell short of the aural avant-gardism of Mingus's *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, nor could it match the raw impact of Ginsberg's *Howl*—it nonetheless played a major part, albeit briefly, in national culture.

“A CERTAIN FEELING OF DEGENERACY”

The jazz-folk bohemians of the 1960s, like the Beats, were attracted to the nightclub scene, including the romanticism of its Continental past. Suze Rotolo, who became a cultural icon when she appeared arm-in-arm with Dylan on the cover of his 1963 breakthrough album, *Freewheelin'*, later portrayed Greenwich Village as America's answer to Montmartre: “Sam Hood ran the Gaslight despite hassles with the mob and a precarious basement locale . . . Art D'Lugoff sired the Village Gate, and Joe Cino created a venue in a cafe on Cornelia Street where he, along with the Living Theater and others like them, reinterpreted theater.” As tourism made clubs financially viable, they were ultimately undermined by corporate scouts, who spirited the performers away to Hollywood and concert halls. But for a generation of young radicals like Rotolo, raised as “red diaper babies” in the pre-McCarthy milieu of the communist Camp Kinderland and Pete Seeger's People's Songs, the Village “was the public square of the twentieth century for the outsiders, the mad ones, and the misfits . . . and New York replaced Paris as the destination for the creative crowd.”³⁸ Rotolo's sense of continuity evinced the Rebel Cafe's long legacy, in which Continental styles met American sociopolitical realities.

Dylan arrived in the Village in 1961 with similar notions, later recalling that “what I was looking for was what I read about in *On the Road* . . . the perfect American city.” He found the club scene at the Vanguard, Village Gate, the Gaslight, Kettle of Fish,

³⁸ Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time*, 14-15, 43-9, 250, 364-5.

Cafe Wha? and the White Horse to be “carnavalesque,” filled with “Literary types with black beards, grim-faced intellectuals—eclectic girls, non-homemaker types.” Dylan felt that his “consciousness was beginning to change,” declaring that “if you want to leave America, go to Greenwich Village.”³⁹

Older Villagers like Larry Rivers also cultivated such transnational cabaret sensibilities. While in Paris in 1950, he had attended one of Dada pioneer Tristan Tzara’s “Happenings” in his apartment and “understood the role played by Parisian nightclubs in bringing the public new ideas in theater, music, and the visual arts.”⁴⁰ Depression-era bohemians such as Rexroth and Lipton recognized this continuity with European cabaret and sought to make their own jazz and poetry in the “left-cafe idiom.” In 1956, Lipton wrote to Rexroth and used jazzman Turk Murphy, a stalwart of the North Beach clubs, as a touchstone for his own artistic aims. The result was a litany of Rebel Cafe connections, his generation’s transnational bohemian psychogeography blended with 1950s hip argot, as he declared the “combination of jive lyric and cafe-Berlin-Left-Underground between-the-wars tune” of Marc Blitzstein and Kurt Weill’s *Threepenny Opera* shone through in Murphy’s newly recorded version of “Mack the Knife.”⁴¹

THE “SOPHISTICATED” NIGHTCLUB AND THE AMERICAN MIDDLE-CLASS

Constructions of middle-class identity used jazz differently than bohemianism, as seen in publicity for Max Gordon’s Blue Angel. The Blue Angel’s “high sophistication,” noted one early-1960s guidebook, was part and parcel with its European style and the “luminaries of entertainment” who graced its stage. The club was a stateside

³⁹ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 9-17, 47, 55, 73, 83, 235, 258, 262.

⁴⁰ Rivers, *Unauthorized Autobiography*, 201. See also Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 26, 29-30. Rotolo considered Dave Van Ronk’s politics, which she described as part of the anti-CP Trotskyite Left, to be a subtle influence on Dylan and herself. See Rotolo, *A Freewheelin’ Time*, 112-15.

⁴¹ Lawrence Lipton to Kenneth Rexroth, April 23, 1956, Box 14, Folder 7, Rexroth Papers, UCLA.

manifestation of the Continental cabaret intended for New York's "upper echelons."⁴² In "sophisticated" nightclubs, jazz served a Janus-faced function as both high-minded taboo-breaker—with its sexual connotations and rebellion against the workaday world—and a buffer against overt transgression. Sociologist Sherri Cavan, in a study of 1960s nightspots, noted that patrons desired to enjoy public entertainment while also minimizing contact with each other. As the "proprieties of audience demeanor restrict . . . sociability within the setting" by demanding "deference to the show," audiences seated at tables were discouraged from moving freely through the club's spaces and interacted mostly with acquaintances at their own table. Within this stricter social dynamic, a performance acted as a social bonding agent, drawing the attention of isolated groups into a common sphere of awareness, while still allowing social separation.⁴³ This mental matrix also kept more distance between performer and audience than in less formal settings such as the Cellar or bohemian bars, furthering a *feeling* of engagement with the "real" world, a substitute sense of community, while maintaining a characteristic level of postwar American individualism.

If the nightclub was a familiar landmark for the Beats, for the newly arrived middle-class it was a site to simultaneously display their economic status and explore the demimonde. This reflected another aspect of "sophistication" that ran through public discourse about nightclub culture. In important ways, Beat sensibilities corresponded to mainstream nightclub audiences' notions of their own class consciousness, as patrons claimed sophistication by treating their own affluence with casual disdain—a back-

⁴² *Hart's Guide to New York City* (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1964), 875; Lorraine Gordon, told to Barry Singer, *Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 106-9.

⁴³ Sherri Cavan, *Liquor License: An Ethnography of Bar Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1966), 161-70.

handed form of conspicuous consumption. Whether they were young intellectuals whose “psychiatrists had psychiatrists,” “Dun and Bradstreet types” drinking on their expense accounts, or “out-of-towners” (defined as “anyone who lives west of Hoboken”), Blue Angel audiences came to spend a tidy sum in order to soak up the “certain feeling of degeneracy” in from “New York’s most sophisticated cabaret.”⁴⁴

Meanwhile, performers, patrons, and critics in San Francisco blithely assumed that the city’s “politically oriented cabarets” would draw “highly sophisticated onlookers”—even if they were sometimes disappointed. Yet even their disdain for philistine audiences brought by “the tourist influx” reveals the expectation that nightclubs were sites of “casual atmosphere and modern, sophisticated entertainment.”⁴⁵ The hungry i, Purple Onion, Jazz Workshop, and the Cellar invoked cabaret sensibilities, as patrons basked in exotic nocturnal “culture.” The Paris Louvre restaurant featured murals with “authentic scenes from Paris” and at 12 Adler, the “cramped, smoky confines of this cabaret” featured Turkish music and belly-dancing that was “provocative, primitive and passionate.” “On a corner in North Beach, where it always looks like summer, a beautiful girl ran her fingers through her hair and said in wonderment, ‘It’s just like Europe’—and so it seemed,” crowed Herb Caen. “At Fack’s, rivulets ran down Annie Ross’s heroic cleavage as the high priestess of bop-and-Basie blasted like a trumpet in full cry—and her

⁴⁴ Gilbert Millstein, “Lament for New York’s Night Life,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1955, p. 233; Arthur Gelb, “Barbs Salute the Blue Angel, 20,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1963, p. 31.

⁴⁵ Lawrence E. Davies, “Audiences Vary, Satirists Find,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1963, p. 9; Knight Rambler, “Bright Lights: Kay Thompson Wins Fans,” *The San Francisco News*, May 22, 1954, p. 4; Margaret Cairns, “Local Groundlings,” letter to the editor, *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 9, 1962, p. 32. This discourse also surrounded Chicago nightclubs such as the Gate of Horn and the Blue Note, which featured performers such as Josh White and Dave Brubeck. Nat Hentoff, however, scoffed at Blue Angel crowds as “falsely sophisticated” and concerned only with their sense of dress and style, in contrast to Vanguard crowds of socially-conscious young liberals. See Will Leonard, “On the Town,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 10, 1961, p. E-5 and September 25, 1955, p. E-10 and Nat Hentoff, *Free Speech for Me—But Not for Thee: How the American Left and Right Relentlessly Censor Each Other* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 328.

devotees mopped and bopped their brows and loved her in the steamy stickiness of it all”⁴⁶ On both coasts, American nightclub culture remained a multifarious mix of exoticism and transnational imagination—all easily purchased with the price of admission.

The nightclub formula of performance, talk, and identity exploration also challenged norms of gender and sexuality. Unsurprisingly, nightclubs played a contradictory public role. As sociologist Wini Breines argues, Euro-American women countered the Cold War-era “containment” of their sexuality by embracing rock & roll, working-class culture, jazz, and the Beats. Though these women usually lacked a deep understanding of Black culture, it represented an escape from domesticity, often paired with the cabaret. “Sophisticated” nightclubs’ structure of physical separation and psychological cohesion allowed patrons to see them as “respectable” public spaces for women.⁴⁷ But because women’s subversive strategies required extra levels of dissemblance, they often remained hidden in bohemian enclaves, away from the watchful eyes of authorities.

Changes in nightclub culture’s gender norms were visible in the policies of different venues. Max Gordon, for instance, explicitly discouraged the Blue Angel from becoming a “pick-up scene.” Lorraine Gordon later asserted that, although the club was a

⁴⁶ Gene DeForrest, “About Town,” *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*, July 17, 1954, p. 8; J.L. Pimsleur, “The Canoon, the Oud and a Belly Dancer,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 15, 1961, p. 4; Herb Caen, *Only in San Francisco* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1960), 211-12.

⁴⁷ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 6-7, 8-22, 127-66, 138, 147, 152. Although her insistence that this interest was “genuine” underemphasizes its racial objectification, Breines convincingly argues that Black culture’s influence was often missed by academics such as David Riesman. This objectification was another example in which the myth of African-American male hyper-sexuality combined with what Farah Jasmine Griffin calls the “white supremacist aesthetic of beauty” to negate Black womanhood—what the singer and activist Abbey Lincoln decried as a cultural process in which Black women were “encouraged by our own men to strive to look like the white female image as much as possible.” Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If you Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 178-9; Cavan, *Liquor License*, 166.

site for single gay men to meet, “Max didn’t allow women alone at the bar” and that he was “very strict, puritanical.” San Francisco’s legal restrictions against B-girls and female bartenders similarly pressured clubs to police women’s presence. For many middle-class women, nightclubbing raised the specter of social stigma. Despite being a regular at the Black Hawk and Jazz Workshop, scenester Marlene Inman reported that she always attended with her partner, Charles, to avoid nightlife’s associations with prostitution.⁴⁸ A younger generation of bohemians who attended North Beach and Greenwich Village venues like the Coffee Gallery and Gerde’s Folk City, however, were less concerned with these gender and class norms. Even Gordon’s Village Vanguard welcomed single women (to the extent that “hookers” were counted among its patrons). And the Village Gate’s Art D’Lugoff actively fought New York municipal policy that prohibited female performers from interacting with customers, arguing that it was “anti-female” and a “very sleazy law.”⁴⁹

UNCONTAINED: WOMEN IN BOHEMIA

Given the impact of suburbanization and massive sociocultural shifts, it is not surprising that clubs such as the Blue Angel began a serious decline by the mid-1960s:

⁴⁸ Lorraine Gordon, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, 112; Author Interview: Charles and Marlene Inman June 19, 2011. Economic and social control issues also guided nightclub regimens. Performances were often held twice nightly in an effort to bring in the necessary income to pay performers. This necessitated the use of organized seating arrangements in order to facilitate rotating audiences or payment for a second show by those who stayed. Additionally, New York’s municipal government maintained more oversight on nightclubs with entertainment than bars. Thus, nightclubs could regularly count on police raids that sought to ferret out performers who attempted to skirt the city’s requirement to carry a “cabaret card” and owners who might be tempted to hide their earnings to skirt the city’s cabaret tax. As a result, it is no surprise that nightclub owners maintained careful vigilance over the behavior of their audiences, always aware that law enforcement officials faced few obstacles to keeping tabs on their venues. Cohen, *Police Card Discord*, 19-20; Paul Chevigny, *Gigs: Jazz and the Cabaret Laws in New York City* (New York: Routledge, 1991, 2005, second edition), 59; Mark Caldwell, *New York Night: The Mystique and Its History* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 310.

⁴⁹ Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard*, 75; Author Interview: Lorraine Gordon, April 22, 2011, New York, NY; “The Reminiscences of Art D’Lugoff,” conducted by Christiane Bird on September 20 and November 6, 1996, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University (1999), 11. Lorraine Gordon, noting the Vanguard’s liberal policies, told a story, with a certain amount of affection, about meeting two beautiful transvestites in the women’s room.

the more liberated spirit of Greenwich Village and North Beach presaged the future of America's nightclub culture, which no longer required the "sophisticated" nightclub's more pristine notions of propriety. With the mainstreaming of the Rebel Cafe, nightclub "sophistication" included independent women as well as interracial social spaces. These changes could, of course, also be problematic when paired with lingering male-dominated norms. "'Beat Generation' sold books," Joyce Johnson recalled, "sold black turtleneck sweaters and bongos, berets and dark glasses, sold a way of life that seemed like dangerous fun—thus to be either condemned or imitated. Suburban couples could have beatnik parties on Saturday nights and drink too much and fondle each other's wives."⁵⁰ But despite the misogynistic aspects of Beat writing, its popularity solidified New York's and San Francisco's reputations as places of possibility and perhaps liberation.

Many women did find liberation from 1950s "containment" by fleeing to the Village and North Beach, enacting a personal politics that tacitly demanded public visibility. A new generation of women came to take their place on the terrain which those like Johnson, Eileen Kaufman, Diane di Prima, and Hettie Jones had cleared a path. Janis Joplin famously went on the road to North Beach's nightclubs after reading Kerouac, but many other less renowned women followed suit. As one North Beach bohemian told a local journalist:

I live here because I've found a reasonable degree of happiness here. I've come to the conclusion that that's the most I can expect. With beauty, talent, and a so-called solid background, I could have settled for a home on the peninsula somewhere with an educated ape for a husband. But you know what? One night this idiot would kick off his shoes and start babbling about how he was high point man at the Amalgamated Toilet Bowl Company, and I'd mix him a cyanide martini.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 187-8.

Similarly, in 1961, the *Village Voice* profiled a “New Girl in Town.” Arrived from Scranton against the objections of her parents, her experiences had already made her more “broad-minded” after only two weeks in bohemia. The *Voice* reported the sights that raised the new girl’s consciousness: “Such things as Negro-white couples (‘My friends wouldn’t believe me if I said that I’d sat down to eat with a Negro’), girls kissing each other as they walked along, and a pomaded youth dressed all in pink (‘He had a lovely figure; I nearly asked him how he kept so thin’).” She concluded that her “determination to stay in the Village is equaled only by her disinclination to return to Scranton, and she feels optimistically that an apartment, a job, and a whole new life are just around the corner.”⁵¹

Of course, contradictory elements continued within this tentative and contested feminism, as notions of fulfillment remained tied to domesticity. North Beach artist and filmmaker Mary Kerr was living in Wyoming in 1960 when she “heard about the Beats.” “I knew there was something happening out on the West Coast,” she recalled. “I thought ‘I’ll move out to San Francisco and I’ll meet an artist.’ So I left Cheyenne and went to California. I started hanging out at the jazz places in North Beach.” At the Cellar she met the man who soon became her partner in art and life.⁵²

Even within bohemia, women had to force open social and artistic spaces wherever they could find cracks in a largely masculine culture. Poet Dora Dull remembered that in North Beach circles, it was difficult to gain respect as a literary equal. “I was Harold [Dull]’s woman,” she said. “It was sort of like—There wasn’t room for me to write, too.” Dull found openings through solidarity with gay poets in Jack Spicer’s

⁵¹ Fritz Bosworth, “Some Call It North Beach,” *today’s San Franciscan* 2, no. 2 (May 1, 1959), pp. 17-19 in Periodical Collection, SFPL; John Wilcock, *The Village Square* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1961), 154-5.

⁵² *The Beach*, dir. Mary Kerr (CA Palm: 1995).

circle, who were less threatened by her talents: “For me, coming to San Francisco and meeting gay men was a wonderful experience, because I had just been through that season in my life where you’re seen as a sex object . . . and then when I met gay men in San Francisco, and realized, ‘They’re interested in my ideas,’ I was just overjoyed! . . . The world of ideas and poetry and politics that gay friends would talk to me about, that’s where I felt at home.” But such alliances were fraught with divisions as well. Gay bohemians like Spicer and Ginsberg displayed their fair share of misogyny, and the Denise Levertov once asserted that while she had “individual homosexual friends” she nonetheless found “homosexual males & lesbians uncongenial in groups, when they reinforce each other’s sexism toward heterosexuals.”⁵³

Unconventional women who claimed a public voice within the Rebel Cafe were part of a broad public discussion in which media interacted with subterranean bar talk. The result of this “conversation” helped transform American gender politics. In the throes of such changes there are always contradictory aspects—transitional ideas and figures weaving through the wreckage and survivals of the old ways. Ever a symbol of her times, Marlene Dietrich was still hailed as “glamorous” when the *Village Voice* interviewed her in 1959, even as she went from nightclub chanteuse to advice-expert for housewives on an NBC radio show. “Hopelessly romantic about both people and things,” the *Voice* cooed, “Marlene also gives every impression of being completely self-sufficient and in control of her emotions—characteristics she attributes to the early influence of Goethe and to being raised in the Prussian tradition.” The article completed its multifaceted portrait with a pair of quotes that were emblematic of the fifties’ tenuous feminism.

⁵³ Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 117, 125-6, 138, 392 n. 23. It is worth noting that Levertov’s quote was taken from a letter to Lewis Ellingham on March 26, 1984, well after her conversion to Christianity.

“Little black dresses and pearls / will do things for even the plainest of girls,” Dietrich advised one listener. *The Blue Angel* star then concluded, “Courage is needed to believe in something. Against that stands conformity of attitude and insecurity of judgment.”⁵⁴

ABOMUNISTS IN THE “BOURGEOIS WASTELAND”

As cultural critic Greil Marcus has suggested of Parisian radicals, it appeared to many bohemian-anarchists that “the future of humanity was decided in the cafes,” with spiritual salvation radiating from the culture of the street—or the nihilism of negation.⁵⁵ Yet, out of the bohemian milieu of withdrawal, activist organizing reemerged, as Rebel Cafe denizens connected their politics of place to wider currents—first within local struggles, then in ever-expanding circles. The function of the public sphere is to provide windows of opportunity, possibilities and potential solutions. The application of these ideas is the realm of politics. Even as literary cafes connected a bicoastal and transnational psychogeography, Rebel Cafe nightspots simultaneously rooted communities in place, sometimes as hubs of political activism.

Art D’Lugoff was a case in point, uniting artistic expression with formal protest. From the time he opened the Village Gate in 1958, D’Lugoff provided a physical and social space which challenged the dominant atmosphere of the 1950s through cultural exchange, with a focus on the avant-garde and folk music he had promoted through concerts in Washington Square Park since 1955. These concerts, along with the Gate itself, were key in building the folk-music revival that largely defined Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. In addition, D’Lugoff hosted protests against an April 1961 ban on folk music performances in Washington Square, which was later lifted in response to

⁵⁴ Wilcock, *The Village Square*, 51-2.

⁵⁵ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 284.

popular outcry in the Village.⁵⁶ He continued throughout the 1960s to organize community action groups and to act as a spokesman to the press about concerns in Greenwich Village. As chairman of the Committee for a Vital Village, an organization of nightclub and coffeehouse owners, D'Lugoff advocated restrictions on "slum clearance" that would have diminished the architectural character of the historic neighborhood while forcing out longtime residents. D'Lugoff noted the role of folk venues in maintaining a sense of community, stating that "if the coffeehouses were shut down" Villagers would "lose out entirely because the tenements would be replaced by luxury apartments" unaffordable to either ethnic residents or bohemians. Moreover, this folk culture underpinned later protests against Mayors Robert F. Wagner's and John Lindsay's rezoning and gentrification efforts, which Norman Mailer described as "highways and housing projects gutting the city of its last purchase on beauty."⁵⁷

THE BATTLE OF THE BEATNIKS

Of course, this kind of urban neo-pastoralism was no guarantee of social harmony. Greenwich Village residents complained of the noise made by late-night revelers.⁵⁸ And even as North Beach became established as an alternative community in the mid-1950s, conflicts with neighboring areas flared, fueled by sociocultural differences. In 1956, John

⁵⁶ Edward Downes, "'Poeme' by Varese Has U.S. Premiere," *New York Times*, November 10, 1958, p. 36 and "Rebel from Way Back," November 16, 1958, p. X-11; Maxwell T. Cohen, *The Police Card Discard* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press and the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers, 1993), 56; Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1992), 313; Sukenick, *Down and In: Life in the Underground* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987), 101; Philip Benjamin, "'Villager' Accuser Will Help Police," *New York Times*, April 13, 1961, p. 36 and "City is Criticized on Cafe Licensing," May 10, 1961, p. 32.

⁵⁷ Sidney E. Zion, "Lindsay Placates Coffeehouse Set," *New York Times*, May 3, 1966, p. 49; Sukenick, *Down and In*, 100-101; Norman Mailer, "Lindsay and the City," *Village Voice*, October 28, 1965, in *The Village Voice Anthology*, 113. See also *Greenwich Village News*, September 2 and 8, 1960 for more general accounts of local insistence on neighborhood preservation.

⁵⁸ Murray Schumach, "'Villagers' Are Facing Summer's Din With Quiet Despair," *New York Times*, April 24, 1967, p. 35.

Allen Ryan reported to Jack Spicer that “There is a gang from the Mission District which hangs around North Beach beating people up and one of them has an uncle in the Police dept. They seem on the most part to catch poor innocents, rather than the queers they think they are beating up” And in 1958, bomb threats against Jay Hoppe’s Co-Existence Bagel Shop were followed by a pair of small explosions. The first blew up the plumbing in the club’s restroom, the second—an Army practice charge dismissed by police as “no worse than a big firecracker”—was thrown onto the sidewalk from a speeding sports car, with no resulting damage or injuries.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, a sign on the Bagel Shop’s storefront warned “no more Coexistence, Pressniks go home, this is a tourist trap.” Tourists did disrupt the Bagel Shop’s feeling of community. But more concerning were “beatnik” exposés in the *San Francisco Examiner* and *San Francisco Chronicle* that brought unwanted police attention. The day after the *Examiner* article appeared, an officer walked into the Bagel Shop holding a copy of the Hearst rag and told Hoppe, “Now that you made the papers, you’re going to get in trouble.” Soon after, the *Chronicle* reported, “two cops stalked into the Bagel Shop” and “announced to the assembled beatniks: ‘Awright, we’re gonna vag (charged with vagrancy) anybody who can’t prove employment.’ This was greeted with such a roar of laughter that the cops wavered, fell back, broke ranks, fled in vagrant confusion.” For weeks, officers were posted for “sentry duty” outside the front door, as regular vagrancy “rousts” continued. More damaging was Hoppe’s arrest on a drunk and disorderly charge

⁵⁹ Ryan to Spicer, March 20, 1956, Box 3, Folder 27, Spicer Papers, Berkeley; “Only Dignity Injured in Bagel Shop ‘Bombing,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 15, 1958, “Bagel Interlude: Bomb Jolts Beatniks,” July 21, 1958, “Beatnik ‘Bomb’ Called Harmless,” July 22, 1958, *San Francisco Examiner*, n.p. clippings in “Co-Existence Bagel Shop” File, Examiner Morgue, San Francisco Public Library.

after he was “beaten up by a customer while sober.”⁶⁰

Hoppe sued. But unusually strict police attention continued, particularly targeting Blacks, interracial groups, and gays. Cases of brutality against African-Americans and questionable arrests included an artist, a physician, and an interracial clique swept up in drug stings at nightspots such as the Coffee Gallery. The press evinced these last suspects’ “beatnik” bona fides by their “wisecracking and hip talk” at the police station. They included a writer, a “TV technician and reported Judo expert,” several musicians, and a “nude model at a North Beach figure studio” who “kept her face buried in a paperback James Joyce novel.”⁶¹ Police also burdened The Place with a capacity restriction and the Black Cat with renewed charges of public indecency. Local bohemians were abuzz about the controversy, a sign of the queer-bohemian public sphere’s continued vitality. Robert LaVigne reported to Allen Ginsberg that The Place “balcony [was] condemned and capacity of customers was limited to 24 persons.” He planned to use the resultant publicity to sell paintings, however, turning police attention to his advantage: “I will leak the word secret and the fuzz will come down on things, preferably about the time of my opening at Lion on Polk Street . . . Anyway, the PD is [plaguing] the beach and I may as well get even with them. . . .” John Allen Ryan similarly wrote to Ginsberg, in typically sardonic terms, about the Black Cat’s legal struggles over openly gay customers, relating that owner Sol Stoumen insisted to the liquor board, “QUOTE my patrons are merely

⁶⁰ “Beat Narrative,” dir. Don Vigne (1960) and “Amazing Footage Featuring Christopher Maclaine,” dir. Dion Vigne (c. 1957-60), Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA; Jerry Stoll and Evan S. Connell, Jr., *I Am a Lover* (Oakland: Angel Island Publications, 1961), unpaginated; Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 159-61; Untitled, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 13, 1958, n.p. clipping, “Co-Existence Bagel Shop” file, Examiner Morgue, SFPL; “Ahern Denies ‘Going After’ Bagel Shop,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 8, 1959, n.p. clippings, Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

⁶¹ “This Is a Tale of ‘Beatniks’ . . .” and “S.F. Police Arrest Negro Publisher-Physician,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, August 7, 1959, p. 6; “Bearded Agents Lead Dope Raid on S.F. Beatniks,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 23, 1960, pp. 1 and 4.

members of the bohemian intelligentsia who gather at the Black Pussy to discuss art and semantics UNQUOTE.”⁶²

Organized responses soon materialized as police harassment, combined with the tourist influx, disrupted North Beach’s sense of community. The first, in August 1958, was one part protest, one part performance piece. An interracial group of one-hundred beatniks, “equipped with bongo drums and bagels and booze,” boarded Gray Line buses at the Co-Existence Bagel Shop for a “tourist-tour-in-reverse.” The “tour” took them marching through the “sophisticated” and “un-beat” St. Francis Hotel and other swanky spots chanting “Hello, Friendly Neighbors” and exchanging bagels with an “anti-beatnik” delicatessen. Appropriately, Bob Kaufman led the march, a playful yet sincere claim on public space which combined his Left political past and a performative art-as-life persona. He closed the event with a recitation at The Place titled, “Things We Have Seen in the Bourgeois Wasteland.”⁶³

Kaufman helped revive an impetus for political protest in San Francisco, a “Battle of the Beatniks” with demonstrations against censorship and HUAC, in which he put his organizing experience to work. Fellow North Beachers soon joined him. In early 1959, Pierre Delattre, pastor of the local Bread and Wine Mission—a bohemian institution that offered both cheap meals and poetry readings—organized the “North Beach Citizens Committee,” which advised locals on non-violent resistance and tactics to avoid false arrest. This was followed on January 30, 1960 by a rally of 300 beatniks in San Francisco’s Washington Square Park, decrying police harassment. Speakers called for

⁶² Robert LaVigne to Allen Ginsberg, June 22, 1958, Box 4, Folder 5, and John Allen Ryan to Ginsberg, February 15, 1957, Box 5, Folder 15, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA. See also Jack Lind, *Leo’s Place: An Oral History of the Beats in San Francisco’s North Beach* (Soborg, Denmark: Det Danske Ideselskab, 1998), 92.

⁶³ “Welcome to My Pad? Like Union (Square, Man): 100 Beatniks Visit the Real World,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 12, 1958, pp. 1 and 5; Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 161.

fellow beatniks to stop “performing” for tourists, but also to “Fight back in every legal way” if “roughed up” or “falsely arrested” by police. “I spent World War II fighting for our democracy and I end up by getting about 2 percent of it,” declared artist Jerry Kamstra. Just months later, in a show of bicoastal bohemian solidarity, the Coffee Gallery held a poetry reading to protest the recent shutdown of coffeehouses in the Village. “Much of what was said attempted to draw analogies between coffeehouses of both cities,” reported a local paper, “and the necessity for maintaining an atmosphere of free exchange of ideas within them.” One impassioned speaker declared simply, “We are not second-class citizens.”⁶⁴

Such activism was not without precedent—and in the Civil Rights era, not without significance. In 1952, the NAACP had successfully targeted city officials for discrimination in North Beach public housing—an outgrowth of Italian residents’ resistance to desegregation. Concern over interracial spaces, in fact, was directly stated by some as the cause for suppression of New Saloons, as older residents conflated (not without some grounds) bohemianism, communism, homosexuality, and the fight for civil rights. One owner reported that a San Francisco police officer made this issue explicit, saying, “Why do you allow so many Commies . . . and jigs to patronize this place? After all, if you give ‘em an inch, they’ll take a mile.” At the Washington Square rally, Kamstra chided police, especially Kaufman’s nemesis Officer Bigarani, for their flagrant civil rights violations. In a declaration of interracial solidarity, Kamstra proclaimed, “I admit that if Officer Bigarani is whacking a ‘nigger’ over the head, he isn’t whacking me—but that ‘nigger’s’ head is much akin to mine.” Calling into question a recent raid on

⁶⁴ “Big Beatnik Rally to Protest Raids,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 31, 1960, pp. 1, 5; Lee Stothers, “Protests Doomed to Failure,” *S.F. Territorial News and Hickory Stick Almanac*, Volume 3, Edition 1 (July 1960): 1-2.

a private apartment, he asserted that police “found some authoritative texts on communism, called the occupants filthy Communists, and tore the books apart” before they “handcuffed the owner.” Within months, Kamstra was leading a sit-in protest against HUAC investigations in San Francisco—the start of a career in activism that spanned into the 1970s and included issues such as prison reform and Native-American land rights.⁶⁵

THE REBEL CAFE AND CLASS POLITICS

In New York, taverns like the White Horse and San Remo also contributed to the emergence of wider and more direct politics in the late 1950s. As the “center of community life” for left-bohemians in Greenwich Village, politically-conscious writers like Michael Harrington, James Baldwin, Dan Wakefield, Mary Nichols, George Rawick, and Jane Warwick gathered in their back rooms for a mix of talk, impromptu folk songs, and sexual connection. Formal politics were always an undercurrent as Villagers mixed bohemianism’s personal rebellion with Dorothy Day’s Catholic Workers antipoverty outreach or CORE’s civil rights activism.⁶⁶ “The San Remo, and the Minetta at the other end of the block, were sort of *the* places,” recalled Mary Nichols, “and we would go down to the White Horse and drink with Michael.” Nichols remembers mingling with

⁶⁵ Geographer Brian Godfrey argues that bohemian areas such as North Beach, along with tourism, furthered a politics of pluralism, coalitions, and a “culture of civility,” although this was gained through hard-fought battles by minorities against elites. While bohemians had occasional conflicts with minority populations, subcultures nonetheless offered “internal order and stability” that simultaneously embraced multiculturalism. Clinton Robert Starr, “Bohemian Resonance: The Beat Generation and Urban Countercultures in the United States during the Late 1950s and Early 1960s,” PhD. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2005, pp. 300-3, 311-25; Rigney and Smith, *The Real Bohemia*, 163-5; “Red Probers Booed by Crowd When They Appear on Balcony,” May 15, 1960, “Riot: 60 Wave Trial,” May 28, 1960, Jerry Kamstra, “The Grim Plight,” December 7, 1969, *San Francisco Examiner* and Maitland Zane, “Ex-Smuggler . . . Jailed . . .” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 12, 1974, n.p. clippings in “Jerry Kamstra” File, Examiner Morgue, SFPL; Brian J. Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco’s Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 15-17, 208.

⁶⁶ Jane Warwick Interview, January 6, 1999, Box 1, Folder 96, p.4, George Rawick Telephone Interview, August 17, 1984, Box 1, Folder 71, and Bogdan Denitch Interview, December 21, 1990, Box 1, Folder 14, Maurice Isserman Research Files for *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington*, TAM.239, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University. See also Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 158-9.

patrons as varied as NMU organizers and future senator Patrick Moynihan. “That was part of the scene,” concurred Catholic Worker and pacifist Eileen Fantino Diaz, “not just the Village, but the literary world. A lot of the literary types at the White Horse.”

Wakefield illustrated these social networks and their role in the public sphere, describing the start of his own journalistic career. “I remember somewhere I ran into Mike,” he told Harrington’s biographer, “probably at the White Horse.” They discussed the Emmett Till lynching trial, the subject of Wakefield’s first piece for *The Nation* in 1955, and Harrington asked him to “speak at one of those Friday night sessions at the Catholic Worker.”⁶⁷

For bohemian seekers, this milieu linked transgressive talk and sexuality with working class authenticity. Beat poet Gary Snyder explicitly made these connections in 1960, suggesting that New Bohemia was producing the “only true proletarian literature in recent history—because actual members of the working class are writing it.” This group of “proletarian bohemians” had “chosen to disaffiliate itself from ‘the American standard of living’ and all that goes with it—in the name of freedom.” Snyder noted that Old Left critics decried the Beats’ brand of psycho-politics, to which he retorted that the “class struggle means little to those who have abandoned all classes in their minds and lives,” a “*real* revolution, which starts in the individual mind and body.” Citing Friedrich Engels, Snyder linked the male-breadwinner ethic to militarism and called for the disavowal of both “patrilineal descent” and the “idiocy” of nuclear armament by “keeping out of jobs that contribute to military preparations, staying out of the army, and saying what you

⁶⁷ Mary Nichols Interview, Box 1, Folder 65, p. 2, Eileen Fantino Diaz Interview, March 16, 1995, Box 1, Folder 15, pp. 2 and 8, Dan Wakefield Interview, February 7, 1993, Box 1, Folder 94, p. 1, Isserman Research Files, NYU; Dan Wakefield, “Land of the Free,” *The Nation*, October 1, 1955, Vol. 181, Issue 14, pp. 284-285.

think without fear of anyone.” “There will be no economic revolution in this world that works,” he declared, “without a sexual revolution to go with it.” Sociologist Ned Polsky, while deriding the effectiveness of bohemian withdrawal, nonetheless recognized it as a “virtuous error” and the heir to class politics. In the face of “America’s inequitable distribution of income *and* its increasing depersonalization of work and leisure *and* its racial injustices *and* its Permanent War Economy,” he wrote, “the beats have responded with the Permanent Strike.”⁶⁸

Despite the Beats’ assertions, however, there were very real divisions between their liberated consciousness and the concrete concerns of many workers. These conflicts sometimes played out in North Beach or Village bars, as humorously captured by *Village Voice* journalist J.R. Goddard. Goddard offered an account of his first night in the White Horse, in which his elitist naiveté was indicated by the moniker, “Dartmouth”:

Timidly Dartmouth joined the men, feeling conspicuous in his Brooks clothes. He was. A stocky, red-faced type, with shirt sleeves rolled over his knotty, proletarian arms, frowned and muttered . . .

“You wanna know sumpin? Used to be guys like you never come in here. Now you’re on the joint like flies. You’re ruinin’ the place. Why don’t you go back uptown?”

Dartmouth was getting mad. Which was unfortunate.

“Hey, the scowler persisted. “*I’m* the kina guy belongs here. I belong in this part [of] Green-witch Village, not you.” Suddenly his face beamed with pride. “You know why? I’m a sailor. A ship’s engineer.”

“A ship’s *engineer*,” Dartmouth grinned coldly. “Well, where’s your engine?”

Good night sweet Dartmouth. When flights of Sixth Precinct cops have borne you to your rest at St. Vincent’s you will be glad to learn the jaw was not broken—only badly bent.

Noting the bumpiness of these urban social shifts, Goddard concluded: “The West Village could still brawl . . . and the longshoremen, truck drivers, or white-collar folk . . . whose families had lived around there since the 1870’s and 1880’s, just didn’t take to outsiders.” Beat affinity for seedy joints and flophouse districts like New York’s Bowery

⁶⁸ Gary Snyder, “Notes on the Beat Generation,” in Charters, ed., *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 519-20; Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967, 1969), 155.

and the Mission in San Francisco also frequently included a dash of sardonic humor. As a North Beach visitor from the UCLA History Department wrote to poet Joanne Kyger after making “the Place scene” in 1958: “I’ve changed my mind about the beat gen. after mucking around with them for a night. . . . We were all walking along Grant and I said that the way I figured it, the beach was sort of a farm club for the Mission dist. Yes, said Jerome, Man, I wish I could get on that Mission scene.”⁶⁹

These vignettes shed light on the Beats’ lack of significant cross-class politics. Their disregard for working-class bread and butter issues was related to the bohemian aestheticization of poverty—a cultural thread running back through Parisian cabaret. But it also reflected their correlation of unionism with a monolithic, oppressively impersonal technocracy. “‘Bureaucracy!’ says Old Bull Lee; he sits with Kafka on his lap,” wrote Kerouac in *On the Road*, “the lamp burns above him, he snuffs, *thfump*. His old house creaks. And the Montana log rolls by in the big black river of the night. ‘Tain’t nothing but bureaucracy. And unions! Especially unions!’”⁷⁰

Similarly, jazz musicians regularly clashed with their unions, which had little patience for setting aside minimum pay in the interest of either a foot in the door or benefit shows. And while California nightspots had few problems with the bartenders union, Chicago and New York branches were tainted by organized crime.⁷¹ Illustrating

⁶⁹ J. R. Goddard, “The Wonderful World of the White Horse,” *Village Voice*, June 22, 1961 in *The Village Voice Anthology (1956—1980): Twenty-five Years of Writing from The Village Voice*, ed. Geoffrey Stokes (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982), 93-4; Unidentified “B.F.” to Joanne Kyger, May 9, 1958, Box 18, Folder 26, Kyger Papers, UCSD.

⁷⁰ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), 123-4; Dave Brubeck Papers, Box 1.A.1.13, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA. This concern was similar to C. Wright Mills’ reaction in *The New Men of Power* to the solidification of AFL-CIO power after the war, in a tense cooperation with the federal state, followed soon by the Treaty of Detroit in 1950.

⁷¹ Ingrid Monson, “Monk Meets SNCC,” *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 2, New Perspectives on Thelonious Monk (Autumn, 1999): 187-200; “Gangster Issue Revived over AFL Election,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 21, 1950, p. A-7; Matthew Josephson, *Union House, Union Bar: The History of the Hotel*

the tangled threads of unionism that ran through the Rebel Cafe, one episode at the hungry i, easily misread as union overreach, was actually an extension of the Red Scare. In 1963 the mob-tied and HUAC-friendly International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees “force[d]” the club to fire its light and sound man, the Hollywood Ten screenwriter Alvah Bessie, insisting that the position be filled by a union worker. The IATSE rejected Bessie’s union application, which included questions about CP membership and Bessie’s admission that he had been a press agent for the leftwing ILWU for five years.⁷² While Bessie recognized the source of this affront, more casual observers in the nightclub underground would likely have seen little difference between the IATSE and the ILWU.

FROM NEW BOHEMIA TO THE NEW LEFT

The concoction of Rebel Cafe nightlife and politics frequently connected bohemianism with a range of radical literati and activists, from Norman Mailer in New York, through the War Resister’s League and *Liberation* magazine’s Bayard Rustin, David McReynolds, and Paul Goodman to Tram Combs in the Virgin Islands and Kenneth Rexroth in San Francisco.⁷³ Yet their own work as writers and editors for publications such as the *Village Voice* and *The Nation* undermined the Rebel Cafe’s social function, even as it grew in political significance.

Harrington was a prime example. Beginning his activism as a Catholic Worker, he

and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union, AFL-CIO (New York: Random House, 1965), 211-14.

⁷² “Statement to the Court, 1963,” Box 20, Folder 8, Alvah Bessie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁷³ Tram Combs’s correspondence and literary ties to *Liberation* illustrate these networks. Although he rarely published in the magazine, he identified himself as the “sole subscriber” in Virgin Islands and stayed in contact with editors Bayard Rustin and David McReynolds, also of the War Resisters League. Combs also maintained ties with radical bohemians such as Gerd Stern and Philip Lamantia through correspondence and during visits to New York. See various correspondence, Box 2, Folder 10 and Box 3, Folder 2, Tram Combs Papers, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

formally left the organization in 1953 when he embraced atheism. He continued to collaborate with Day, however, through the period of his leadership in the Young Socialist League (YSL) and, ultimately, in the League for Industrial Democracy, the educational branch of the Left (founded in 1905 by Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and Florence Kelley) that spawned SDS in the early 1960. The White Horse was central throughout his social and intellectual development, as Harrington translated his bohemianism into political action. “We had our tabs, our phone messages, even our mail,” he recalled. “So the Horse fulfilled a classic Bohemian function: it was, to borrow from a French writer, ‘a kind of organization of disorganization.’” Harrington asserted that this was where the American Left and bohemianism “come together”:

When the Beats first came around we had friendly relations with them; they thought we were much too square and organizational, and worrying about things like the labor movement. But a guy like Allen Ginsberg had been an SYLer I believe. He was sort of around the SYL [Socialist Youth League] though his homosexuality would have kept him from being related to the CP. Sometimes after YSL meetings we’d go over and sit in the back room of the White Horse. The thing that kept it from being completely Bohemian was that we were involved in organizing civil rights marches; we were involved in anti-Franco picket lines.

Harrington’s back-room bar talk with Ginsberg, Mailer, or Moynihan, his White Horse debates with local conservatives from Young Americans for Freedom, flirtation with “pretty girls,” and sing-alongs with the Clancy Brothers were woven into his oppositional lifestyle as ways to help process his ideas. After sleeping off these nights until noon, he recalled, “I worked for twelve hours after I got up, reading, writing, or doing socialist organizing. The late night was a gregarious, potentially erotic release from a disciplined existence. The world of nine-to-five was a routine; of twelve-to-twelve a choice.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Isserman, *The Other American*, 219; Michael Harrington, *Fragments of the Century* (New York: Saturday Review Press/E. P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 47-8; Michael Harrington Interview, November 19, 1982, Box 1, Folder 35, Wakefield Interview, p. 14, and Rawick Interview, Isserman Research Files, NYU. If Ginsberg was in the YSL he certainly remained on the fringes. However, it was reportedly a YSL with

“A transcript of a barroom chat with Michael Harrington would read like the first draft of a slightly discursive *New Republic* essay,” wrote one admiring scribbler. But many of his nocturnal interlocutors were surprised by the product of his daytime labor, *The Other America*, not realizing that their discussions were helping distill an important work of social criticism. Published in 1960, this study of poverty in the Affluent Society was groundbreaking, a postwar parallel to Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* that helped spawn Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society legislation. The book solidified Harrington’s position as “a virtual folk hero of the Left,” as captured in J.R. Godard’s article in the *Village Voice* in 1962. “Most know him as the masterful orator of the socialist position,” Godard wrote. “Still others know him as a kind and affable man in his mid-‘30s who tells funny stories in that garrulous Village forum, the back room of the White Horse Tavern.” Now, commentators noted, instead of being “confined to one faction of the Young People’s Socialist League and the back room of the White Horse Tavern,” Harrington was “knighted by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as ‘the only responsible radical in America.’” Although he quickly fell out with SDS over the “Port Huron Statement” in 1962, Harrington was nonetheless a key link from the Rebel Cafe underground to the broad New Left movements of the 1960s, maintaining ties with civil rights groups such as SNCC and, more tentatively, the antiwar movement. Meanwhile, the Rebel Cafe milieu that had helped nurture this new opposition succumbed to its own success. As its underground sensibilities became absorbed into the mainstream and the sixties counterculture, Harrington proclaimed, “America lost that faith in its own

event Max Shachtman that was the source for the line in *Howl*, “who threw potato salad at CCNY lectures on Dadaism.” George Rawick recalled that Lawrence Ferlinghetti also had ties to the Shachtmanites.

philistine righteousness and Bohemia began to die.”⁷⁵

Print culture played a continual role in this widening of the underground public sphere. Rebel Cafe regular and assistant editor at *Mademoiselle* Jane Warwick agreed that, although Harrington was “not a friend of mine because of politics” but “socially and a bar friend,” it was “no accident” that a 1961 article by SDS’s Tom Hayden praising Harrington and proclaiming the start of student activism found its way into the magazine. The magazine’s editors, Warwick asserted, worked to stay “politically . . . on the ball.”⁷⁶ While this still included connections to the nightclub underground, it increasingly meant linking New Left leadership with national issues in the public eye.

Further, in 1961 activist Jane Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which argued that mixed-use development and mutual support were key to urban renewal. Rather than large-scale “slum clearance,” with open green spaces punctuated by high-rise housing, Jacobs called for attention to the human scale of sidewalks and street life, with a mix of housing, bars, shops, and restaurants. Jacobs used the bars of her own Greenwich Village neighborhood as examples. “Strangers become an enormous asset on the street on which I live,” she wrote, “particularly at night when safety assets are most needed. . . . On a cold winter’s night, as you pass the White Horse, and the doors open, a solid wave of conversation and animation surges out and hits you; very warming. The comings and goings from this bar do much to keep our street reasonably populated until three in the morning, and it is a street always safe to come home to.” Rejecting “puritanical and Utopian conceptions” of urban planning, such as Robert Moses’ freeway-focused New York dreamscapes, Jacobs recognized the saloon’s

⁷⁵ Isserman, *The Other American*, 108, 199, 219, 227-9, 270-4; Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 50.

⁷⁶ Jane Warwick Interview, pp. 2, 6, 11-12, Isserman Research Files, NYU.

role within the city's vibrant bustle and motley palimpsest of overlapping layers. "In maintaining city street civilization," she argued, "the White Horse bar and the church-sponsored youth center, different as they undoubtedly are, perform much the same public street civilizing service." During the Washington Square battle, Jacobs put this theory into political practice, helping form the Committee to Save the West Village and using the White Horse and the Lion's Head coffeehouse for campaigning and organizing meetings. Jacobs's alliance with Art D'Lugoff later paid off directly. After she was arrested for disrupting a city council meeting in 1968, the Village Gate held a benefit for her legal defense fund.⁷⁷

Admittedly, Jacobs's depiction of urban life was limited by middle-class notions of aesthetics and lifeways—as well as a too-sanguine view that elided the messier side of the bar business such as drunken fisticuffs or payoffs to both police and organized crime. As Harrington later noted, she also ignored the continued racial tensions in the area, illustrated by a Village Bar called The Ideal, which was "nicknamed The Ordeal by the White Horse regulars" as the "scene of tense confrontations between Bohemia and square America."⁷⁸ Nonetheless, Jacobs's study was a compelling plea for a renewed, humanistic urbanism. At the same time, like Harrington's rise to national prominence, its widespread influence symbolized one of the last gasps of the Rebel Cafe's outsider politics.

⁷⁷ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), 29, 36, 40-1, 244-5; Anthony Flint, *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City* (New York: Random House, 2009), 104, 108, 132, 155, 176. Flint also reports that Bob Dylan wrote a protest song (left unnamed) against the Lomex Cross-town Freeway over Lower Manhattan, yet another small link between the Rebel Cafe and the politics of place. Jacobs did note that too much concentration of entertainment businesses could also have deleterious effects, as seen in the Third Street bar scene in which too many tourists caused disruption and conflict.

⁷⁸ Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*, 150; Harrington, *Fragments of the Century*, 50.

THE BATTLE OF THE BLACK HAWK

The final significant skirmish between the Rebel Cafe and municipal authorities came in January 1961. The previous year, San Francisco's Black Hawk jazz club (now co-owned by Fantasy Records' Max Weiss) had begun a policy of allowing underage listeners to sit in a special section behind the stage, separated from the bar by chicken wire, which enabled them to hear the music without access to alcohol. In response, Mayor George Christopher led an effort to shut down the club, asserting that "the book should be thrown" at the Black Hawk "whether they're breaking the law or not," concluding "I wouldn't want kids in a place like that. They are at an age when they're formulating opinions and their minds beginning to jell. A lot of things can happen."⁷⁹ What became known as the "Battle of the Black Hawk" resulted in vocal protestation from Bay Area denizens against what they saw as a misguided attempt to "clean up" the city. Ralph Gleason led the charge in the *Chronicle*, including a call for poems in support of the club. The *Chronicle* was flooded with letters decrying Christopher's campaign and outside the club the Mayor was "hanged in effigy" by a pair of college students. Supporters pointed to other public facilities, from opera houses to baseball stadiums, where minors were in even closer proximity to alcohol. A vocal defense of jazz as a legitimate art form was a major theme throughout, demonstrating the genre's growing social cachet.⁸⁰ Ultimately, the Alcohol Beverage Control Board (ABC) determined that the Black Hawk had adequately separated minors from the bar and on February 24, Judge

⁷⁹ Donovan McClure, "Police Visit Black Hawk, Play It Cool," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 26, 1961, pp. 1, 4.

⁸⁰ Ralph J. Gleason, "Cops are confused about the Black Hawk," January 26, 1961, p. 27 and "Rhyme Your Squawk about the Black Hawk," January 31, 1961, p. 27, "Letters to the Editor," January 31, 1961, p. 26, and "Christopher Swings at Black Hawk," February 13, 1961, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

James J. Walsh dismissed the case.⁸¹

Much like the Battle of the Beatniks in North Beach, issues of race and gender underlay the Mayor's attack. In a revealing statement, Christopher asserted, "One day a girl will be raped in a parking lot next door. And you know who'll be blamed—me and the chief of police." One incensed letter to the editor confronted the Mayor's stance, asking, "Is he against rape in the parking lot, or is he just against being blamed for it?" Meanwhile, saxophonist Pony Poindexter wrote to the *Chronicle*, arguing that the "alcohol excuse is merely a camouflage for the real issue which is racial integration," since, as a rule, "jazz audiences are integrated." Poindexter concluded, linking the issue with the legitimization of jazz itself: "Mayor Christopher apparently would rather see San Franciscan teen-agers out hot-rodding and drinking than focusing their attention on good jazz and integration." Gleason spotlighted this theme—poignant in the era of sit-ins and Freedom Rides—describing the teen section as "separate but equal facilities."⁸²

Although racial mixing and women's full access to public space were certainly central issues, a more subtle yet equally significant issue was also at stake. Gleason's "Defense of the Lowly Saloon" during the Black Hawk case rested in part on the notion of nightspots as community spaces—a role which the club had indeed played through the 1950s. Mayor Christopher, however, had recognized, at some level, a social shift which Gleason missed. In a decade when teenage autonomy had increased with access to cars and some independent income, combined with massive mobility and suburbanization, the

⁸¹ "Black Hawk Owners Ask Trial," February 1, 1961, Tom Mathews, "Blackhawk Massacres the Mayor," February 22, 1961, pp. 1 and 8, "Mayor Blasts State Over Blackhawk," February 23, 1961, pp. 1 and 7, and "Mayor Taps Foot as Judge Clears Blackhawk," February 24, 1961, p. 3, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁸² "Cops Again Raid Black Hawk, Oust Teen-Agers," January 27, 1961, pp. 1 and 5, "Letters to the Editor," February 2, 1961, p. 26, and Ralph J. Gleason, "A Few Lonely Words in Defense of the Lowly Saloon," February 5, 1961, "This World" insert, p. 25, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

saloon was losing its quality as a *community* institution and instead was becoming a purely *public* one. Black Hawk supporters had unwittingly illustrated this point, arguing that closing the underage section would merely lead teens to “forge ID cards”—a pointless move in a face-to-face community setting.⁸³ Whether or not minors *per se* should be in proximity with alcohol was ultimately not the most important question in the Battle of the Black Hawk (and was settled by the ABC in any event). Mayor Christopher’s failed campaign against the Black Hawk was far more significant as a cultural marker, signaling the beginning of the end of Rebel Cafe nightlife in San Francisco.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL . . .

At the 1960 San Francisco Washington Square rally, a young woman—who refused to identify herself because she had already been “subject to punishment” for speaking out—presciently declared to the crowd the start of “a great American general strike.” While the alliance she envisioned between radical bohemians and “workingmen who have no democracy” never fully emerged, these protests were indeed early salvos in the social justice movements of the 1960s, practice runs for middle-class Euro-Americans who, like Jerry Kamstra, soon joined in Civil Rights and antiwar demonstrations. By 1963 New Bohemia was no longer a marginal culture contained purely in areas like North Beach, the Village, Venice Beach, or Chicago’s Hyde Park. As Michael Harrington later said, stressing “one of the crucial differences between Bohemia and the Counterculture of the sixties and seventies,” “the Village . . . was small and organized on a human scale.”⁸⁴ Increasingly, organizing against the status quo no longer needed small underground sites

⁸³ “Letters to the Editor,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 27, 1961, p. 24.

⁸⁴ “Big Beatnik Rally to Protest Raids,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 31, 1960, p. 5; Michael Harrington, *Fragments of the Century* (New York: Saturday Review Press/E. P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 42.

like the White Horse. Slowly, it began to emerge from the Rebel Cafe into the broad daylight of the streets.

Yet, while 1950s bohemia may have been relatively exclusive, it always existed in dialogue with the larger society. Especially within the dark confines of Rebel Cafes, it brought otherwise hidden social forces aboveground, as the press publicized its quasi-utopian model of sexual experimentation and aesthetically-oriented lifeways. The simultaneous labeling of oppositional culture as “sick,” however, illustrated the era’s dominant notions of homosexuality, and even feminism, as deviant. As a result, oppositional identities often remained performative and limited to particular public spaces, as seen in the sometimes outrageous aesthetics of “camp.” Nightclubs therefore continued to be crucial venues for translating subterranean sensibilities to the surface of American society. Even as jazz-poetry faded from the scene (only to be heard faintly echoed in the rock-music lyricism of Dylan and The Doors or later, in bits and bytes, in hip-hop), new styles of campy decor and stand-up comedy became the Rebel Cafe’s most enduring cultural expressions—as well as the final channels that merged the nightclub underground with the American mainstream.

Chapter 12

“Tin Angels and the Unmasked Man: Authenticity, the Politics of Performance,
and the End of the Rebel Cafe”

Gay Is Good—God Save the Queen!

—José Sarria (c. 1960)

Eavesdropping on human nature is one of the most important parts of a comedian’s work.

—Bert Williams (c. 1909)

“When I was young I often wondered how I appeared to people around me,”

Maya Angelou wrote in her autobiography, “but I never thought to see myself in relation to the entire world.” By the mid-1960s, Angelou was a symbol of global change, a cultural and political leader in the Civil Rights Movement and a participant in the Black Freedom Struggle in Africa, a poet, journalist, and performer on the world stage.¹ As such, she was an emblem of the changes in American society since the end of World War II. The public invisibility of women, African Americans, gays and lesbians had always been an illusion, a lie of omission. In the 1960s, those like Angelou refused to be contained by other people’s perceptions. The Rebel Cafe had played its part in this growth of what is now called identity politics, offering spaces where a sense of self could be nurtured into public visibility and self-determination. Squeezing into tiny cracks in the Cold-War traditionalist facade, queer public figures and bohemian women planted seeds that eventually widened openings for full-fledged feminism and gay liberation, while Black cultural producers smashed the stereotypes that had shaped their oppression. The various cultural tactics and strategies of these groups should not be conflated; they followed whatever means necessary to bring about their own liberation and often took

¹ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 59; Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 138; Ann Charters, *Nobody: The Story of Bert Williams* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 105; Maya Angelou, *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 712, 889.

different, even opposite, paths. They did share a desire to reverse the old order, and the Rebel Cafe was frequently a base of operations.

Perhaps the most significant, and subsequently overlooked, nightclub within this milieu was Peggy Tolk-Watkins's Tin Angel. Through the 1950s, Tolk-Watkins exhibited a brand of personal politics that combined queer culture and unrepentantly individualist feminism, charging the atmosphere of her cabaret with her performative persona and artistic flair. The Tin Angel firmly planted campy aesthetics into San Francisco's bohemia and was an important site for the critical theorist Susan Sontag during her formative years at Berkeley. The club offered psychosexual liberation that deeply influenced Sontag's thinking—especially her groundbreaking work on queer culture and aesthetics—which participated in raising the public visibility, and thus the legitimacy, of homosexuality in the 1960s.

Although identity politics did not reach fruition until the feminist and gay rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, early stirrings were visible in the Rebel Cafe. In 1959, novelist Ann Bannon published *I Am a Woman*, which expressed many of the nightclub underground's sentiments, sensibilities, and settings. Bannon's protagonist, Laura, leaves her father to go to New York, seeking a job and "a few friends." She soon finds her way to the Village, stumbling into a gay bar called the "Cellar," where the patrons looked like "students," with women in cotton pants and men in open-collar shirts. During Laura's introduction to lesbianism, she revels in the Village patrons' "sophisticated sarcasm." After a series of conflicts with lovers and weeks of soul searching, she ultimately finds a happy ending in the Cellar. As Laura kissed her partner, Bannon wrote in classic (if melodramatic) Rebel Cafe style, the reunited couple "turned

and walked into the night toward Cordelia Street.”²

As Bannon’s novel suggests, the Rebel Cafe translated the subterranean ethos for unfamiliar audiences and transmitted these underground ideas into the mainstream. In many ways, the culmination of this process was the satire of African-American nightclub comic Dick Gregory, the last in the line of New Comedians beginning with Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce. With the expansion of the Black Freedom Struggle, Gregory’s satire became an important cultural symbol, a window into the African-American community for Euro-Americans who sought greater awareness and an entertaining yet trenchant form of critique that helped propel the Movement forward. Gregory’s success marked a new moment in American culture, when a Black comedian faced white audiences and openly lampooned society’s foibles and failings. This signaled the removal of the minstrel mask’s vestiges, as Gregory tossed aside the previous generation’s dialect-soaked shuffling or sexual “blue” humor, declaring his authenticity by speaking directly as himself about topical issues. Further, Gregory literally bridged the nightclub underground’s oppositional culture and full political participation, becoming active in the Civil Rights Movement and New Left.

The examples of the Tin Angel, Susan Sontag, and Dick Gregory encapsulated much of the Rebel Cafe’s transformative role and its conclusion. If the Kennedy years were a period of transition from the sheltered 1950s to the tumultuous 1960s, late-1963 was the moment of explosion, a time of triumph and tragic violence. The March on Washington in August marked the high point, followed all-too quickly by the Birmingham Church Bombing and Kennedy’s assassination. These events were graphic

² Ann Bannon, *I Am a Woman* (Greenwich, CN: Fawcett Publications, 1959), 5-9, 27, 30, 33-42, 5, 64-72, 80-90, 193-4, 222-4.

symbols of the sweeping changes in American society and politics. For some, the world seemed to turn upside down, and in a way they were right. The Rebel Cafe underground had surfaced, and the subterraneans took to the streets.

THE TIN ANGEL AND THE POLITICS OF CAMP

As critical theorist Susan Sontag argued in her foundational 1964 essay, “Notes on Camp,” Marlene Dietrich was not only a public model of powerful femininity, but was also associated with the “outrageous aestheticism” celebrated by urbane gay men. Nan Boyd has convincingly argued that this “camp” sensibility contained the potential for political resistance, as seen in the activism of Black Cat drag queen Jose Sarria, whose campaign for San Francisco city supervisor in 1961 energized the Bay Area gay rights movement.³ In particular, the performative aesthetics of camp bolstered the visibility of gays and lesbians in the public sphere. Yet, the lines between sexual and gender transgression should not be drawn too sharply. Bay Area bohemian women also embraced camp’s flamboyant and satirical style, making it part of early feminism’s personal politics. Within the Rebel Cafe milieu, camp was intertwined with performative public personas that opened social space for gender-transgressive behavior and identity. Sontag and Tin Angel owner Peggy Tolk-Watkins, whose paths briefly intersected in 1949, were exemplars of a similar queer-feminist dynamic. Both flouted 1950s gender norms with unconventional styles, working in male-dominated fields while demanding sexual and socio-economic autonomy. Their proto-feminism demonstrated one of the most important aspects of the vaunted 1960s Sexual Revolution: women’s claim on public expression of sexuality. At the same time, Tolk-Watkins’s Tin Angel and Sontag’s

³ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 283; Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 57-62, 210-12, 242.

cultural criticism were part of a newly-visible queer culture.

Peggy Tolk-Watkins was a pivotal underground figure, a subterranean force whose influence radiated into the mainstream far beyond her individual renown. Not a Hipster, she instead was a prime example of both the Flipster and the Holy Fool—an eccentric aesthete who was a transformative model of possibility for those who met her. Bohemian writer Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, whose first significant sexual experiences were with Tolk-Watkins at Black Mountain College in the 1940s, remembered her as central to her own free-spirited identity. “My time at Black Mountain had radically altered the roadmap of my life,” she recalled. “Early in our relationship, Peggy had told me, ‘You’re not a lesbian. You’re just in love with *me*.’ Several other women and many years showed me that she had been right. . . In so many ways, Peggy was my creator. From her, I had learned to be fearless, extravagant, a wanderer, an explorer. She had taught me about pain and obsession, betrayal and ambivalence, risk and reward.”⁴

Tolk-Watkins’s influence was guided by a “spider-web deviousness and humor,” as in the poetry of her whimsical book, “Pigs Ate my Roses,” which spouted lines like, “The red rose has a thorn in its side.” Through her friendship with Fantasy Records’ Max Weiss (who became part owner of the Tin Angel in 1956), “Pigs Ate My Roses” and its author, along with her partner Irmine Droeger and Weiss himself, were featured on the cover of Lenny Bruce’s first album, *Interviews of Our Times*, in 1958. Like Bruce, jazz critic Ralph Gleason wrote, Tolk-Watkins was a “genuine character with a brilliant, erratic mind and a razor sharp wit.” Gleason’s insistence that she “practically invented

⁴ Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, “Peggy,” courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins.

camp as interior decoration” further underscored her bleeding-edge tastes.⁵ Just as Tolk-Watkins’s Sausalito Tin Angel had been an extension of her persona in the late 1940s, the San Francisco location equally expressed her campy sensibility. Its atmosphere was “part Greenwich Village, part Paris,” blending experimental art, cabaret, and queer-culture camp, with intimate tables, Buckminster Fuller globe lights, Renaissance paintings, vintage circus posters, a carnivalesque stage set, and the club’s trademark: a silhouetted tin angel, salvaged from a condemned Manhattan church, spotlighted atop the roof.⁶

For many, the Tin Angel’s Embarcadero milieu—on the waterfront, less than a mile from North Beach—evoked the qualities of a Saroyanesque saloon. While recognized nationally as the club that spawned Odetta’s career, and as a base for Rexroth’s jazz-poetry revival, the Tin Angel was also embedded in the local bohemia. When *Time* covered the jazz-poetry phenomenon, it unconsciously captured close connections that ran from Rexroth’s poetic performances to The Place. Moreover, Irmine Droeger was part of the Bay Area literary-bohemian scene, a former WAC and a journalist who had studied at UC Berkeley.⁷ These links reprised both Tolk-Watkins’s role in the 1940s Iron Pot crowd and her Black Mountain friendship with The Place owner Leo Krikorian. This history also reflected her penchant for bars, which she

⁵ Ralph J. Gleason, “Days of Peggy and Helen,” *San Francisco Chronicle: This World*, July 8, 1973, p. 33; B.C., “And Then There Was San Francisco,” *Metronome*, November 1955, p. 23, clipping courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins.

⁶ Gleason, “Days of Peggy and Helen”; “Tin Angel Is Peggy’s—Sale Off,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 6, 1956, n.p. clipping in Examiner Morgue, SFPL. Fuller briefly taught at Black Mountain in the 1940s.

⁷ “Agreement” contract: Peggy Tolk-Watkins and Irmine Droeger v. Tin Angel, Inc. (Max Weiss, et al.), Dismissal of Superior Court of California Case# 473967, July 30, 1961, courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins. Droeger enlisted in 1944, her occupation listed as a reporter and editor. World War II Army Enlistment Records, Records of the National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 64, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Suzette, “Pot Pourri of Romantic News, Travel and Fashion Shows,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 28, 1961, p. 17. Like Tolk-Watkins, Droeger displayed some amount of sexual fluidity, marrying Allen Steltzner in 1961. The Steltzners’ son, Adam, has recently gained fame as a former rock musician turned NASA engineer, as he led the landing team for the successful Mars mission in 2012.

frequented “for the conversation and the drinks,” as well as friendships with jazzmen such as Dick Mills, whose social circles overlapped with the Beats.⁸

In 1955 Tolk-Watkins expanded, opening the Fallen Angel at 1144 Pine Street, just north of the original Black Cat’s old cabaret district. Columnist Herb Caen quickly placed Tolk-Watkins in this bohemian genealogy, proclaiming her “the logical successor to Izzy Gomez” as the “village character.” The theme of the club’s opening night, Caen reported, was the “Terrible Twenties,” replete with local socialites in flapper and Chaplin costumes. Capturing the evening’s Flipster-Holy-Fool-as-usable-past atmosphere, Caen concluded, “All in all, it seemed like a party out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald nightmare . . . He would have loved all of it—the empty gin bottles, the empty champagne bottles, the empty-headed madness of it all.” The building’s legendary history as madam Sally Stanford’s former brothel further enhanced the Fallen Angel’s allure, underscoring Tolk-Watkins’s aura of gender transgression and free sexuality. Caen noted that the guests included “Mme. Stanford herself, looking around nostalgically at the scene of past glories (there was enough necking in dark corners to make her feel at home).” The Fallen Angel allowed middle-class patrons to display their sophistication within a safely performative public space—perhaps best illustrated by the fountain in the club’s atrium, which spouted sparkling burgundy and was scheduled to feature stripper Tempest Storm in a “milk bath.” Storm backed out, however, stating her fear that “someone might attack me.” In response, Caen reported, “Miss Tolk-Watkins jumped in, clothes and all. She was not attacked.”⁹

⁸ “The Cool, Cool Bards,” *Time*, December 2, 1957, p. 71; Brio Burgess, *Wail! An American Journey: A Novel in Autobiographical Vignette Form* (Tempe, AZ: Jacob’s Ladder Books, 2002), 47-9, 26-34; John Allen Ryan to Jack Spicer, March 20, 1956, Box 3, Folder 27, Jack Spicer Papers, BANC MSS 2004/209, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁹ Herb Caen, “La Triviata,” December 1, 1955 and untitled, October 17, 1955 and December 7, 1955, *San Francisco Examiner*, n.p., clippings in “Fallen Angel,” Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

Tolk-Watkins's queer-feminist persona was embodied in her self-presentation: when not dressed in period clothing for big nights like the Fallen Angel opening, she preferred Brooks Brother's shirts and corduroys, which she tailored and dyed pink, orange, or red—colors repeated in the Tin Angel decor. Her pixie-crop hairstyle, at once reminiscent of the Jazz Age and—as she often declared—Prince Valiant, topped off her sartorial statements. Tolk-Watkins completed her cross-dressing usable-past persona with a series of aliases, from “Bubbles Rabinowitz” to “Snowwhite Goldstein,” which, with Beat-like word-playfulness, simultaneously satirized the names of infamous San Francisco madams and her own Jewish heritage.¹⁰

This intertwining of lesbian and prostitute overtones made Tolk-Watkins's milieu symptomatic of Cold War-era sexual transgression. As historians Nan Boyd and Donna Penn have argued, “The very essence of the lesbian, like the prostitute, was an expression of uncontained female sexuality,” a defiance of women's ideological containment. This was seen concretely in underground North Beach bars such as Tommy's, where lesbian owner Tommy Vasu welcomed prostitutes as patrons in the early 1950s. Conversely, however, with the statistical reality of increased middle-class female sexual activity since the 1920s, prostitution diminished, making it a small-scale street business, as lavish bordellos like Stanford's became unviable after World War II.¹¹ The Tin and Fallen

¹⁰ Author Interview: Ragland Tolk Watkins, December 4, 2012, New York, NY and “Peggy Tolk Watkins,” courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins, author's possession. See Curt Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco: An Irreverent History of the City by the Golden Gate* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), especially pp. 163-6, 275-8, and 310-11. Sally Stanford was clearly a kind of model or mentor for Tolk-Watkins, a fiercely independent woman who ran her own restaurant in Sausalito, the Valhalla, after closing her brothel on Pine Street. Born Mabel Busby, Stanford herself “collected” nom de plumes, including Marcia Spagnoli and Claire Gold, which, along with risqué Gay '90s such as Dolly Adams, clearly inspired Tolk-Watkins's aliases. Stanford also embraced political activism, often speaking out on issues in Sausalito and making an impressive, through unsuccessful, run for city council in 1962.

¹¹ Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 83-8; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, Second Edition), 256-64.

Angels, therefore, were spaces in which new notions of sexuality could be publicly explored, with Tolk-Watkins as a sort of socio-sexual scout, guiding initiates through unfamiliar territory and translating the transgressions of places like Tommy's into legible terms for middle-class patrons.

Although the Fallen Angel closed within a year and Tolk-Watkins sold the Tin Angel space to jazzman Kid Ory in August 1958, she was not afraid to come out swinging once again, immediately opening a third Tin Angel on Vallejo Street which lasted through 1960. Meanwhile, an incident in a Sausalito nightspot demonstrated Tolk-Watkins's determination to claim social space on her own terms. As she was drinking at the bohemian Bridgeport Inn, a young man reportedly approached Tolk-Watkins's "girlfriend," with the result that the Tin Angel owner "splintered a glass over [his] head." The conflict continued next door, at Leo Krikorian's cafe, the Kettle, where, "Before it was over, three (3) other free spirits . . . went through two (2) plate glass windows. No one was hurt." In a follow-up report in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Tolk-Watkins insisted, "I didn't hit him with a glass, I whacked him with my fist. If I'd hit him with a glass, he wouldn't have been able to walk."¹² While perhaps fueled by alcohol, this incident both paralleled Tolk-Watkins's assertiveness in the largely masculine world of nightspot owners and was a forceful defense of her queer identity.

This identity was inextricably linked to her performative, cosmopolitan, and edgy Tin Angel persona. Tolk-Watkins was, as Gleason put it, the quintessential nightclub "raconteur," always ready with a clever quip and with "the knack, as had some of the

¹² "Ralph J. Gleason, "The Kid Is Down 'On the Levee' Blowing Good," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 14, 1958, "This World" insert, p. 25; Herb Caen, "Business as Usual," September 25, 1956, "Sausalito's Free Spirits Swing Into Action," May 27, 1959 and "It Was a Fist, Not a Glass," June 2, 1959, *San Francisco Chronicle*, n.p., clippings in "Tolk-Watkins" Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

most successful night club entrepreneurs in New York and Paris, of getting interesting people to come to the club regardless of the entertainment.” A letter to friends Bill and Joan Roth in 1960 contained some of what must have greeted patrons at the Tin and Fallen Angels. Opening with the salutation, “Sunday 8 A.M. Happy Easter . . . (If J.C. could get up early so can I.),” Tolk-Watkins proceeded to detail the legal and financial problems of the Tin Angel, as her current partners failed to pay the water, gas, and electric bills or file unemployment and union paperwork. “Then finally down to the last bottle of very ordinary white wine and a suggestion from Internal Revenue that we get the federal tax stamp,” she complained. “With fastidious partners like these I should be able to embrace my enemies.”¹³

Nonetheless, Tolk-Watkins marched on undaunted. “I am in excellent humor lately,” she wrote. “As my mother Sadye said so profoundly, ‘My Peggy had such a happy childhood, she feels guilty, that’s why she’s going to a doctor. . . .’” After declaring that “I decided to give up all booze for the summer also reading MAD Comics,” she concluded with a statement that encompassed her wit and fierce independence:

I decided no matter what happened to the famous Tin Angel, to my law suits, to my adoring lovers?, to my disenchanted with me family . . . the atom bomb and my P.G. and E. bill, I was going to paint paintings. . . . I felt and feel deliciously ruthless and strong in my need and desire to come hell or high water paint . . . Actually my son and my paintings and my friends are the only things I love and need and give me dignity and potency.

She concluded by relating an act that encompassed both her role as the Flipster and the Holy Fool, a symbolic rejection of the trappings of postwar media and materialism:

¹³ Gleason, “Days of Peggy and Helen”; Peggy Tolk-Watkins to Bill and Joan Roth, undated (c. 1960), courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins (also archived at the San Francisco Historical Society). This appears to have been just before the closing of the second San Francisco Tin Angel at 728 Vallejo Street. The second partner was former basketball star George Walker. See Dick Nolan, *San Francisco Examiner*, December 4, 1958 and April 7, 1960, n.p., untitled clippings in “Peggy Tolk-Watkins” File, Examiner Morgue, San Francisco Public Library

“Actually this rebirth began very few days after an evening that WITH NO AUDIENCE AND DEAD SOBER I KICKED THE TELEVISION SET DOWN THE STAIRS AND RIGHT OUT THE DOOR AND OUT OF THE HOUSE . . . FOR REAL. (and it’s not easy to be suave when you have a spiral staircase.)”¹⁴

Tolk-Watkins’s use of the term “audience” was appropriate. Despite the fact that she was not a performer in a traditional sense, her public persona, combined with her work as a painter, approximated what would come to be known as performance art—an heir to the Dada tradition. Tolk-Watkins’s primitivist paintings garnered positive reviews during an exhibition at San Francisco’s De Young Museum and she provided the album cover for Brubeck saxophonist Paul Desmond’s first solo album, released on Fantasy Records in 1956. As Fantasy co-owner Saul Zaentz wrote in its liner notes, “The album represents the first serious attempt to fuse primitive art with modern jazz.” Zaentz added that “Tolk-Watkins has a permanent exhibition on display at one of the nation’s finest galleries, the Fallen Angel in San Francisco.” This intertwining of jazz-bohemian aesthetics and performative identity continued through the De Young showing, with Tolk-Watkins humorously proclaiming to the press that one of the paintings was a forgery. According to one compatriot, she “wanted to set up her easel in the de Young and copy her own painting so that she could hear what the spectators were saying,” wryly adding another layer to her “forgery” hoax, but the museum objected. Another story has it that she once showed up at a friend’s house “wearing a Persian lamb fur coat from the thrift store and a Jackie Kennedy mask. When she took off the mask she had on a Hitler

¹⁴ Tolk Watkins to Bill and Joan Roth.

Mustache.”¹⁵ For Tolk-Watkins, the division between life and art simply offered more opportunities for provocative transgression.

In addition to the Tin Angel’s publicly performative role, the club served private mutual aid functions much like The Place did for local bohemians. Its “hat-check girl,” for example,” was Tolk-Watkins’s mother Sadye, who lived in a nearby low-rent hotel and acted as a motherly mentor to neighborhood prostitutes. Legends abound concerning Tolk-Watkins’s largesse with Tin Angel employees, ranging from freely sharing money from the till for medical bills to giving a Jaguar to a waitress when the car didn’t meet expectations. (“Before she let her actually take it,” recalled her son Ragland, who was living with his father after the couple became estranged in the early 1950s, Tolk-Watkins took the hood ornament off the car, “and mailed it to me in Mississippi because I had always loved it.”)¹⁶

Such generosity (or, as her son says, “Generous or a show-off—I’ve never been able to determine”) was tempered by nightclub economics, with higher operating costs than bohemian bistros, as well as her mercurial nature, which sometimes resulted in poor treatment of employees. And many of Tolk-Watkins’s financial problems were her own, as alcohol abuse complicated an already unpredictable business—another tale of creative self-destruction paralleling those of Jack Kerouac or Lenny Bruce. Moreover, San Francisco’s complex sexual politics tempered the Tin Angel’s liberatory potential. Perhaps fearing a shutdown by authorities if the club developed a reputation as a queer

¹⁵ Burgess, *Wail! An American Journey*, 50; “Self-Taught Painter Shows at De Young,” *Independent Journal*, December 31, 1961, n.p. clipping, courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins; William Albert Lanier, *Albert’s Stories* (Self-Published, 2003), p. 27, courtesy of Ragland Tolk Watkins, author’s possession.

¹⁶ Watkins, “Peggy Tolk-Watkins.”

venue, Tolk-Watkins sometimes refused admittance to overtly gay or lesbian patrons.¹⁷

Yet, even after the Tin Angel closed for good in 1960, she demonstrated an anarchist-bohemian spirit that skirted feminism and queer culture, maintaining a presence in Sausalito's saloons, such as Krikorian's Kettle. Artist and writer Brio Burgess remembers Tolk-Watkins as a mentor from the time she met her in 1963 until the nightclub owner's death from cancer in 1973. Tolk-Watkins helped Burgess's brother get a job at the Kettle and shared a house with the siblings in the late 1960s, offering Burgess space and time to write. Throughout, Tolk-Watkins steered Burgess through her development as a nonconformist "using a dialectical method of telling me a story and then asking me to tell . . . what she said in my own words." These sessions also included moments of outrageousness, with Tolk-Watkins's "drug- and alcohol-inspired performances" as a "folk musicologist" who sang songs "when she was 'in her cups', quite often around 4 a.m." Burgess nevertheless claimed Tolk-Watkins as a central influence, a model of possibility for a new generation of outsider women. Writing in 2002, Burgess concluded: "Peggy was a poet and a painter, a mother and a nightclub owner, an entrepreneur, an operator, a godmother and a comedian, a tragic clown. She was rough, she was tough, and had been built to last . . . she's lasted in my mind for over thirty years."¹⁸

"AN EROTICS OF ART": SUSAN SONTAG AND THE REBEL CAFE

The brief moment when Tolk-Watkins's path crossed with Susan Sontag's was auspicious for the development of American culture. Many of the same broad socio-cultural forces that inhered in the Tin Angel's performative sensibility later came through in Sontag's criticism. Her experiences in Sausalito and North Beach in the late 1940s

¹⁷ Author Interview with Ragland Tolk Watkins.

¹⁸ Burgess, *Wail! An American Journey*, 47, 89-90.

helped direct a life journey that took her through the bicoastal and transnational bohemia to her position as a public intellectual. Born Susan Rosenblatt in 1933, then taking her stepfather's surname in her teens, the precocious student began undergraduate studies at UC Berkeley at age fifteen. Soon after her sixteenth birthday in January 1949, Sontag met a group of literary bohemians in Berkeley's coffeehouse scene, including Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, who worked at the campus bookstore. Zwerling encouraged her to attend a Saturday-afternoon class on Samuel Johnson, after which she introduced Sontag to San Francisco's queer-bohemian set at the Black Cat and lesbian hangouts such as Mona's, where she first met and Peggy and her husband, Ragland "Rags" Watkins. Zwerling then took her to the original Tin Angel in Sausalito.¹⁹

Sontag recorded the process of her intellectual and sexual awakening in a series of notebooks, which traced, in her words, a "juvenile" exploration of aesthetics and the Self through the full flowering of her ideas in the early 1960s. Her entries in May 1949, after she met Zwerling, were particularly significant. They reveal the unfolding of a new consciousness, an inchoate intellectualism on the cusp of sophistication. "I am not living up to the whole of myself," she wrote, "I am not filling my moments, I am not growing widely enough." The notion of life itself as aesthetic became particularly important for Sontag's thinking. Amid philosophical musings on "meaning" and "causality," Sontag played with the conventions of novel writing, wondering whether her own work could be "heavy, mytho-poetic—(like [Djuna] Barnes)" and testing plot ideas such as, "*The life, life as The aesthetic phenomenon.*"²⁰

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1964*, David Rieff, ed. (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2008), 23-5.

²⁰ "Notebook # 21, 7 May, 1949 – 31 May, 1949," Box 123, Folder 5, Susan Sontag Papers, (Collection 612), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

Sontag's experiences with North Beach nightlife, the Tin Angel, Tolk-Watkins, and—most significantly—Harriet Zwerling were crucial catalysts for her ideas about the inseparability of aesthetics, performativity, sexuality, and identity. This transformation revolved around a pivotal moment: the weekend of May 21, 1949, when Zwerling first took Sontag to North Beach and Sausalito. On the train from Berkeley to San Francisco, Zwerling already began to crack Sontag's "sardonic-intellectual-snob pose," arguing that fellow students who denounced her liberated notions of sexuality were "narrow and insensitive and not alive." "I felt Harriet to be right," Sontag noted. "That I was not horrible . . . And I need so to be rid of that consciousness of being sinful." The pair first went dancing at Mona's with Rags and Peggy, then to 12 Adler (where "Henri, the owner, wears a beret") and the Paper Doll for beer and bar talk with local bohemians, before driving to Sausalito in Tolk-Watkins's orange and pink Model A Ford. "The ride to Sausalito is over the Golden Gate Bridge," Sontag gushed, "and while Peggy and Harriet were sitting next to me and necking, I watched the bay and felt warm and alive . . . I had never truly comprehended that it *was* possible to live through your body and not make any of these hideous *dichotomies* after all!"²¹

On their arrival, Sontag recorded, this sense of possibility bloomed into the realm of experience, all within the confines of the nightclub:

Peggy's place was on the right side of the street on the dock . . . [S]he and Rags are opening . . . a tiny joint—food, as well as liquor, and a band every Saturday night—called the Tin Angel. When we walked back I discovered two more girls plus Peggy's baby son . . . The idea of Peggy's harem seemed very ridiculous—I especially wondered how Rags took it . . . but it became obvious that they all loved Peggy that much—(who, as Harriett told me, has an enormous need for sexual infidelity) and, of course, a lover does not love on the conditions that his love will not cause him pain or be unfaithful . . .

"By this time," she concluded, "both the baby (crying) and one of the girls—named

²¹ Sontag, *Reborn*, 24-7.

Mary—was awake, although the other—a blonde named Willi refused to be mauled into consciousness—The three of them want to sleep in the other bed, and Harriett and I went in to sleep on a narrow cot in the back of The Tin Angel . . .”²²

Much as Tolk-Watkins had done at Black Mountain, Zwerling now awakened Sontag to a wider spectrum of sexuality. “Perhaps I was drunk, after all, because it was so beautiful when Harriet began making love to me,” Sontag confided. “The first time Harriet kissed me, I was still stiff, but this time it was just because I didn’t know how, not that I didn’t like it (as with Jim) . . . [W]e talked some more, and just when I became fully conscious that I desired her, she knew it, too.”²³ Over the next few days, Sontag recorded her post-sexual transformation:

23 May, Monday: This weekend has been a beautifully patterned summation and, I think, a partial resolution of my greatest unhappiness: the agonized dichotomy between the body and the mind that has had me on the rack for the past two years. . . . [It] could not have been more perfectly timed—And I *was so close to completely negating myself* of surrendering altogether. My concept of sexuality is so altered—Thank god!—bisexuality as the expression of fullness of an individual . . . I know now a little of my capacity . . . I intend to do everything . . . to have one way of evaluating experience—does it cause me pleasure or pain, and I shall be very cautious about rejecting the painful . . . I shall involve myself wholly . . . *everything matters!* The only thing I resign is the power to resign, to retreat: the acceptance of sameness and the intellect. I am alive . . . I am beautiful . . .

Acknowledging the “wonderful widening of my world which I owe to Harriet,” Sontag wrote, “Everything begins from now—*I am reborn.*”²⁴

The affair lasted only a few more weeks—until Zwerling moved to New York—during which time Sontag witnessed the riotous behavior of Bay Area bohemia, including the opening of the Tin Angel during which “Rags and Peggy got very drunk, naturally, and broke one of the windows.” Like many in the Rebel Cafe’s bohemian milieu, Sontag

²² “Notebook #21,” Box 123, Folder 5, Sontag Papers, UCLA. See also *Reborn*, 25-6. In the margin of the original notebook, omitted from *Reborn*, is written “Peggy Tolk-Watkins.”

²³ Sontag, *Reborn*, 27.

²⁴ “Notebook #21,” Box 123, Folder 5, Sontag Papers, UCLA; Sontag, *Reborn*, 27-9, 34.

made sense of her experiences through the lens of the literary past, even as nightspots were places of experimentation for her “adolescent” stage of intellectual development. In particular, Djuna Barnes, the subject of her B.A. thesis, was a touchstone. Describing a night in the Paper Doll, Sontag noted that “we realized what a parody of *Nightwood* this all was.” Meanwhile, she had received a scholarship to the University of Chicago, where she moved that fall. Sontag periodically met with Zwerling back in San Francisco, including once at a party where she “almost went to bed with Peggy’s husband, Rags, but finally—not to disgrace my sex!—slept with Harriet,” whom she found “even more magnificent than I remembered her.” But the two gradually grew apart and in Chicago, Sontag briefly settled down, marrying sociology instructor Philip Rieff, although she and Zwerling occasionally rekindled their romance in New York and Paris as the decade wore on.²⁵

Throughout the 1950s, the Rebel Cafe continued to play a role—albeit one of diminishing importance—as Sontag sharpened her ideas and cultivated her career as a critic. Although most of her journals from 1950-57 were lost, the entries that bookended this period make it safe to suppose that, much like the Beats, bohemian cafe culture was a continual aspect of her life. In August 1949, for instance, next to lists of subcultural gay slang (including “straight (east),” “jam (west),” and “*Jonny—Dietrich . . . Short Haired Woman*”), Sontag made a list of parallel San Francisco and New York nightspots, such as the Black Cat and San Remo. She began to move back and forth from New York to Paris, all the while reading Joyce, Kafka, Marx, Rabelais, and Baudelaire. And she mused about city life, American politics, psychology as an expression of the Enlightenment, Paul

²⁵ Ibid, 31-2, 36; “Notebook #21,” 5/28/1949, 3/23/1950, 4/3/1950, and 4/22/1950, Box 123, Folder 5, Sontag Papers, UCLA.

Goodman's anarchist ideas, and the relation of sexuality to intellectualism. In 1956, planting the seed of her sixties sociocultural stance, she noted the two "attitudes I can't tolerate": "1. anti-intellectualism among intellectuals 2. Misogyny."²⁶

Sontag found cafe life in Paris and New York to be comparable. In both cities, she interacted with fellow left-literary figures like Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Simone de Beauvoir in sites like the Deux Magots and the Cedar Tavern. "The city as labyrinth," she wrote in Paris, noting the urban psychogeography in Joycean terms. "This, among other things, attracts me." Returning to New York in early 1959, Sontag remarked on the city's "ugliness," but continued: "I do like it here . . . In NY sensuality completely turns into sexuality—no objects for the senses to respond to, no beautiful river, houses, people . . . Nothing except eating, if that, and the frenzy of the bed." Critiquing her chosen milieu, Sontag noted in 1957 that the "Essence of Bohemianism is envy—must be a solid intelligentsia to which it is peripheral—can only exist in certain communities—e.g., S.F., N.Y. . . . [or] Black Mountain, etc." Yet Village bars like the San Remo and Cedar were a regular part of her social and intellectual exploration. These were places where she publicly displayed her ideas and identity, as captured in her concept of "X"—"when you feel yourself an object, not a subject"—a state defined by a performative persona of "boasting & name-dropping" or "being very cool." Indiscretion, she wrote in 1960, "is a classic symptom of X. Alfred [Kazin] pointed this out at the White Horse the other night." Looking cynically at her own role in Rebel Cafe circles, she concluded: "How many times have I told people that Pearl Kazin was a major girlfriend of Dylan

²⁶ Sontag, *Reborn*, 44, 70, 160-83, 198-208; "Notebook # 22, 1 June 1949 - 16 September 1949," Box 123, Folder 6, "Notebook # 24, 28 December 1949 – undated," Box 123, Folder 8." "Notebook 1956-1957," Box 123, Folder 10, "Notebook, 1957-60," Box 124, Folder 5, "Notebook, 1960," Box 124, Folder 6, and "Notebook, 1963-5," Box 124, Folder 11, Sontag Papers, UCLA.

Thomas? That Norman Mailer has orgies? That [F.O.] Matthiessen was queer? All public knowledge to be sure, but who the hell am I to go advertising other peoples sexual habits?”²⁷

While Sontag’s 1966 breakthrough collection of essays *Against Interpretation* cannot be reduced to her experiences at the Tin Angel and other nightspots, it nonetheless bears the clear stamp of the Rebel Cafe. The text delineated a new view of aesthetics and was the first major published work on camp, reflecting the sensibility among “small urban cliques” of “seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon.” With an opening epigraph by Oscar Wilde, stating, “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible,” Sontag argued against a false division between form and content. “Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art,” she asserted. “It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories.” Conversely, she argued, art should be integrated into life. “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings.’ It is to turn *the* world into *this* world,” Sontag wrote. “The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us.”²⁸

“To avoid interpretation, art may become parody,” she continued, reflecting her notation in 1957 that parody was “the most forceful *denial* of . . . [dialectical] values—full of mockery—to use their form while inverting their content.” Camp “introduces a

²⁷ Sontag, *Reborn*, 95, 173, 220, 159, 244. See also Alice Kaplan, *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

²⁸ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 274, 277, 10, 7, 14.

new standard: artifice as an ideal,” a “comic vision of the world” that laughed away the pretense of surface appearance in order to discover its affective quality. With this recognition of art as an unmasking tactic, Sontag demanded a recognition of aesthetics as sensual experience, a call for “Transparency” as the “most liberating value in art,” a means to authenticity through “experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are.” She entreated critics to “*see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” and to embrace camp’s capacity to neutralize “moral indignation” as it “sponsors playfulness.” Sontag concluded with a phrase that clearly echoed the Tin Angel’s performative sexual aesthetic, asserting the preeminence of subjective identity over standards of objectivity—a unity of Eros and culture—stating, “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”²⁹

Sontag correctly noted that camp’s new, largely gay, sensibility was “disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical.” Yet the social forces that produced its postmodern aesthetic were part of the rise of identity politics, in which the ostensibly biological categories of gender and sexuality gained sociopolitical valence. While Sontag never fully engaged as a queer activist, her characterization of camp helped legitimate gay life as worthy of intellectual exploration.³⁰ Performative approaches to liberation were not universal in the 1960s, however. While queer communities found freedom in performativity, the Civil Rights Movement demanded the *removal* of pretense, a recognition of humanity and citizenship that dismantled stereotypes by establishing African-American identity as authentic. Culturally, this approach was well-established by

²⁹ Ibid, 10, 13-14, 288; “Notebook, 1957,” undated, Box 124, Folder 1, Sontag Papers, UCLA.

³⁰ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 277. For a brief but cogent queer-feminist view on Sontag’s public role, see Yoshie Furuhashi, “Sexing Susan Sontag,” in *Solidarity* (May-June 2005) <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/287> (accessed July 10, 2013).

the end of the 1950s, in music, from bebop to blues, and in Hollywood, where Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier had entrenched a new image of the Black leading man as both urbane and tenacious. Even on TV (despite southern affiliate objections), interracial performances were more frequent than is commonly recalled. More telling was the lack of interracial nightclub comedy, with white audiences entertained almost exclusively by white comics, as Black comedians remained on the “Chitlin’ Circuit” of African-American clubs. Euro-American audiences were just not willing to face having their foibles publicly satirized by Black comics.³¹ In 1961, as the Movement began to peak, that suddenly changed.

“IF THERE’S ANY RESENTMENT IN THE HOUSE, GET UP, BURN YOUR CROSS AND LEAVE!”: DICK GREGORY, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND THE POLITCS OF CELEBRITY

On May 11, 1964, several hundred African Americans took to the streets of the small Eastern-Shore community of Cambridge, Maryland, to protest a planned speech by Alabama’s segregationist governor George Wallace. Demonstrations, rent strikes, and clashes with National Guard units, fueled by anger about unemployment and unfair housing practices, continued off and on for two weeks. A handful of Guardsmen suffered minor injuries (mostly from friendly fire), but teargas used to disperse the crowds possibly contributed to the death of an already-ill African-American infant. As anger at Guardsmen flared into bottle- and rock-throwing (and the Maryland Commission on

³¹ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 253-8, 302-8, 367-9, 380-3; Arthur Knight, “Movies and the Racial Divide,” in Murray Pomerance, ed., *American Cinema of the 1950s: Themes and Variations* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 222-43; Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 70-9. Doherty is correct to point out that perpetual reruns of domestic sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* have whitened collective memory. Variety shows such as the *Original Amateur Hour* that featured Black performers were live and not recorded, making them impossible to syndicate and adding to the image of a lilywhite 1950s. Yet he overstates the significance of such performances, as they rarely featured material that challenged the cultural status quo, with edgy comics such as Moms Mabley and Redd Foxx banned from the airwaves. See also Andrew J. Falk, *Upstaging the Cold War: American Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy, 1940-1960* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 175-7.

Interracial Problems ineffectually proposed bringing in Billy Graham to calm both sides), civil rights leader Gloria Richardson enlisted the help of Dick Gregory, who flew from New York to give a performance in hopes of focusing demonstrators and keeping the peace.³² In the previous three years, Gregory had rocketed to national stardom on the nightclub circuit, with two best-selling albums and multiple TV appearances. But he had also become active in the Civil Rights Movement, taking part in demonstrations in Mississippi and Alabama. His words carried weight with the protesters who packed the Cambridge Elk's Hall to hear him. "When you can make them laugh in this situation," he told a reporter, "you're making headway. It was most important that the message of non-violence go over."³³

Equally important, Gregory's words carried weight in the White House. On May 28, with the Civil Rights Act stalled under Senate filibusters, President Lyndon Johnson kept a concerned eye on Cambridge, summoning Attorney General Robert Kennedy to the Oval Office to update him on developments. Kennedy suggested that a federally-assisted jobs plan might quell the unrest, but noted that it had been difficult to build consensus during the chaos. "In the first place, the Negroes don't know what they want," he said condescendingly, "and I'd prefer that we can find out from them exactly what

³² "Negroes in Cambridge Protest Wallace Talk," *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1964, p. 4; Douglas D. Connah, Jr., "Negroes Hold New Protest in Cambridge," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 13, 1964, p. 48; "Claim Tear Gas Killed Negro Baby," *Boston Globe*, May 14, 1964, p. 28; "Tear Gas Not Cause Of Baby's Death," *Boston Globe*, May 15, 1964, p. 26; "Negroes Plan A Rent Strike In Cambridge," *The Washington Post*, May 22, 1964, p. F-10; "New Protest March Held in Cambridge," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 23, 1964, p. 32; "Soldier Shot, Others Hurt in Maryland: Guardsmen Put Down Racial Demonstration," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1964, p. 12; Douglas D. Connah, Jr., "Gregory Cancels Show, Bids Whites Close Theaters Too," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 28, 1964, p. 50.

³³ B.D. Ayres, "Tension in Cambridge Lessened by Gregory," *The Washington Post*, June 1, 1964, p. A-6; Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 6, 1961, p. 19; "Making it Big," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 16, 1961, p. 18.

they're interested in—and Dick Gregory's been some help on that.”³⁴ On May 31, Gregory told the crowd about the White House plan, asking for a day of calm while the details were hammered out. “If you don't hear anything tomorrow,” he warned, however, “you'll know they've chickened out. You know what you have to do then. You have to go back into the streets again.” The next day, Kennedy and the Secretary of Labor announced a \$93,000 program for Cambridge's Black community as “a beginning toward providing education and training for people who feel there is no future for them.”³⁵ On June 19, after waves of protests across the country, the Senate passed the landmark Civil Rights Act, which Johnson signed into law on July 2, 1964.

While the Cambridge uprising certainly illustrated how public pressure can drive policy, it also encapsulated Dick Gregory's sociocultural role. Far more important than his tiny part in the passage of the Civil Rights Act was Gregory's public persona, his work as a comic satirist that was inseparable from his political engagement. At first blush it perhaps seems odd that a nightclub comedian should be called on to mediate a serious social conflict, especially when a call to Billy Graham had failed. But in the context of American race relations—and the Rebel Cafe—it makes perfect sense. Gregory was the Rebel Cafe's living legacy. Just as the Beats, Bruce, and Sahl pricked the pretensions of the postwar mainstream, Gregory marshaled the notion of authenticity to become the first Black standup comedian to find wide success with white audiences, performing in clubs such as the Blue Angel and hungry i. Dick Gregory publicly examined the African-

³⁴ “The Nation: Civil Rights: Attempt at Cloture Due Soon,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1964, p. F-5; Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, Presidential Tapes, May 28, 1964, Miller Center Online, http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/presidentialrecordings/johnson/1964/05_1964 (accessed December 7, 2011).

³⁵ “Plan to Ease Cambridge Tension Set,” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 1, 1964, p. 36; “Federal Project To Aid Negroes In Maryland,” *The Hartford Courant*, June 2, 1964, p. 11-C.

American comedic mask and, by doing so, removed it.

This was a decided break from previous African-American comedy. The dissemblance and misdirection of the trickster, and the pathos and primitivism reflected in Rourke's "Negro" archetype, deeply tied to minstrelsy, had been the norm well into the twentieth century, as Black comedians were forced to hide signs of discontent behind bumbling Sambo characters. Even respected comics such as Bert Williams donned the "burnt cork" of blackface, a mask that confirmed white expectations of shuffling "darkies"—expectations underscored by the violent reaction to his sans-blackface appearance in the 1914 film *Darktown Jubilee*, when white audiences nearly began a race riot. These performative elements continued through characters such as Stepin' Fetchit and Amos 'n' Andy into the 1950s, even as more sophisticated comedians like Moms Mabley and Redd Foxx turned to the raunchy "blue" material of Black nightclubs and party records, which white audiences stereotypically associated with hyper-sexuality. As African-American humor scholar Mel Watkins has argued, Gregory was the comic who finally removed the mask, refusing to play either the clown or the blue humorist. Standing before Euro-American audiences simply as himself, Gregory used comedy to address the issues that were meaningful to him and, by extension, to the Black community. So doing, he publicly revealed his full humanity, an act inherently tied to the goals of the Movement. As Gregory told *Playboy* interviewer Paul Krassner just after the Cambridge protests, "I've been able to help all organizations—the NAACP, CORE, SNCC, the Urban League—because when I come in to help, I don't come in associated with any one group. All they associate me with is Dick Gregory."³⁶

³⁶ Rourke, *American Humor*, 82, 92-5, 99-100; Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture*,

DICK GREGORY AND THE REBEL CAFE

This breakthrough was the culmination of New Comedy. In addition to Sahl's and Bruce's advance guard, other significant developments in comedy had occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The comedy duo Mike Nichols and Elaine May, starting at the Blue Angel, broke big in 1958. Growing from Chicago's Compass Theater, whose roots were in Hull House community theater and the theories of Bertholt Brecht, this style of improvisational humor became increasingly popular, peaking with television's *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s. Nichols went on to spread the Rebel Cafe sensibility to Hollywood as he directed films such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*—as did Woody Allen, who began his career at the Bitter End and the hungry i. Bill Cosby would later do the same for television. Equally important was Phyllis Diller, who started at San Francisco's Purple Onion. Following edgy pioneers like Mabley, Belle Barth, and Rusty Warren, Diller legitimated stand-up as a woman's pursuit, with her reversals of standard jokes about stale marriages that led to a long and successful TV career.³⁷ But Dick Gregory not only capitalized on and disseminated the nightclub underground sensibility. He was a more significant path-breaker, not because of some simple tally of oppression and resistance, but because his career actually blended the Rebel Cafe with a major political movement, making him its most vital, if overlooked, exemplar. And, along with Bruce, broad acceptance of his humor signaled the moment when the Rebel Cafe became

from *Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 62-3, 68, 76, 102-3, 192-3, 313, 373, 499-501, Paul Krassner, "Dick Gregory," *Playboy*, August 1964. See also Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³⁷ Janet Coleman, *The Compass* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); Giovana P. Del Negro, "The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy: Gender, Class, Assimilation, and Whiteness in Postwar America," in Leonard J. Greenspoon, *Jews and Humor* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011); Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003). It is interesting to note the similarity between Nichols and May and the style of Joanne Kyger's *Carola Letters* which Kevin Killian compares to Noel Coward.

indistinguishable from American culture as a whole, the moment when it was no longer underground.

Richard Claxton Gregory was born in 1932 and grew up in a poor family in St. Louis, raised by a single mother who remained an object of his affection and admiration throughout his career. He attended Southern Illinois University on a track scholarship, but his comedic talents first bloomed while in the army, where he won a talent contest. In the late 1950s, he began to perform in small “working-class” Black clubs like the Esquire Show Lounge in Chicago, and for six months in 1959 he ran his own joint, the Apex. With shades of the New Saloon ethos, Gregory remembered that the Apex “had been something like a home” for him and his staff, but financial pressures forced him to close down. By the new year, Gregory had clawed his way into Roberts Show Club, known as the largest Black nightclub in the country, where he was filmed for a TV documentary, *Bell & Howell’s Close Up!*, performing a satirical bit on segregation for an interracial audience. Between Roberts and other gigs, including a “beatnik coffeehouse off Rush Street, the Fickle Pickle,” Gregory developed a reputation in Chicago as a solid comic.³⁸

But the place that “opened the door to the top” for Dick Gregory was Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Club. On January 13, 1961, the club’s manager called Gregory’s agent with news that comic Irwin Corey was sick and they wanted Gregory as a substitute. When he arrived, the manager nearly sent him home, having not realized that the club had been booked by a convention of Southern frozen food executives. Gregory, “cold and mad and . . . broke,” insisted the show go on. Despite resistant patrons’ “dirty, little insulting statements,” Gregory’s routines soon won them over. “Good evening ladies and

³⁸ Dick Gregory, with Robert Lipsyte, *nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), 1-65, 105-7, 127-8, 137; “Club Apex Offers Hit Acts, Fine Music, Food,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 10, 1959, p. 18; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 286-7.

gentlemen,” he began, “I understand there are a good many Southerners in the room tonight. I know the South very well. I spent twenty years there one night.” Gregory continued with deceptively self-deprecating quips which actually cut the heart of structural racism in America: “You see, when I drink, I think I’m Polish. One night I got so drunk I moved out of my own neighborhood.” By the time he finished, “that room broke and the storm was over.”³⁹

Gregory later recalled that “before Hugh Hefner brought Dick Gregory into the Playboy club, a black comic was not permitted to work white night clubs in America. You could sing, you could dance. But you couldn’t stand flat footed and talk to white folks.” Yet this moment meant more than just breaking the comedy color line. Hefner’s Playboy Club was a conscious attempt to bring an underground aura to the surface, signaling the point when the Rebel Cafe milieu was mainstream enough to be commodified by a corporation more interested in profits than politics. Recognized by subterraneans as an “ersatz” nightclub, Hefner nonetheless concocted a balanced mix of the urban demimonde’s masculine, transgressive sexuality and hints of oppositional liberalism—bolstered by his vocal support of Lenny Bruce and civil rights. This particular blend of nightclub “sophistication” traded on subterranean cultural currency, giving him the social space to break previous taboos and providing a high-profile stage for Gregory’s talents.⁴⁰

³⁹ Gregory, *nigger*, 142-4.

⁴⁰ Megan Burke and Maureen Cavanaugh, “Comedian Activist Dick Gregory Is Still Speaking His Truth,” February 2, 2011 in <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2011/feb/22/comedian-activist-dick-gregory-still-speaking-his-/> (accessed January 10, 2012); Eugene Brooks to Allen Ginsberg, November 19, 1962, Series I, Box 1, Folder 13, Allen Ginsberg Papers, MS# 0487, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 65-73, 141-8; Hugh M. Hefner, *The Playboy Philosophy* (Chicago: HMH Publishing Co., 1963), 10-17, 27-35; Thomas Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise: The Playboy Vision of America* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 24-77.

Gregory was conscious of his relation to the nightclub underground. “If I’ve done anything to upset you,” he quipped, “maybe that’s what I’m here for. Lenny Bruce shakes up the Puritans; Mort Sahl, the conservatives; and me—almost everybody.”⁴¹ Yet he was not produced by the Rebel Cafe milieu, but rather was an heir to its progressive legacy. Gregory’s humor, while owing some debt to Sahl, was often conventional, with hipper versions of vaudeville jokes (“Say, who was that crazy chick I saw you with yesterday?” “Man, that was no chick, that was my brother—he’s just got a problem.”) or old-school zingers (“My wife can’t cook. How do you burn Kool-Aid?”). But mostly, Gregory reflected the folk humor that was, as Watkins notes, “common currency in black communities” during his youth—often used as a defense mechanism in a hostile world (“A redneck walks up to a Black man about to eat a chicken dinner and says, ‘Boy, whatever you do to that chicken, I’m gonna do to you.’ The Black man picks up the chicken and kisses its ass.”).⁴²

But the Rebel Cafe *was* fundamental to Gregory’s rise by offering a ready-made institution to legitimate his approach. A deluge of press coverage praised Gregory’s performances at clubs like the Village Gate, the Blue Angel, and the hungry i (although fellow Black comics like Nipsey Russell and Slappy White complained that the young upstart was pilfering their material). Throughout, Gregory subtly steered expectations onto his own terms. “They call me the Negro Mort Sahl,” he quipped to audiences. “In the Congo they call Sahl the white Dick Gregory.”⁴³ This Rebel Cafe legitimization was

⁴¹ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 503.

⁴² Dick Gregory, *In Living Black and White* (Colpix Records, 1961; Collector’s Choice Music, reprint, 2008); Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 291; Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 92, 498.

⁴³ Ted Watson, “Comedians ‘Warm’ Behind Dick Gregory’s Success,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 4, 1961, p. A-23; Arthur Gelb, “Comic Withers Prejudice Clichés,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1961, p. 34. See also, Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 290-1 and Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 498.

underscored by Gregory's second album, *East & West*, which prominently proclaimed that it was recorded live "At the Blue Angel" and "At the hungry i." At the Blue Angel, Gregory joked about local politics ("Mayor Wagner said, 'Put me in office and defeat the bosses,' and I thought *he* was the boss. . . . Wouldn't it be wild if twenty years from now you really found out your mayor was Adam Clayton Powell?") and smoothly linked the city's atmosphere to both Cold War concerns and civil rights. "How about them East German Freedom Riders, aren't they weird?" he asked. "Just goes to show you we're not the *only* ones! Yeah, you've been reading about the East German Freedom Riders, jump in the truck, put the gas pedal all the way down to the floor, look neither left or right, crash through everything. In New York we call them cab drivers."⁴⁴

At the hungry i, Gregory's direct connection to the nightclub audience was even more apparent. Coming onstage after Enrico Banducci's introduction, Gregory immediately addressed an audience member in the front row:

You didn't clap. That's right, you must clap when I come out. I don't mind you not clapping when I go off, because if you don't clap then, that means you didn't dig me, you know. But when I come on and you don't clap, that makes me think you resent me. This is different.

"If there's any resentment in the house," he proclaimed, "get up, burn your cross and leave!" When the laughter and applause died down, Gregory began to talk with the crowd, asking patrons where they were from and what they thought of the hungry i. When one man answered boldly that he was from New Orleans, an unsettled hum went through the audience. "Louisiana's alright," Gregory quickly quipped. "Hell, you people could go to South Africa and be considered liberals." A New Yorker, asked by Gregory whether he had ever seen a club like the hungry i before, insisted that he had. "No, there's no place is

⁴⁴ Dick Gregory, *East & West* (Colpix, 1961; reprint, Collector's Choice Music, 2008).

the world like this crummy joint,” the comic rejoined. “This is a basement! Three dollars a head they charge you . . . I bet you don’t go in your own basement for free. Ever been in a club with no tables? It’s sort of like drinking in church!” Noting North Beach’s tourist trade, Gregory quipped that the hungry i was “sort of like a nice place to visit but you wouldn’t want in your own neighborhood.”⁴⁵

Cementing the civil rights implications of this line, Gregory queried a couple from Chicago’s North Side, “You ever go back? You’re in for a hell of a surprise, my brother just moved in there a couple of weeks ago.” “And you heard what Bobby Kennedy said,” Gregory concluded, “that thirty years from this year a Negro could become president. . . . If I was president . . . I think I’d grab Satchmo and make him Secretary of State. Dizzy Gillespie would be my Vice-President. And I’d give you a job, just so they won’t say I’m prejudiced. That’s what I would do my first day in office. My second day I’d take Georgia, North Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama and make it an H-bomb testing area.” Yet Gregory offered more than a simple dismissal of the backward South lagging behind the enlightened North. “It happens all over,” he said. “But up north we’re more clever with it. . . . When the Negroes move into one large area and it looks like they might control the votes, they don’t say anything to us—they have a slum clearance. You do the same thing out here on the West Coast, but you call it freeways.”⁴⁶ Within the intimate confines of the nightclub, Gregory’s audience rapport and quick wit created a deliberative space in which white audiences faced the complexities of Black life in America—a perspective that was rare in a media environment that kept a keen eye trained on southern Jim Crow, while remaining largely

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

blind to the blight of the northern city.

Equally important, as Gregory became active in civil rights protests in 1962-3, politically-conscious club owners like Enrico Banducci and Art D'Lugoff accepted his frequent last-minute cancelations and continued to supply him with steady income. In May 1963, when civil rights leader Medgar Evers called for his participation in Jackson, Mississippi demonstrations during Gregory's run at the hungry i, the comic approached Banducci and "told him I wanted to leave, that my people needed me. A white man, and he had waited all year for my engagement, but he never batted an eye."⁴⁷ D'Lugoff both offered Gregory this flexibility at the Village Gate and participated, along with press agent Ivan Black, in organizing and promoting Gregory's causes. This included his 1964 "Xmas for Mississippi" program, which airlifted 25,000 frozen turkeys to poor families after state food assistance was cut off in retaliation against demonstrations and voter registration drives. In turn, D'Lugoff traded on Gregory's aura of authenticity, simultaneously promoting him as a "satirist of the general fraud" who was "virtually the house comedian at the Gate," and "no longer a mere comedian but a national institution in the fight for civil rights of all Americans." In this way, both Gregory and the Gate established their bona fides in a tradition of socially-conscious entertainment that stretched back to the Popular Front.⁴⁸

Gregory underscored this dialectic of authenticity when he determinedly returned to the hungry i following Evers's murder in 1963. When asked by a friend how he could possibly go on stage and be funny, he replied that "when a man sells his talents he's a prostitute, and when you're a prostitute you lay like the customer wants you to lay." By

⁴⁷ Gregory, *nigger*, 181.

⁴⁸ Press release, November 27, 1964 and undated, Box 18, Folder 6, Ivan Black Papers, JPB 06-20, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

summer 1964, Gregory estimated that he had personally donated around \$100,000 to the cause, while forfeiting upwards of \$250,000 in bookings. He later recalled the Village Gate as both a financial supporter, but also a hub in social networks that actively advanced the civil rights cause. In a mid-1960s interview following one show at the Gate, Gregory insisted that even as the New Comedians risked “upsetting someone,” the necessity of educating audiences about “social problems and social conditions” made them a necessary force. He was adamant that “we need good comedians just as much as we need good leaders.”⁴⁹

“A MAD NEGRO IS SOMETHING ELSE”: THE FUNNY MAN AND THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Gregory appeared at a time when white America was looking for Black spokespeople, seeking clues to penetrate the apparent opaqueness of Black culture (which even extended to political demands, as seen in Gregory’s mediation between the White House and Cambridge protesters.) What is often called the “modern civil rights movement”—from Rosa Parks’ bus boycott through the 1964 Freedom Summer—was only new for *Euro-Americans*; *African Americans* had been demanding their rights since Reconstruction. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896, for example, was a backfired attempt to *challenge* emerging Jim Crow laws, a clarion call to uphold the Fourteenth Amendment which fell on deaf ears in the Supreme Court. Now, in the 1960s, white America was finally beginning to hear what Black America had been saying all along.

In a 1961 article in *Swank* magazine titled, “Dick Gregory: Desegregated Comic,” African-American writer John Williams described this translational dynamic.

Characterizing the comic as a jazz fan, but not a hipster, he noted that Gregory used hints

⁴⁹ Gregory, *nigger*, 191; Krassner, “Dick Gregory.” For an example of this financial challenge at ground-level, see “Cabaret in Queens Drops Dick Gregory,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1963, p. 38; Dick Gregory and James R. McGraw, *Up from Nigger* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), 87-9, 150-1; Larry Wilde, “Dick Gregory,” in *The Great Comedians* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1968), 256, 260, 264.

of Black dialect to put white audience at ease. At the Blue Angel, he cracked up the “99 per cent White” audience with topical jokes about race. These included jabs at owners Max Gordon and Herbert Jacoby for trying to make him feel at home with “black olives” in his martini and lampooning then-Vice President Johnson’s Texas roots, saying that Kennedy “wanted to build a great cross on the lawn of the White House, but he was afraid the Vice President would burn it.” These jokes, Williams asserted, revealed the “innermost thoughts of Negroes under oppression,” even as they partly assuaged the white “guilt” of the club’s “hip patrons.” Amid economic pressures and racial unrest, Gregory acted as a “timely safety valve, draining off that tension,” even as his persona transcended minstrelsy’s trappings and whittled away at stereotypes.⁵⁰

The variety in Gregory’s media reception was revealing, indicating his role across racial lines. The white press praised him as part of the thaw in Cold War comedy since “the height of the McCarthy reign of intellectual terror, when all humor seemed to have gone underground.” Yet they distinguished him the “sick” New Comedians, softening their assessment by asserting that Gregory was primarily “psychological.” White journalists also emphasized the comic’s rapid rise as an “overnight hit” and, unsurprisingly, focused on Gregory’s race—while usually complementing him as “not militant” on the “race issue.” The independent press, unsurprisingly, embraced Gregory, as in the 1963 *S.F. Territorial News* article by Al Capp calling for the comic’s presidential nomination (a proposition he would take seriously five years later). Capp noted that Gregory’s “profession has been to sell decency, wrapped in humor, for a profit,” discussing “the problems of American life and politics in public halls,” which he found

⁵⁰ John A. Williams, “Dick Gregory: Desegregated Comic,” *Swank* (August 1961) in *Flashbacks: A Twenty-Year Diary of Article Writing* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 231-9.

superior to the candidacies of an auto executive or the heir to a “whiskey fortune.” The Black press offered a different shading, as Gregory’s act treated “race *problems* in a lighthearted vein.” While noting his move into nightclubs like the hungry i, and television shows such as *Jack Paar* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*, African-American journalists equally emphasized Gregory’s “dogged determination and perseverance” through college and years of small club work, as well as his experiences of “both poverty and frustration in his rise to stardom.” As the *Baltimore Afro-American* declared, “He takes racial discrimination and turns it into humor.”⁵¹

As Gregory’s activism heated up, however, his TV appearances dried up in equal measure. His cultural role remained inherently tied to nightclubs, where the performance’s significance was in the very physicality of the sensory experience, as well as the immediate impact of the performer-as-artisan. This experiential mix was highlighted in Gregory’s accounts of performances for white audiences, such as his debut at the Playboy Club. While it would certainly tax the imagination to think that the southern businessmen returned home as converts, preaching desegregation as a result of Gregory’s influence, it is just as certain that his material was not the kind previously seen or heard on TV or radio. Moreover, the southerners had *experienced* this fresh perspective in an immediate, “tactile” way. The resulting impact stemmed not simply from the “authenticity” a firsthand performance, but from the immersion within a fully-human social space—the built environment of the club. This was seen in Gregory’s

⁵¹ John Crosby, “Humor Bubbles Back Onto American Scene,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 1961, p. A-23; John L. Scott, “Gregory Success in Local Debut,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1961, p. B-7; Gelb, “Comic Withers Prejudice Clichés”; Al Capp, “I Nominate a Decent Man,” *S.F. Territorial News*, Vol. IV, no. 11 (May 22, 1963), p. 8; Tan Entertainers Grab N.Y. Nitery Spotlight,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 13, 1961, p. 15 [emphasis added]; “Determination pays off at last for comic Dick Gregory,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 11, 1961, p. 15.

interaction with hungry patrons, for example, and his comments on the club itself. Social space was therefore central as he tailored his material for white patrons. He pointed out that, for white comics, a female patron leaving her table for the restroom was an opportunity for a humorous, if crass, remark. But both Gregory's and audiences' awareness of interracial taboos made such moments tense, as comedic expectations clashed with racial and gender norms. Yet this subtle interjection, which called attention to sensitive cultural codes, only heightened the impact of Gregory's challenges to other taboos, as he noted the absurdity of social distinctions based on skin color. "Wouldn't it be a hell of a thing if all this was burnt cork," he quipped, "and you people were being tolerant for nothing?"⁵²

This method of lifting the mask had its limits. Demonstrating what Du Bois termed "double consciousness," Gregory was well aware that he had to simultaneously tailor his material for white patrons and address undercurrents of racial tension. Not only did he go "digging into musty old books on humor" in order to "figure out what Whitey was laughing at" (including, "mother-in-law jokes and Khrushchev"), he addressed racist language head on. Gregory insisted, reflecting the individualist liberatory postwar ethos, that this allowed him to be "colored funny man, not a funny colored man," to stand onstage as "an individual first, a Negro second." Linguistically, he sometimes handled racist hecklers with evasion, such as adapting Moms Mabley's line, "You hear what that guy just called me? Roy Rogers' horse. He just called me Trigger." More often Gregory was direct, as in the title of his 1964 autobiography: *nigger*. His strategy here turned racism against itself, as revealed in the memoir's dedication: "Dear Momma—Wherever you are, if you ever hear the word 'nigger' again, remember they are advertising my

⁵² Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 442, 287; Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 496.

book.” To nightclub audiences, he simply announced, “You know, my contract reads that every time I hear that word, I get fifty dollars more a night. . . . Will everybody in the room please stand up and yell nigger?”⁵³

Unlike Bruce, however, Gregory matched his challenge to *The Word* with satirical critiques of structural racism. As said in one of his most pointed routines:

The President is willing to give Lockheed \$250 million. . . . When it comes to giving welfare layouts to black folks, so many legislators say, “They ought to learn to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.” So I sent the president of Lockheed Aircraft a telegram. . . . “Why don’t you learn to pick yourself up by you own landing gear?” I just can’t understand Lockheed asking for all that welfare money and they don’t even have any illegitimate planes!

In the conclusion of his autobiography, Gregory brought together threads of liberationism and structural criticism, calling for white Americans to “learn to love and hate us as individuals,” even as he called for a “revolution” against “a system where a white man can destroy a black man with a single word.” Moreover, he connected this with both a recognition of race as a social construct—a product of consciousness—and the notion of America’s global mission. “Every white man in America knows we are Americans. . . . So when he calls us a nigger, he’s calling us something we are not, something that exists only in his mind,” Gregory declared. “[If] I have called [an object] something it is not . . . I’m the sick one, right?” He continued, “Something important happened in 1963, and . . . for some reason God has put in your hands the salvation of not just America . . . but the salvation of the whole world.”⁵⁴

In the context of twentieth-century racial constructions, in which massive Black migrations from the South to northern and western cities created cultural and spatial structures that were analogous to immigrant communities, Gregory’s translational social

⁵³ Gregory, *nigger*, 105, 132, 134-5; Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 291-2.

⁵⁴ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 502; Gregory, *nigger*, 208-9, 201-2.

role for white audiences paralleled that of Sahl and Bruce as the fourth archetype of American humor, the Immigrant. But within the Black community, his use of celebrity in support of the Movement was considered that of a moderated militant. In cities like Greenwood, Mississippi, Gregory gave fiery speeches that shocked even local African Americans, who were unaccustomed to openly challenging the white power system. Moreover, historian Stephen Kercher is mistaken to lump Gregory in with Bruce's "exaggerated sense of heroism." Unlike many celebrities who dashed to demonstrations and briefly entertained protesters before heading back to more cushy climes, Gregory marched on the front lines, subject to the same abuse and arrest as SNCC or CORE foot soldiers. Yet Gregory never held his tongue, skirting the line between nonviolent resistance and confrontation, responding to hostile police with lines like, "Your momma's a nigger. Probably got more Negro blood in her than I could ever hope to have in me."⁵⁵ While some critics within the Movement questioned this tactic, it certainly bolstered the resolve of local protesters who had rarely, if ever, seen such bold resistance.

When asked about the Movement interfering with his career, Gregory retorted, "Funny you should ask, I keep asking myself, 'Is my career interfering with my demonstrations?'" Even as he recognized the value of visits by celebrities such as Lena Horne, which "did a lot of good for the people, to hear someone they idolize say: 'I'm with you'," Gregory took a more participatory approach. "It always amazes me to see how the Southern white folks will knock themselves out . . . to slip into a Negro meeting, and we haven't gotten around to wanting to slip into a Ku Klux Klan meeting," he announced to a crowd in Selma, as his wife Lillian sat in jail for demonstrating. "I think

⁵⁵ Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 409; Gregory, *nigger*, 170, 178; "The Nation," *New York Times*, April 7, 1963, p. E-1.

that speaks for itself. The whole world wants to slip in and be around right and good and Godliness, but only fools want to be around filth.” In his autobiography, Gregory vividly illustrated the paradox this double-standard posed to Euro-Americans who wished to maintain the social fiction of racial inferiority. During a demonstration in Greenwood, he suddenly faced an angry local with a shotgun aimed square at his gut. Too tired and scared to move, Gregory challenged the local to “just kill me,” to “pull that fucking trigger.” “And that no-good dirty mother-fucker was so hung up on his hate weed that he lowered his shotgun and turned and walked away,” he reported. “He just couldn’t do anything a Negro told him to do.” Gregory continued in terms that evoked the true grotesquery of racial segregation: “A Southern white man. Only thing he has to be able to identify with is a drinking fountain, a toilet, and the right to call me a nigger.” In response, Gregory reported, the protesters were “screaming and laughing and the white cops up front looked pale. The crowd wasn’t afraid of them. . . . A scared Negro is one thing. A mad Negro is something else.”⁵⁶

Gregory displayed his moderated militancy discussing Malcolm X in a 1964 interview with *Playboy*. Yet even as he showed a partial transition to Black Power, Gregory still resisted its more exclusionary aspects:

Playboy: Malcolm is an advocate of Negro violence in self-defense, whereas you’ve said that you’re committed to nonviolence. Yet recently at Carnegie Hall, you were applauded by a biracial audience when you spoke about “the phoniness of nonviolence.” How do you reconcile this seeming self-contradiction?

Dick Gregory: Many clapped because they’re *not* committed to nonviolence, and they thought because I was speaking about the phoniness of nonviolence, that I was saying let’s fight the white man. But I wasn’t saying that. I was saying that anything built on a false premise will not exist very long. The philosophy of nonviolence will not last very long in this country, because all nonviolence means is that the Negro don’t hit a *white* man; but if a Negro kill

⁵⁶ Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 443; Gregory, *nigger*, 176, 200-1 See also Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 150-1 and Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 2007), 172, 197-8.

Malcolm X, he'd be cheered by many nonviolence-loving whites. "If every Negro said 'I'm nonviolent,' white folks would love it," he said, illustrating the difficulties of the African-American oppositional tightrope act. "But if we had to fight Russia and we said we're nonviolent and don't believe in killing nobody, we'd be hauled off to a concentration camp and shot."⁵⁷ This moderated militancy made Gregory more than a cultural symbol. He was a transitional figure who helped bring underground opposition out into the daylight, even as its tentative interracial alliance would largely split under the weight of liberal inability to address the demands of Black Power. Throughout, Gregory remained steadfast in his determination to be more than merely a celebrity cheering from the sidelines; he got into the game. During the Watts uprising in 1965, Gregory took a bullet in the leg while trying to help calm the crowds—a clear sign that his activism was no joke.⁵⁸

. . . AND INTO THE STREETS

Gregory's appearance at the Playboy Club had marked the end of the Rebel Cafe as a postwar sociocultural phenomenon. His subsequent shows at the hungry i or Village Gate were merely residual—an extension of their long-held ethos. Gregory's assertion that no previous Black comic could "stand flat footed and talk to white folks" was largely true: Black comedian Godfrey Cambridge's Village Vanguard performances in the 1950s went unnoticed by scholars for so long because it was an infinitesimally small blip on the national cultural radar. Yet it was also unremarkable within the nightclub underground's long history of challenging racial norms; Cambridge hardly seemed out of place in a nightclub culture that had regularly welcomed Dizzy Gillespie's interracial jams and

⁵⁷ Krassner, "Dick Gregory."

⁵⁸ Dick Gregory and Sheila P. Moses, *Callus on My Soul: A Memoir* (New York: Dafina; Kensington, 2003), 110-11.

spoken-word performers like Canada Lee. The difference was that Gregory's Playboy Club appearance was anything but underground.

Of course, the notion of the underground as separate from the broader culture had always been an illusion—as the very spatial logic of the metaphor demands:

“underground” has no meaning without reference to street-level. But as the Loyal Opposition moved out of the cellars and into the streets, the illusion no longer served its social function. Cultural developments such as Sontag's criticism and Gregory's rise merely lifted the veil. Without the hocus-pocus, rebel culture simply became American culture. And slowly fading, like a whiff of stale smoke from the open door of a bar, the Rebel Cafe disappeared.

Conclusion

“Playboys and Partisans: American Culture, the New Left, and the Legacy of the Rebel Cafe”

To John Dillinger and hope he is still alive.

Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1986

Thanks for the wild turkey and the passenger pigeons, destined to be shat out through wholesome American guts. Thanks for a continent to despoil and poison. Thanks for Indians to provide a modicum of challenge and danger. Thanks for vast herds of bison to kill and skin leaving the carcasses to rot. Thanks for bounties on wolves and coyotes. Thanks for the American dream, to vulgarize and to falsify until the bare lies shine through. Thanks for the KKK. For nigger-killin’ lawmen, feelin’ their notches. For decent church-goin’ women, with their mean, pinched, bitter, evil faces. Thanks for “Kill a Queer for Christ” stickers. Thanks for laboratory AIDS. Thanks for Prohibition and the war against drugs. Thanks for a country where nobody’s allowed to mind their own business. Thanks for a nation of finks. Yes, thanks for all the memories—all right let’s see your arms! You always were a headache and you always were a bore.

Thanks for the last and greatest betrayal of the last and greatest of human dreams.

—William Burroughs, “A Thanksgiving Prayer”

“Love-fuck,” began Charles E. Artman, addressing the Student Union during a Berkeley Free Speech Movement rally in 1965. “It means a great deal to me. I don’t know what you are laughing for—I’m serious. . . . Sexual fucking, as I understand, was a part of the way[s] of living of . . . [the] early Christian community. . . . Well, I think it is about time . . . that we change them back to what they were originally meant to be.” To which the crowd applauded generously.¹ Such public use of controversial and confrontational language was one of the legacies of the Rebel Cafe—and in particular Lenny Bruce, whose obscenity trials made him a model for young radicals seeking to express their outrage during the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the US invasion of Vietnam. Throughout the Berkeley protests, Bruce was invoked—sometimes in name, often in spirit—as students struggled to forge their own modes of resistance.² The new consciousness of the Beats also found audible expression in Artman’s call for a re-

¹ Free Speech Movement Papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, Container 2, Folder 4, Speaker to Student Union 3-5-65 Noon Rally.

² FSM Papers, Carton 2, Folders 4-53, Carton 3, Folders 6 and 31.

sexualized Christian community. Along with the musical soundtrack that accompanied the New Left and Counterculture, these allusions made clear that the Rebel Cafe was no longer underground. Threads of earlier bohemianism and cabaret culture wove through the following decades; the spirit of Dada and the transgressive allure of Dietrich's Blue Angel were still apparent in American culture, as well as the theatrical politics of the New Left. And what had previously been rebel culture became the mainstream—sometimes watered down, sometimes commodified, but now out in the open. Yet this openness also exposed the limitations of Rebel Cafe liberationism. Like Bruce's focus on freedom of The Word and sexuality, personal politics often nudged out attention to structural inequality and systems of power. Artman's language may have been intended to shock, but it did so only on the dominant society's terms.

By the start of the Free Speech Movement in the fall of 1964, the role of "beatnik" culture was firmly planted in both the public mind and the sensibilities of participants. Connecting the Beats and FSM, Lawrence Ferlinghetti noted in a postcard to Allen Ginsberg: "Berkeley Free Speech Movement great scene here. Everybody in town getting into act, [Ralph] Gleason quoting from my Routine 'Servants of the People' with Graduate Student's speeches." News reports across the country alternated from support to horror, but both ends of this spectrum cited the student uprising as a "Battle of the Beatniks" or the product of outside agitators from the bohemian "colonies" of North Beach.³ FSM participant Jeff Lustig, however, saw the Beat influence as fundamental, infused within the world-historical changes that ranged from the Black Freedom

³ 9 December, 1954, Ferlinghetti to Ginsberg, Allen Ginsberg Papers, Series I, Box 5, Folder 3, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York, NY; Dorothy Bowman, "Battle of the Beatniks," *Daily Tribune*, Great Bend, Kansas, December 10, 1964, p. 2; John Chamberlain, "Limit of Patience," *Oneonta Daily Star*, March 18, 1965; David Smothers, "Noisy New Left Draws Young Radicals," *Arizona Republic*, July 28, 1965, p. 12.

Movement to the Cuban Revolution: “The fact of the matter is that it was precisely because we were familiar with the American dream . . . that we beneficiaries were the ones most likely to become estranged from it . . . SNCC writer Julius Lester wrote that in the late fifties . . . ‘While Fidel liberated the Sierra Maestra, the beat generation created a liberated zone . . . in San Francisco.’ What linked Castro and the beatniks despite the vast differences in their personal and historical importance was that both had taken up residence outside the American dream. Both established liberated zones outside the presumably inevitable Brave New World.”⁴

But as the 1960s progressed, the nightclub culture of North Beach and Greenwich Village lost much of its subversive allure. And while the Rebel Cafe had aided a level of cultural synthesis, its lack of attention to economics left its politics atomized and only effective at the margins, without significant cross-class alliances. While the gains made by focusing on personal issues around feminism and gay rights were certainly important, the New Left only slowly infused liberation politics into a mainstream that otherwise began a sharp rightward turn after 1968.⁵ In some ways, the dissipation of underground politics was symbolized by splits among the Beats by 1964, who fell victim to their own revolution as change came in unanticipated forms and the rise of identity politics led them to different individual paths. Some, like Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, embraced the consciousness-raising and environmentalism of the counterculture; others followed Kenneth Rexroth in decrying the loss of tradition (Marxist and literary) that had driven the San Francisco Renaissance. Kerouac, and to some extent poet Gregory Corso,

⁴ Robert Cohen and Reginald E. Zelnik, eds., *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s*, 222-3. The Lester quote is from *Search for a New Land* (1969).

⁵ Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 212-16, 251.

retreated toward the reactionary Right, while still resisting party politics. Some moved the other way, from cultural resistance into activism. Amiri Baraka helped Kenneth Gibson become elected Newark's first African-American mayor in 1970. Poet Tram Combs used his Mattachine Society membership to support his successful campaign against bans on public homosexuality in the US Virgin Islands.⁶ Ginsberg, as always a bridge between cultural and political radicalism, organized protests, first in support of Lenny Bruce and Cuba, then in opposition to the war in Vietnam—appropriate extensions of the urban underground that had spawned the New Comedy and bohemia's pacifism and multicultural activism.

Ironically, and hardly recognized at the time, by 1964 North Beach had already shifted away from bohemianism. Bar and club owners courted the increased tourist trade with exploitative performances that caricatured Beat culture, or relied on relaxed social norms to introduce topless entertainment aimed at businessman crowds. The celebrity of the *Howl* trial and the influx of a new generation of hopeful young outcasts brought by the notoriety of *On the Road* had changed the character of the area for good. In 1960, Leo Krikorian had closed The Place. The Cellar and the Jazz Workshop closed their doors in 1962 and 1971 respectively, signaling, along with the closing of the hungry i and the Coffee Gallery, the shift in North Beach away from both the counterculture and jazz.⁷

These changes meant little to those who arrived in the wake of the 1950s Renaissance. Hopeful bohemians such as Mary Kerr and Peter Coyote continued to pour into San Francisco throughout the early 1960s, adding to the hippie movement or the

⁶ Tram Combs o Mattachine Society, February 25, 1966, Carton 1, Folder 31, Tram Combs Papers, 1956-1973, BANC MSS 79/48, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁷ *The Beach*, Krikorian Interview; Russ Wilson, "Ross Show Recalls Band Era," *Oakland Tribune*, Jan 9, 1972, 5-EN; "Coffee Gallery," February 5, 1971, clipping in Examiner Morgue, San Francisco Public Library.

street theatrics of radicals like the Diggers. This growing population was matched by mushrooming little magazines, which continued the symbiotic relationship in which the nightclub underground supported the small press with advertising dollars, in return gaining visibility among a new generation of nonconformists. Unbeknownst to most mainstream news commentators, however, the central locus of the San Francisco counterculture had already moved to the more affordable and interracial Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. As Beat poet Gary Snyder observed in 1966, “Rock & Roll and LSD have taken over. It’s fun. The clothing and behavior *all over* town is deliciously outrageous. Everybody’s on acid—I mean like dentists and lawyers. Haight Ashbury is really the center—N. Beach has gone back to topless, cops, wops and City Lights.”⁸

Vesuvio is now the last of the Rebel Cafes in North Beach and survives by trading on the Beat Generation as a kind of countercultural tourist trap—or, perhaps, national monument—in a symbiotic relationship with City Lights across what is now Jack Kerouac Alley. Much the same can be said of Greenwich Village, which has remained a central nightclub and countercultural neighborhood, due in part to the stability of its nightspots: the Village Gate remained open until the 1990s, while the White Horse and Village Vanguard are still standing, trading largely on the aura of their literary and jazz pasts.

North Beach still wrestles with an uneasy legacy of bohemianism beside less cerebral hedonistic pursuits. Its reputation for sexual allure made it a prime location for businesses that traded in bared female flesh. A topless nightclub called the Cellar opened there in 1965, as did a San Francisco franchise of the Playboy Club, and a club called the

⁸ *The Beach*, Liner notes and narration by Mary Kerr; Peter Coyote, *Sleeping Where I Fall: A Chronicle* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998), 8-15; Gary Snyder to Philip Whalen, October 11, 1966, Box 7, Philip Whalen Papers, MS#1328, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

hungry i remains in operation as a strip club as of this writing. Yet even this development was fraught with contradictions. The Playboy Club became an oppositional rallying point for both feminists and those who saw it as an assault on the area's bohemian legacy. After several protests, it closed in 1976. Hefner's clubs became a national target as well, particularly following Gloria Steinem's 1963 expose articles in *Show* magazine and a series of strikes by its wait-staff "Bunnies" in the mid-1960s.⁹ Further complicating this picture were the feminist elements *within* topless clubs in North Beach. While primarily aimed at turning a profit for male club owners, they were also expressions of the Sexual Revolution, with women sometimes performing topless as a demand for the recognition of their sexuality. Out of the North Beach milieu came the feminist activist Margo St. James, whose organization COYOTE ("Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics") has advocated for women sex workers' civil rights and health care since the 1970s. These threads of social change were further tangled by *Playboy's* occasional alliances with feminists. This contrasted sharply with the nearly unanimous opposition to Hefner's nightclubs among progressives, an emblem of the growing separation between nightlife entertainment and political advocacy.¹⁰

Such divisions were not yet so clear in the 1960s, however, as American nightlife intertwined with full-fledged political movements, from feminism and Black Power to

⁹ "State Opens Hearing on Topless Waitresses," *The Independent* (Pasadena, CA), September 28, 1965, p. 15; Claire Leeds, "Playboy Club's Preview Party with a Heart," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 7, 1965, p. 14; Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128-32; Thomas Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise: The Playboy Vision of America* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 153-4; "Bunny Girls are Covered by Union Suit: U. S. Ponders Inquiry On Playboy Clubs' Hiring," *The Baltimore Sun*, March 14, 1964, p. 3. See also clippings in Playboy Club envelope, Examiner Morgue, SFPL.

¹⁰ Wallace Turner, "'Topless' Is Tops in San Francisco," *New York Times*, March 5, 1966, p. 15; "Denver Clubs Go Topless," *New York Times*, January 14, 1968, p. 70; "Foreword by Margo St. James," and "Margo St. James" in Dick Boyd, *Broadway North Beach: The Golden Years: A Saloon Keeper's Tales* (San Francisco: Cape Foundation Publications, 2006), xi-xii, 49-56; Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 225-47.

gay rights. In the mid-1960s, Max Gordon continued the Village Vanguard's tradition of public discussion with a series of "Speak Outs": panels on the club's stage featuring countercultural spokesmen, such as Timothy Leary, LeRoi Jones, Mario Savio, and Paul Krassner, crossing swords with conservative New York politicians. (At the hungry i, Enrico Banducci tried to hire FSM spokesman Mario Savio as monologist, seeing him as the next Mort Sahl.) Art D'Lugoff featured a symposium at the Village Gate on race in the jazz world, which included a blow up between African-American musicians and white club owners, whom they charged with exploitation.¹¹

The Black Freedom Struggle was also frequent subject in mimeographed magazines that circulated through the Free Speech Movement ranks, such as *Rag Baby* and *Soulbook*. *Rag Baby* included mentions for a revived "Blabbermouth Night" at the Coffee Gallery and an antiwar benefit held by the satirical troupe The Committee; *Soulbook*, which counted contributions by soon-to-be Black Panther Bobby Seale, featured Rebel Cafe subjects scrutinized through a Black Power lens. The radical little magazine criticized Langston Hughes for rejecting LeRoi Jones's plays (while defending Lenny Bruce), decried white appropriation of rock & roll, and printed poetry inspired by socially-conscious jazzmen such as Mingus saxophonist Eric Dolphy.¹²

Dick Gregory even more fully entwined remnants of the Rebel Cafe with New Left activism. Putting his performance skills to work for the cause of peace, Gregory participated in the founding of the Youth International Party (YIP, or the "Yippies") with

¹¹ Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 123-9; Gerald Nachman, "A Funny Thing Happened to the Hungry i," *Oakland Tribune*, January 11, 1970, 3-EN; "Racial Debate Displaces Jazz Program," *New York Times*, February 10, 1965; Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 251-76.

¹² *Rag Baby*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (October 1965) and *Soulbook*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 1965) in FSM Papers, Carton 2, Folders 42 and 48, Bancroft Library.

Abbie Hoffman and Paul Krassner. This included testifying at the conspiracy trial of the “Chicago 8” along with Norman Mailer and Ed Sanders, the radical poet and member of satirical rock group The Fugs, when New Left leaders were charged with inciting the riots outside the Democratic National Convention in 1968.¹³ Later that year, Gregory ran his own presidential campaign, receiving 1.5 million votes. His campaign had kicked off with a press conference at the Village Gate, as Art D’Lugoff remained a key supporter who promoted Gregory as a “week-end wit, weekday warrior” who was not merely a “satirist of the general fraud,” but a “Freedom Fighter.” Further cementing this mix of performance and politics, Gregory shared the Village Gate stage with Krassner and LSD guru Timothy Leary. As one New York reporter sardonically wrote, Gregory continued to influence the politics of fresh audiences, performing for young women with “flip and pageboy hairdos” and “wide-eyed, unguarded glances” and young men with “extra long hair” who “held their cigarettes at self-conscious angles.” Even as Gregory began to repudiate comedy as a “narcotic” in the face of serious political struggles, the Gate’s patrons remained attracted to his authenticity, which he confirmed by mentioning his Watts uprising gunshot wound and hunger strikes in support of Native American land rights.¹⁴

Eugene McCarthy’s 1968 presidential primary campaign also held a nightclub

¹³ Abbie Hoffman was fully aware that the Chicago 8 judge, Julius Hoffman, had tried Lenny Bruce for obscenity four years prior. The YIP leader did his best to channel Bruce in the courtroom, satirizing the judge at every turn. His initially arrest, in fact, was for public indecency, after he attended a protest with the work “Fuck” written on his forehead.

¹⁴ Various press releases and clippings, Box 18, Folder 6, Ivan Black Papers, JPB 06-20, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Dick Gregory and James R. McGraw, *Up from Nigger* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), 43-4, 87-9, 148-51, 160; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 235; Jon Wiener, ed. *Conspiracy in the Streets: The Extraordinary Trial of the Chicago Eight* (New York and London: The New Press, 2006), 13, 148-50, 188-91; Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 443.

benefit, at the New York's countercultural Cheetah Club, which was attended by radicals such as Michael Harrington and Allen Ginsberg. But the Rebel Cafe's political legacy was perhaps most visible during Norman Mailer's 1969 run for New York mayor. Campaigning on a platform advocating the city's independence from Albany, and thus the creation of the fifty-first state, Mailer garnered enough signatures to be placed on the Democratic primary ballot. In celebration, and in an attempt to energize supporters and spawn media coverage, on May 7 Mailer and campaign manager Joe Flaherty organized a rally at the Village Gate. A diverse audience of countercultural volunteers and conservative "straights" who were exploring the Mailer camp packed the club amid the pulsing music and lights of an acid-rock band. D'Lugoff supplied not only his safe to protect the precious petitions, but bread baskets which were passed around for donations. Around one a.m., overcome with an exuberance fueled in equal measure by the crowd's exhortations and whiskey, Mailer mounted the stage and—taking a page from the Lenny Bruce playbook—embarked on a speech that the *New York Times* said "alternately entertained and harangued" the raucous audience. Much of the profanity-laden display was in response to a group of heckling feminists in front of the stage. Mailer's saucy responses and the ensuing press reports undermined whatever legitimacy he had established, effectively ending his chances—however slim—for an electoral victory. Goaded by the vocal exchanges in an urban space noted for its alternative community, the Village Gate fundraiser "proved to be an unshakable hangover for Mailer and thus the campaign."¹⁵

¹⁵ Mailer had also held a book release party for *An American Dream* at the Village Vanguard in 1965. Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 285; Joe Flaherty, *Managing Mailer* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1969), 107-109, 129; *New York Times*, May 9, 1969; J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013),

The Village Gate rally's vocal interactions between Mailer and his feminist contingent dramatized shifts in nightclub culture since the 1950s: the days of the nightclub as a structured space enforcing performative norms or gendered notions of propriety were all but gone. The "sophisticated" nightclub was a relic in New York: only the famous Copacabana survived the 1960s. Even the Copa closed in 1973, only to reopen three years later as a disco.¹⁶ The rise of rock & roll among the college-aged crowd had changed the direction of the nightclub, as desires to sit attentively at tables or engage in close, cheek-to-cheek dancing to the strains of jazz standards gave way to the Twist, then the Frug, the Fish, and the Fall. The result was a proliferation of "discotheques" (including one in the old site of Cafe Society), modeled on European venues that saved money by playing records rather than live music and which opened most of the available space for dancing. One report from a New York club in 1964 noted that "the crowd was so thick one night that a girl managed to hold hands with two boys at once, without either being aware of the conditional nature of her affections." The de-centered nature of "disco" dancing obliterated gendered space within the nightclub. Fashions also began to reflect this new freedom for women. Higher skirt lines became fashionable, as women chose "easy-skirted dresses for dancing" and designers jumped "on the discotheque bandwagon." While the sexual objectification that often accompanied miniskirts certainly tempered their newfound freedom, author Helen Weaver nonetheless noted that changes in music and dance were key to women's feeling

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¹⁶ John S. Wilson, "Max Loew Transports Schmaltz To Diners Near Central Park," *New York Times*, November 17, 1965, p. 52; Richard F. Shepard, "New Year's Eve Merrymakers, Flu Permitting, Will Fill Clubs," *New York Times*, December 30, 1968, p. 26; Freed Ferretti, "Copa Is Back as A Disco," *New York Times*, October 15, 1976, p. 53.

of liberation, when suddenly “she could dance with herself . . . with the whole room.”¹⁷

As the influence of thinkers such as Paul Goodman and Marshal McLuhan led to an emphasis on authentic experience, nightclubs also became the sites of “be-ins,” where the entire space was utilized for multi-media performance. College-aged audiences flocked in to become part of the show. “Dancing has become an open war on self-consciousness and inhibition,” asserted a self-proclaimed Village bohemian tract, “a confrontation with LIFE, which is ‘out there’.” Some venues were quick to accommodate a new generation of night people, and even as the Blue Angel was out of business by 1965, the Village Vanguard began to feature a disco format between jazz sets and after-hours. Earlier that year, Art D’Lugoff, had decided to open a new club: the Disc-Au-Gate. “It’s going to be a disease, just like the folk clubs,” he noted jovially of the new craze. “You have to go with a winner, let’s face it.”¹⁸ The cultural role of the nightclub had shifted and D’Lugoff was quick to follow.

The most popular rock group in these early discotheques was undoubtedly The Beatles, who in many ways embodied the era’s sociocultural changes. Their very name invoked Ginsberg and Kerouac’s transatlantic movement, while their music evoked the earthiness of Liverpool’s working class and African-American R&B—polished around the edges, as their whiteness made them safe for popular Euro-American consumption.

¹⁷ “Opening Tonight: ‘Discotheque’,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1964, p. 1; Charles Mohr, “World of Affluent Youth Favors ‘In’ Dancing at City Hideaways,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1964, p. 31; Grace Gluek, “New Discotheque Provides Tattoos,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1967, p. 45. See also Mark Caldwell, *New York Night: The Mystique and Its History* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 314; “Shoe Shop Is Being Revitalized by Wife of Owner,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1964, p. 28; Philip H. Dougherty, “Now the Latest Craze Is 1-2-3, All Fall Down,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1965, p. 28; Marylin Bender, “Fashion Had Its Go-Go Fling During 1965, and Now for . . .,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1965, p. 24; *New York in the ‘50s*, dir. Betsy Blankenbaker (First Run Features: 2001).

¹⁸ John Gruen, *The New Bohemia: The Combine Generation* (New York: Shorecrest, 1966), 8, 16; Grace Gluek, “A Little Be-In Goes a Long Way,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1966, p. D-20; Louis Calta, “Brooklyn Loses Two Nightclubs,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1966, p. 55; Letter to the Editor: Ellis Rabb, “Unfashionable?” *New York Times*, October 13, 1968, D-8.

The Beats themselves quickly embraced their musical namesake. In 1965, Ginsberg made a point to visit Liverpool's rock clubs, which he compared to San Francisco's, and declared The Beatles (along with Bob Dylan) to be an expression of 1960s oppositional consciousness. In the midst of conservative Barry Goldwater's presidential run in a 1964, poet Philip Whalen similarly intermixed music and politics in a letter to painter Robert LaVigne, as he briefed his friend on the latest West-Coast developments. "Everybody has registered to vote," Whalen wrote, "all of us are campaigning against Goldwater & the anti-Negro housing Proposition 14. We all love the Beatles."¹⁹

As the band's sound developed, however, their British (and increasingly psychedelic) inflections overtook their bluesy roots—a cultural parallel to the canalization of identity politics in which whites withdrew from the Black Freedom Struggle and women led their own liberation with the rise of Second Wave feminism. Musically, this was most notable on the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). But the cover artwork was also a tribute to the Rebel Cafe, a collage of life-sized photos ranging from Edgar Allen Poe, Karl Marx, Dylan Thomas, and Marlene Dietrich to Dylan, artist Wallace Berman, and Lenny Bruce. (Proposed by the band but rejected as too controversial were Hitler and Jesus Christ!) The Beatles' massive popularity grew at least in part from their ability (like Dylan's) to collapse wide-flung sociocultural phenomena into a single identifiable point, with elements of postmodernism's erasure of time, space, and high/low art divisions. At the same time, they were a prime example of cultural channeling into increasingly distinct and narrow avenues.

¹⁹ Allen Ginsberg to Louis Ginsberg, various 1965, Box 7, Folder 19, Allen Ginsberg Papers and Philip Whalen to Robert LaVigne, September 29, 1964, Box 1, Folder 29, Robert LaVigne Papers, MS#0747, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Butler Library, Columbia University. See also Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Black Music* (New York: W. Morrow, 1967), 180, 206-7.

These trends were visible in literature as well. Following Mailer into the New Journalism was Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo grotesque. The ground broken by James Baldwin nurtured the bold, confrontational fiction of Toni Morrison and John Rechy; Kerouac's ecstatic American road gave way to Don DeLillo's darker, more sophisticated vision of the national underground. Thomas Pynchon probably best represented the Rebel Cafe sensibility, particularly in his first novel, *V.* (1963). Pynchon's sweeping tale of a man in search of a mysteriously powerful woman known only as "V." distinctly echoed Dashiell Hammett's Cultural Front detective fiction. (Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, for instance, opens with a description of Sam Spade as a "blond satan" whose face displayed a "v motif" with "his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth.") But Pynchon's novel was also an early postmodern tour-de-force that marshaled the twentieth century's previous six decades of history into an intricate web of connections. And Pynchon's biting satire, like Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961), reflected both the dark humor of "sick" comics and the Rebel Cafe's oppositional consciousness.²⁰

Themes of identity, usable pasts, Freudianism, and left-bohemianism suffused *V.*, as its protagonists wandered through underworld bars and cafes spanning across early-1900s Africa (where a murderous femme-fatale had "plucked [her] eyebrows to look like Dietrich's"), war-torn Europe, and 1950s New York. The novel summarized its simultaneously sweeping scope and subterranean sensibility with a closing soliloquy by its protagonist's love interest, who declared that she *was* "the twentieth century": "I am the ragtime and the tango . . . I am the lonely railway station in every capital of Europe. I

²⁰ Steven Weisenburger argues that Black Humor and satirical literature in this period was a significant postmodern form of expression. Steven Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

am the Street, the fanciless buildings of government; the café-dansant, the clockwork figure, the jazz saxophone; the tourist-lady's hairpiece, the fairy's rubber breasts . . . I am the dead palm tree, the Negro's dancing pumps, the dried fountain after tourist season. I am all the appurtenances of night." In a response that subtly captured the shift to the more world-weary sixties, Pynchon's protagonist simply shrugs, "That sounds about right."

At the center of the story was the "Whole Sick Crew," another permutation of Kerouac's *Subterraneans*, who gathered at the Village's "V-Note Cafe" jazz club and the "Rusty Spoon" bar, declaring their signature "Catatonic Expressionist" phrase, "Wha?" The Rebel Cafe's role in *V.* was vividly captured by the Crew's drinking song:

There are sick bars in every town in America, / Where sick people can pass the time o' day.
You can screw on the floor in Baltimore, / Make Freudian scenes in New Orleans . . .
There's espresso machines in Terre Haute, Indiana / Which is a cultural void if ever a void there be, / But . . . The Rusty Spoon is still the bar for me, / The Rusty Spoon is the only place for me.

Pynchon savagely satirized the underground's post-atomic ethos and bohemian bar talk in postmodern terms, proclaiming, "Conversations at the Spoon had become little more than proper nouns, literary allusions, critical or philosophical terms linked in certain ways. Depending on how you arranged the building blocks at your disposal, you were either smart or stupid . . . In or Out. The number of blocks, however, was finite. . . . [and] if nobody else original comes along, they're bound to run out of arrangements someday. . . . This sort of arranging and rearranging was Decadence, but the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations was death."²¹

The Rebel Cafe's dark embrace of *talk* also ricocheted through Hollywood in the 1960s. In 1960, Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* was adapted into a film (a flop), followed

²¹ Thomas Pynchon, *V.*, (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1963), 232, 276-7, 208, 428.

by Truman Capote's own portrayal of New York's cocktail set and cafe society, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (a hit). (Both films starred George Peppard as a struggling young writer.) Comedian Mike Nichols followed in the verbal tradition of Tennessee Williams when he made the jump to directing with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967)—a stylistic and career trajectory paralleled by hungry i and Village Vanguard comic Woody Allen. (Dustin Hoffman, the star of *The Graduate*, had been a waiter at the Village Gate and, of course, portrayed Lenny Bruce onscreen a few years later. And the director of *Lenny*, Bob Fosse, also directed the most forthright homage to the Rebel Cafe's roots, *Cabaret*, in 1972).²² In 1971, *Village Voice* cartoonist Jules Feiffer brought ample verbosity to the script for Nichols's *Carnal Knowledge* (which starred singer Art Garfunkel, who, along with partner Paul Simon, had dedicated the 1966 album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* to Bruce and featured an eerie version of "Silent Night" overdubbed with the sound of a news report announcing the comic's death). But this trend truly culminated with Robert Altman's overlapping dialogue in *M*A*S*H** (1970), the antiwar black comedy scripted by Hollywood Ten writer Ring Lardner, Jr., which mimicked the kind of cacophony produced by loquacious nightspot patrons.

Less prominent but equally symbolic of the Rebel Cafe legacy in the 1960s and 1970s was Lardner's blacklist compatriot, the hungry i's Alvah Bessie. Like several of the Hollywood Ten, Bessie resisted the pressure to conform to Cold War expectations. But rather than slowly returning to the fold of mainstream film as the specter of McCarthyism faded in the late fifties, he instead became a bridge to the New Left,

²² David Hinckley, "Art D'Lugoff Dies at 85; Longtime Owner of the Village Gate, His Conscience Shaped Counterculture," *Daily News*, November 5, 2009.

working in a subterranean nightclub and maintaining his political principles. Like many (including Kenneth Rexroth) raised on the open clashes of the 1930s, Bessie felt that potshots from jazzy cellars simply were not enough to pierce the armor of capitalism. Yet, also like Rexroth, Bessie forged alliances with the new generation he met within the dark confines of the hungry i. He was a frequent correspondent with jazz critic Ralph Gleason, a founder of *Rolling Stone* and a producer, with *Howl* lawyer Al Bendich, in Fantasy Records' film division in the 1970s (which brought Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to the screen). Gleason and Bessie's letters reflected the Old/New Left shift, as they debated the sixties' sweeping changes. The pair discussed the "Night People" they had encountered in the boîtes of North Beach, and they debated the future of capitalism, the editorial stance of *Rolling Stone*, and the merits of Albert Goldman's Lenny Bruce biography, which Gleason deplored. Gleason argued that Bessie's black-and-white leftist views may have applied when choosing sides in the Spanish Civil War, but that the postwar world required more nuance. Citing both Bruce and Algerian liberation leader and theorist Frantz Fanon, Gleason wrote: "As Lenny said, pour that hot lead in my ass and I'll tell you everything. I do not presume to judge . . . I have learned with my involvement with jazz, for instance, that even those who were thought of as Uncle Toms served, as Fanon put it, in their own way in their own time."

Bessie and Gleason also grappled with the cultural changes that accompanied the New Left. Bessie decried rock & roll as crass and "monosyllabic," insisting that those who emphasized consciousness-raising could never truly "change the world" because "they have no program." Gleason countered that Dylan's lyrics provided "a whole generation . . . a picture of the world and of the USA in particular which supplants the

picture given them in school.” Comparing Dylan’s prose to Kerouac, Gleason continued: “He has no program, which is the weakness of all critical thought emanating from the young today, but that may not be the poets [*sic*] function,” which was “to ask questions and to look at the world through different, and certainly not rose colored, glasses.” Bessie also denounced Allen Ginsberg as a stinky hippie, to which Gleason jovially responded that such a square attitude made the radical screenwriter sound like the “Barry Goldwater of the social revolution.” Bessie admitted that his cultural tastes were more conservative than his politics, but was disappointed when Gleason did not accompany him to hear Marlene Dietrich perform at the Fairmont Hotel.²³

Kenneth Rexroth remained as staunch as Bessie in his Marxism, but was more willing to blend this with the liberatory potential of rock & roll. He was a fan of The Fugs, for instance, and declared that the “most effective weapon” in the band’s push for an “alternative society” was their use of humor. Rexroth quipped that while Ed Sanders’ and Tuli Kupferberg’s “free-verse doggerel full of dirty words” resembled “an occupational-therapy project in a very permissive asylum,” this “only cripples, but it does not invalidate, their posture of social responsibility” and opposition to “the evils of society—war, sexual conflict and racial persecution.” In 1969, Rexroth dismissed the desirability of political programs, as Bessie put it, arguing that rock-music consciousness was more “effective over a long term” because formal movements—however radical—can be co-opted by power structures or the state. “The techniques of massive paramilitary confrontations are, in my opinion, absurd,” he said. “The Sunflower Sutra has more effect than a Columbia University takeover. . . . [because] the counterculture as a culture, as a

²³ Bessie-Gleason Letters, June 17, 1970 to June 2, 1975, Box 6, Folder 6, Alvah Bessie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI. When Gleason died of a heart attack in 1975, Bessie’s grief was palpable in his letter of condolence to Gleason’s widow, Jean.

way of life . . . [is] in the bloodstream of society. You can't pin it down. Its effect is continuously corrosive. . . . This is true of the whole protest-rock and protest-folk bit. Young people are wise to the fact that Donovan is more revolutionary than Dylan. . . . Leonard Cohen is more subversive than Country Joe and the Fish. . . . Leonard Cohen . . . doesn't give a fuck whether he sings or not. I mean, he is communicating . . . he's in direct communication with people."²⁴

Rexroth spent much of his final years understandably railing against being forgotten as a trailblazer, as his radical bona fides were tarnished by his criticism of Black Power and feminism. He failed to see the contradiction in his demand that others follow his prescriptions for their own liberation. Yet, while his oppositional edges smoothed enough to take a university teaching post in the 1970s, he pushed for the kind of participatory pedagogy that was groundbreaking at the time, and has since become a part of humanities education, bringing Rebel Cafe principles into classroom discussions. "Creative education, development, liberation, occurs more often in coffee shops off campus than on the campus," he insisted. "If you really want to do something about creative people, move the coffee shop into the curriculum."²⁵

The shift in the university was one of the outgrowths of the New Left demand for ideas and language that was "authentic for us, that can make luminous the inner self that burns for understanding," as political radicals such as SDS also espoused the Beat notion of living artistically. By the early 1970s, this became a mainstay of American culture. As Lou Reed said of his 1972 album *Transformer*, which featured gender-bending imagery

²⁴ Kenneth Rexroth, *The Alternative Society: Essays from the Other World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 45; "Kenneth Rexroth (1969)," in *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*, David Meltzer, ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 255, 239.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 252, 259.

and the hit “Wild Side,” his songs were explorations of an *inner* frontier, in a tradition of the New York experience with Ginsburg and William Burroughs as forbears. (Hints of the Rebel Cafe even appeared more directly: the album was dedicated to White Horse poet Delmore Schwartz.)

But while these claims for authenticity and unfettered sexuality traced back to the 1950s and Herbert Marcuse—himself hearkening back to Freud—they had almost exclusively assumed the liberation of male sexuality. One of the significant gains of feminism was to overturn these views and make an equal claim for women’s full personal and political expression. Feminist consciousness-raising fundamentally changed the relationship between culture and politics, seeking not just to bring cultural meaning to social struggles, but to declare that issues of the self were *inherently* political. The conflicts between “radical” and “cultural” feminists quickly made clear that this did little to end the debate about the precedence of social structures versus changed consciousness. But feminism did solidify and fully entrench questions of authenticity, sexuality, and the self as aspects of American politics. And fundamental to the process of consciousness-raising were the talk sessions carried out in the living rooms of radicals, which, like the New Left’s “rap sessions,” were highly reminiscent of bohemian bar talk—another significant, if slender, thread extending from the Rebel Cafe.²⁶

If there is a single lesson to be learned from the Rebel Cafe, it is that the political/cultural dichotomy is a false one: they are always in a dialectic relationship, continually in tension, each breaking down and reconstituting the other. This was

²⁶ Christina G. Larocco, “Fractured Front: Gender, Authenticity, and the Remaking of the American Left after World War Two,” PhD. Diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2012, pp. 323, 336-8; Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, 1966), 207; Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 6, 83-91, 142-3, 244-5.

illustrated most vividly in the Stonewall uprising in June 1969, in many ways a capstone of the postwar nightclub underground. The police raid on a Greenwich Village bar which brought thousands of protesters into the streets, clashing with police for two days, did not start the gay rights struggle. The liberation movement that emerged after the uprising relied on long-established organizations and networks. And the event was not unique: similar clashes had already occurred in Los Angeles and San Francisco bars. But Stonewall was a unifying, symbolic moment, an eruption that made the movement clearly visible, to both the broader society and the queer community itself, as Villagers resisted authorities, throwing bottles and rocks amid trash-can fires and graffiti calling for “Gay Power!”—which echoed in young voices releasing their anger and frustration. As historian John D’Emilio has noted, the previous generation of activists responded vocally to the event. Ginsberg arrived on the second night and proclaimed, “You know, the guys were so beautiful. They’ve lost that wounded look that fags all had ten years ago.” The Mattachine Society printed a special-edition newsletter, infused with “camp humor,” declaring it, “The Hairpin Drop Heard Round the World.”²⁷ Stonewall encapsulated much of the Rebel Cafe’s ethos and legacy, as political mobilization grew from the communal strength gathered within the nocturnal underground—which itself drew from a usable past that intertwined politics and culture.

William Burroughs, the Beat whose dark, cynical style made him the movement’s most enduring voice into the 1990s, captured the Rebel Cafe’s simultaneously compelling

²⁷ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 231-3; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 9-10; Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 79-81. See also Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 167-96.

and utopian impetus toward cultural liberation on his spoken-word album, *Dead City Radio* (1990). His poem, “Apocalypse,” envisioned the violent moment “when art leaves the frame and the written word leaves the page,” as “graffiti through glass and steel like acid races across the sky in tornadoes of flaming colors” and “Pan, god of panic,” returns from his two-millennium exile to a world in which “everything is alive and significant.” “Caught in New York, beneath the animals of the Village, the Piper pulled down the sky,” Burroughs proclaimed. “Let it come down!” Burroughs echoed the Rebel Cafe’s call to infuse art into everyday life, to make a world awash in Beauty (as defined by artists such as himself, naturally). Of course the result would be no utopia; without context, Beauty loses its meaning—and the reality is that unlimited expression would as likely reflect commercialism as any authentic self. Burroughs predicted that outcome easily enough, quoting Dostoyevsky’s maxim that a condition in which “everything is permitted” would be more a curse than a blessing—although he might have done better to recite Nietzsche’s parable suggesting that the death of god would occur in the marketplace. Burroughs recognized that although the Rebel Cafe’s radical cabaret tradition could open doors to a new consciousness, that alone was not enough to confront systems of power. He closed the album facetiously croaking out *The Blue Angel*’s “Falling in Love Again” in German, a symbol of failed revolutions with only the faintest silver lining of hope.

DIALECTICAL DREAMS AND HAUNTED HALLS . . .

During an era in which organized political opposition seemed remote, the Rebel Cafe was a key site in which battles over the definition of “America” were fought. In many cases, it served as a final redoubt, both a fallout shelter and a laboratory for cultural expressions of democracy, political consciousness, and identity formation. It was a place, both physical and psychological, where performers interacted with a crucial core of

America's intelligentsia and participated in the process of shaping and interpreting mass-media forms, as well as analyzing postwar politics. For some radicals, underground nightspots served as alternative institutions, incubators for seeds of opposition that fully bloomed with the New Left of the 1960s. The Rebel Cafe served a significant historical function, carrying forward a cabaret tradition that intrinsically recognized the political valence of culture. As always, this usable past fitted the needs of its own time, and therefore reflected the possibilities and limits of change, for good and ill.

Some scholars have criticized white radicals for romanticizing bohemia and exaggerating the level of racial progress it produced. Their criticism has merit: many of the memoirs and studies of the period have done exactly that. Yet they also miss the historical, sociocultural function of Greenwich Village and North Beach. The evidence, including the reminiscences of Black cultural producers, shows that the nocturnal underground served much the same purpose in overcoming American racism as it did for psychological or sexual liberation. The same kind of place and space for public experimentation with new ways of being in the world applied. Bare demographics support the view that these bohemian enclaves were the most integrated areas of New York and San Francisco—maybe the nation. And it is not mere romanticization to note the interracial alliances that abounded there, from personal partnerships such as Charlie and Chan Parker, LeRoi and Hettie Jones, Bob and Eileen Kaufman, or James Baldwin and Lucien Happersberger, to cross-cultural exchanges in jazz clubs, literary bars, and coffeehouses.²⁸

Black denizens were not shy about leveling criticisms of this milieu's shortcomings; integration is not the same as racial justice and the necessity of creating

²⁸ David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 74-5.

Black institutions was apparent, lest African Americans continue to suffer as an integrated minority devoid of power. It is not a coincidence that Jones (Amiri Baraka) and the Umbra Group writers decamped from the Village in the 1960s to establish themselves in Newark and Harlem. But the Village had already served its purpose, giving them a platform from which to launch independent cultural and political campaigns. The beatniks were naive and premature in proclaiming the end of racism in their ranks, and the continued racism and inequality that plague the US has made “political correctness” a necessary part of our national discourse (if not our policy).²⁹ The subsequent loss of forthrightness and candor, the discounting of critical discourse around the question of race (much less the slow progress of the very concept’s destruction), is also its own kind of defeat.

The redemption of 1950s bohemia, then, was its willingness to relinquish privileges of race and class, to think outside the lines about what the shape of the nation *should* be—a halting legacy of its nineteenth-century predecessors. The bohemians of North Beach and Greenwich Village were the first to recognize this and to attempt, however fumblingly, to devise a new kind of community in response. This tentative relinquishing of white privilege is the key to Kerouac’s connection to the sixties, which he failed to see as he grew increasingly conservative, disillusioned with fame and dissipated by drink. At the same time, the New Left absorbed the Beat tendency to see the African-American struggle as their own path to redemption, which helps explain why it was such a shock when Stokely Carmichael declared in 1966 that Blacks could take care

²⁹ Lawrence Lipton, for example, in his glossary of Beat terms defined a “spade cat” as “Negro. The holy barbarians, white and negro, are so far beyond ‘racial tolerance’ and desegregation that they no longer have to be polite about it with one another.” Lawrence Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians* (New York: Julian Messner, 1959), 317.

of things themselves, thank you very much.

Truman Capote once famously rejected Kerouac's prose as mere "typing," but nonetheless followed with his own novel about what it meant to be on the road in the middle of America. Of course, Kerouac made the Road itself invisible by its ubiquity. As much as the American Automobile was an individualistic symbol of social mobility, the federal highway system was the product of collectivism, a project made possible through the pooling of resources and labor (if ultimately driven by the auto industry to enable travel by car to the detriment of public transportation). Kerouac would have been better served to recognize the full symbolism of the Road, not simply as a stream that carried his effusive version of the American Dream westward, but as a fractal circuit, the Dream-as-Dialectic, which destroys itself by its own uses, yet whose destruction once again opens space for dreaming. And while Capote's *In Cold Blood* was certainly superior in craft to *On the Road*, Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* equally bested *Breakfast at Tiffany's* representation of New York scenesters. In fact, the accessibility of Capote's novel was another sign marking the Rebel Cafe's end and the expansion of America's culture of rebellion. What would have been provocative a decade earlier—the alcohol-soaked story of an independent urban woman, with themes of homosexuality, drug use, organized crime, and interracial sex—was, by the time of its film adaptation in 1961, as banal as a trip to a department store.

Actually, the notion of culture as a dialectic, with its polar opposites and mediating synthesis, is too simplistic to capture the complexity of such sociocultural change. A better metaphor is that of various forms of culture as "waves" that crash onto the "beach" of society. Just as there are multiple and massive forces driving each wave,

each is equally shaped by its landfall. And with every incoming crash, the beach itself is also reshaped: no two waves are ever the same, and the beach is transformed at a granular level that only gradually becomes recognizable as an altered shoreline. The nocturnal underground was one such wave. And by the end of the 1960s, it washed onto an American beach with an altogether new geography—one with shifting sands that could no longer support the Rebel Cafe’s foundation, leaving its walls and halls unsteady and mostly abandoned.

From the 1960s through the 1990s, the boards and mortar of the Rebel Cafe were dismantled and repurposed—here as a plank in the New Left, there as the brick wall of a comedy club. Strains of oppositional bohemianism continued; echoes of the Cabaret Voltaire rang through the proto-punk of the Velvet Underground and The Stooges, grunge-rock clubs, edgy urban galleries, loft parties that boom with hip-hop and techno rhythms, the satire of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Saturday Night Live*—the comedic launching pad of Minnesota senator Al Franken, which found much of its first cast through former Harry Belafonte manager and Village Vanguard ally Jack Rollins.³⁰ The mainstream that they countered more easily absorbed them, however, a peril that came with postmodernism. Even the political Right adopted elements of the Left’s satirical strategy. While Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck (and their audiences, apparently) long ago started taking themselves seriously, it is important to remember that they started out as radio comics. History’s lessons come in all shapes and sizes.

³⁰ Gary R. Edgerton, Michael T. Marsden, and Jack Nachbar, eds., *In the Eye of the Beholder: Critical Perspectives in Popular Film and Television* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1995), 28. In perhaps the Rebel Cafe’s most literal—and simultaneously most absurd—1970s film permutation, the Rebel Alliance’s resistance to the Empire in *Star Wars* was successfully solidified when Han Solo first met Luke Skywalker in a galactic cabaret.

On his 1991 spoken word album *Praying Mantis*, the New York poet Jim Carroll told a story about a friend, "Billy," who had a tragicomic sexual awakening on the day of Kennedy's assassination. When Billy's mother heard the president's death announced on television, Carroll retold, she began to wail in grief, searching the house for her teenage son to tell him the news. Distraught, she burst into the bathroom to the sight of Billy on the toilet, attempting to masturbate for the first time, with a picture from *Time* magazine of Village Vanguard chanteuse Barbara Streisand. From that moment, Billy's sex life was haunted by a sense of doom. "A lot of people say America lost its innocence the day that John Kennedy got shot," Carroll concluded. "That's a sweeping statement, and I'm not here to judge that. But I do know one thing: my man Billy lost his innocence the day John Kennedy got shot, and that's for damn sure." Yet Carroll was disingenuous to separate his friend's story from the national mythology of a lost Camelot. By telling Billy's tale to an audience, he created a symbol of American political maturation that suffused everything from mass media to sexual freedom. Kennedy's death was the loss of *willful* innocence, the end of average Americans thinking that the hard realities of political struggle could no longer reach them. And such myths are not just ancillary, they are bearers of meaning, fundamentally part of the society and culture that manifest them. Carroll, himself an heir to the Greenwich Village poetic tradition, carried its mythology forward, transmitting it to another generation who listened and interpreted it in the context of their own times.

The 1976 film *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* in many ways best captured the ethos of Cold War bohemia as a usable past. Told from the perspective of the film's director, Village Vanguard comedian Paul Mazursky, *Next Stop* was an inside

representation of the Village in 1953, replete with discussions about the Rosenberg executions and trips to Mexico in fictionalized versions of the Minetta Tavern and Cafe Reggio.³¹ A key character in the bohemian circle of Mazursky's alter-ego, Larry Lapisnky, is "Bernstein"—a gay African American clearly modeled on James Baldwin. Bernstein represented the two central themes of *Next Stop*: the search for social and sexual identity; and the establishment of self-authenticity over performative "posture." In a pivotal scene, Bernstein, scorned by a lover and emotionally crushed, retreats from the underground community, insisting that his persona of suave sophistication was "all fiction," and that "only the gay is real." Yet he confirms his blackness as well, hinting at his difficult childhood in the South, where both his body and spirit were "brutalized." The Village, therefore, was the place where he could claim his own personal sovereignty, to define himself, if only as a false persona, but also where the mask could be removed when the revelry of bohemia's continual costume ball became too much. Bernstein captured the dialectic of the Rebel Cafe: that it was rooted in performativity, the conscious reshaping of self, but in search of authentic community—even love.

The film's inability to reconcile the two illustrates that, even by the 1970s, the denizens of the urban underground could not see their own false dichotomy. The performative and the authentic are continually intertwined, each recreating the other—and the Other—and reproducing reality through the material-ideological process of communication. Once again, Bernstein characterized this process, a gay Black man as the living representation of the tension between performativity and authenticity, with sexuality trapped in the middle. "I think I'm in love," Bernstein announces at a rent party

³¹ The movie included *Saturday Night Live*'s Bill Murray in an uncredited role, his first in a Hollywood film, playing a bohemian recently returned from Mexico.

in Lapinsky's apartment. His new partner embodies the elusiveness of bohemia's possibilities: a sailor, beautiful, but shipping out to Marseilles and thus unattainable. But the attraction itself is affective, a ghost of meaning in Bernstein's dislocated existence, an idea just as powerful as physical presence. And a nightspot was the point of connection. "I met him in a bar this morning," he declares. "He's incredible! Tall, blonde—sort of a butch Marlene Dietrich."

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