FRACTURED COSMOPOLITANISM: INDIVIDUALITY AND TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE LITERATURE OF THE BEAT GENERATION

Nicolae Bobaru
West University of Timișoara

Abstract: *This article reframes the Beat Generation through the lens of fractured cosmopolitanism. This critical framework captures the movement's complex and often contradictory engagement with transnational spaces, identities, and cultural politics. While the Beats are frequently mythologised as quintessential American rebels—white, male wanderers seeking spiritual and poetic transcendence—this study argues that uneven global encounters, ideological asymmetries, and exclusionary practices profoundly shaped their literature and lives. Drawing on recent transnational Beat scholarship, the article introduces fractured cosmopolitanism as a way to understand the Beats' simultaneous pursuit of global connection and their entanglement in structures of privilege, including U.S. imperial ideology, whiteness, and masculinist individualism.*

The article traces five interrelated movements. First, it interrogates the construction of Beat individuality, showing how the myth of the self-made outsider obscures the movement's gendered and racial exclusions. Second, it situates Beat travel within the geopolitics of the Cold War and decolonisation, analysing how sites such as India, Tangier, and Mexico functioned as contact zones rather than blank canvases for a spiritual quest. Third, it offers a corrective to masculinist historiography by foregrounding feminist and racialised voices—including Diane di Prima, Brenda Frazer, Bob Kaufman, and Ted Joans—that redefined the meaning of transnational engagement from below. Fourth, it develops fractured cosmopolitanism as a theoretical model that highlights the Beats' aesthetic and ethical ambivalence: a poetics of rupture rather than synthesis. Finally, through case studies of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Brenda Frazer, the article reveals how the Beats navigated global spaces not as ideal cosmopolitans, but as historically embedded subjects negotiating the contradictions of their time.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the Beat Generation—not as a movement of liberated individuals, but as a conflicted literary community wrestling with the broken promises of global modernity.

Keywords: *Beat Generation; fractured cosmopolitanism; transnational literature; postwar modernity; literary globalism.*

Introduction: Reframing the Beats in a Transnational Key

Long perceived as emblematic of a distinctly American counterculture, the Beat Generation has often been mythologised as a movement of restless, iconoclastic white men seeking spiritual transcendence through highways, drugs, poetry, and jazz. This popular image—frequently anchored in the explosive reception of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956)—continues to shape both public memory and scholarly treatment of the Beats. However, this narrative has come under

increasing scrutiny in recent decades, as a growing body of critical literature has worked to reposition the Beats within a global, heterogeneous, and politically fraught framework. Scholars such as Jimmy Fazzino, Véronique Lane, Nancy Grace, and Jennie Skerl have drawn attention to the transnational itineraries, intercultural entanglements, and colonial legacies that shaped Beat literary production, urging a move beyond the Cold War Americanist lens that has long dominated the field.

This article contributes to and extends these interventions by proposing a new conceptual framework—*fractured cosmopolitanism*—for reading the Beat Generation's ambivalent negotiation of individuality and community within transnational spaces. Cosmopolitanism, in its most idealistic formulation, suggests an ethical and aesthetic openness to the world—a sense of belonging to humanity beyond national, racial, or ideological boundaries. Yet the cosmopolitanism enacted in Beat texts is rarely seamless or inclusive. Instead, it is marked by fragmentation, asymmetry, and contradiction, which I refer to as *fractured cosmopolitanism*. This condition names the Beats' simultaneous yearning for global communion and their failure, at times, to escape the ideological and material scaffolding of U.S. empire, white male privilege, or orientalist appropriation.

By foregrounding the fractured nature of Beat cosmopolitanism, this article advances two key arguments. First, it reframes the Beats not simply as rebels against American conformity, but as participants in a complex dialogue with decolonising cultures, global avant-gardes, and displaced communities. The road they travelled—be it to Mexico, India, Japan, or Paris—was never a blank canvas for self-discovery alone, but a contact zone of power, misunderstanding, and sometimes solidarity. Second, it challenges the idea that Beat individuality was purely personal or existential. Instead, it was dialectical: forged in consideration of others, marginalised groups, geopolitical pressures, and literary ancestors across linguistic and national boundaries.

As such, fractured cosmopolitanism offers a critical alternative to both celebratory accounts of Beat globalism and cynical reductions of Beat travel as mere bohemian tourism. It asks instead: What does it mean to be open to the world when structures of privilege also mark one? What possibilities for radical empathy—and what limits—are revealed in Beat engagements with the Other?

By foregrounding these moments of tension, fracture, and unfinished connection, this article offers a more nuanced account of what it meant for the Beats to be "on the road" in a world already shaped by empire, resistance, and emergent solidarities. The Beat Generation, I argue, should not be understood as a purely American literary rebellion, but rather as a conflicted project of world-making—one that still resonates with our fractured global modernity.

Individuality and the Myth of the Self-Made Beat

From its earliest manifestations, the Beat Generation has been closely identified with a celebration of individuality—a form of personal freedom that appeared to challenge the restrictive norms of 1950s American life. This ethos was inscribed into the very syntax of Beat literature: Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous prose," Allen Ginsberg's ecstatic visions, and William S. Burroughs's hallucinatory fragmentation all registered individuality as a literary act. Their protagonists were wanderers, madmen, mystics, junkies, and outsiders —figures who refused domestication and instead sought ecstatic encounters with themselves and the world. "The only people for me," writes Kerouac in *On the Road*, "are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved" (Kerouac 23-24). But what kind of "self" did the Beats construct—and what ideological work did that self perform?

At first glance, the Beat version of individuality appears to enact a radical break from mid-century American values. Against the backdrop of suburban containment, McCarthyist paranoia, and the expanding culture of consumerism, the Beats championed intensity, self-exposure, and ontological risk. Kerouac's narrative personas, from Sal Paradise to Ray Smith, appear caught in an endless process of becoming: never settled, never finished, always moving toward some vague horizon of spiritual or sensual fulfilment. Ginsberg's speaker in *Howl* is less a stable subject than a prophetic channel, wracked by visions and screaming through "the negro streets at dawn" (Ginsberg 49). Individuality, here, is inseparable from vulnerability and disruption—it is a space of fracture, madness, and revelation.

Yet as many critics have noted, the Beats' exaltation of the individual must be understood as a historically situated gesture, both enabled by and complicit with specific structures of power. As Christopher Gair observes, the Beat mythos of the "outsider" emerged not simply from existential angst, but from a reaction against the political conformity and racialised national identity of postwar America (Gair 28). The Beat hero was defined not just by what he sought (freedom, transcendence) but by what he opposed: middle-class domesticity, sexual repression, patriotic duty, and suburban routine. This oppositional posture gave individuality an oppositional charge, but also a degree of abstraction. The white, male, educated Beat subject was able to fashion himself as "outside" not because he was marginalised, but because he could afford to opt out.

Indeed, the very figures who came to symbolise Beat individualism—Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs—benefited from forms of social and cultural capital that enabled their performances of marginality. Their so-called disaffiliation from American norms was often exercised from a position of privilege: they could afford to drop out, travel, and experiment precisely because of their status as white, male, U.S. citizens. As Fazzino notes, "[t]he

Beats were primarily, though by no means exclusively, white and male with U.S. passports, which means they possessed an extraordinary freedom to move in the world." (Fazzino 26) This mobility—across borders, genres, and ideologies—was a central feature of the Beat mythos, but it was also structurally uneven. Kerouac's construction of Dean Moriarty (based on Neal Cassady), for instance, turns a working-class drifter into a metaphysical figure of spontaneity. Yet, this transformation is mediated through Kerouac's literary and aesthetic framing. The Beat self, then, is not an unfiltered eruption of authenticity, but a curated persona shaped by narrative control and cultural advantage.

Gregory Stephenson insightfully characterises the Beat journey as a spiritual and mythic process, deeply aligned with gnostic and archetypal structures. In his reading of Ginsberg's *Howl*, he observes that "[t]he poet descends into an underworld of darkness, suffering, and isolation and then ascends into spiritual knowledge, blessedness, achieved vision, and a sense of union with the human community and with God." (Stephenson 51-52) This trajectory of descent, disintegration, and renewal is central to the Beats' narrative logic, rendering their literary journeys not merely geographic or psychological but metaphysical. The road, the fix, the chant: all become vehicles of a redemptive cycle from fragmentation toward fleeting, fragile wholeness. This structure elevates the individual's inner struggle to the level of spiritual necessity. But in doing so, it also centres a highly particular notion of the self: one modelled on masculine risk-taking, romantic suffering, and intellectual elitism. While the Beats opposed the regimentation of American life, they often reproduced other hierarchies, especially of gender. As Polina Mackay and Brenda Knight have shown, women of the Beat Generation were frequently excluded, silenced, or objectified within the movement's dominant discourses. Their subjectivities were often cast as secondary, enabling the masculine literary mythos without occupying space in it themselves. Mackay observes that Beat feminisms arose precisely in response to how women had been "undermined, possessed or silenced" (Mackay X). At the same time, Knight notes that women "stayed underground, writing" (Knight 1), largely absent from public representation despite their central contributions to the movement's legacy.

The mythology of Beat individuality also frequently collides with the realities of the historical moment. Postwar America was not simply a landscape of conformity, but one structured by violence—of Jim Crow segregation, of anti-Communist purges, of nuclear brinkmanship. The Beat self is often oblivious to these structural forces. "Moloch," in Ginsberg's *Howl*, is a totalising force of mechanised capitalism and spiritual death, but it remains metaphorical—a demonic abstraction rather than a material system. The poem's rage is directed at a spectral enemy, not a historical one. Likewise,

Kerouac's road is populated by drifters, hobos, and Mexican labourers who serve as figures of alterity and authenticity, but rarely emerge as agents or subjects in their own right.

What emerges, then, is a contradiction at the heart of the Beat self: it is a vehicle for radical expression, but also a screen onto which privilege is projected and disavowed. The "freedom" it seeks is made possible by forms of social detachment—economic, racial, and gendered—that are not universally accessible. While much of Beat mythology emphasises individualism and spontaneous self-expression, this narrative often overlooks the structural conditions that shaped who could be visible within the movement. As Polina Mackay notes, the experiences of Beat women reveal how "a shared sociability" (Mackay 4) that framed the Beat aesthetic excluded many of them, who "faced isolation during the Beat movement's heyday in the 1950s and 1960s" (Mackay 5). Their marginality was not simply personal but embedded in the very frameworks of recognition and circulation that enabled Beat literary production. The figure of the lone male poet, howling against civilisation, remains compelling—but it occludes other voices, other selves, who experienced the world in radically different ways.

Nevertheless, to dismiss Beat individuality as merely self-indulgent or naïve would be to overlook its rhetorical and affective power. What the Beats captured was not a coherent politics, but a spiritual hunger—a desire to reconnect with what had been severed by war, mass culture, and bureaucracy. In this sense, their writing enacts what Charles Olson called "projective verse" (Grace 162): a poetics of motion, breath, and energy. The Beat self is not simply a subject—it is an event, a threshold, a force. Its power lies in its refusal to cohere.

This refusal, however, does not exist in a vacuum. As Véronique Lane's *The French Genealogy of the Beat Generation* demonstrates, Beat individuality was always dialogic—shaped by deep engagements with French modernism, existentialism, and the Symbolist tradition. Ginsberg's voice emerges in conversation with Apollinaire and Genet; Burroughs's textual disintegration owes much to Rimbaud and Michaux. Even Kerouac's "spontaneity" is steeped in Proustian memory and Céline's lyrical fatalism. What appears as a purely American assertion of selfhood is, in fact, a cosmopolitan construction—one haunted by other languages, other traditions, other selves.

In this light, the Beat self becomes a palimpsest: layered, unstable, and stitched together from fragments of global modernity. It is neither purely authentic nor purely performative. It is, instead, what I term a fractured cosmopolitan self, seeking wholeness through rupture, connection through detachment, and meaning through the very impossibility of coherence.

Transnational Routes, Postwar Maps

The Beat Generation's literary and philosophical preoccupations were never solely domestic in orientation. While Beat mythography often remains tethered to American geography—Kerouac's highways, Ginsberg's urban reveries, Burroughs's Midwestern decay—these landscapes soon gave way to a planetary itinerary. India, Mexico, Japan, Tangier, Paris, Havana: these were not mere stops on a bohemian itinerary, but contact zones where Beat writers encountered the aftermath of empire, cultural syncretism, and geopolitical tension. Their travels occurred against the backdrop of postwar reordering—decolonisation, Cold War realignment, and emergent Third World movements—transforming Beat literature into a field of transnational engagement, if not always critical self-awareness.

Jimmy Fazzino's reading of the Beat writers as "worlded" suggests that their creative and personal trajectories were shaped not solely by U.S. countercultural politics, but by broader transnational forces. This perspective complicates the notion of the Beats as insular or exclusively American. Take Ginsberg's 1962–63 travels through India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. While these journeys have often been framed in popular accounts as spiritually motivated or orientalist in nature, the archival materials—particularly his *Indian Journals* and correspondence—point to a more layered engagement.

When Ginsberg arrived in Kolkata, he came into contact with the Hungryalists—a group of Bengali poets known for their radical literary stance. Writers like Malay Roy Choudhury and Sunil Gangopadhyay were challenging not only conventional nationalist ideologies, but also lingering colonial stylistic norms. Their literary resistance was far from symbolic; it unfolded under conditions of real political danger. As Deborah Baker notes in *A Blue Hand*, and as Jimmy Fazzino later elaborates in *World Beats*, Ginsberg encouraged the Hungryalist poets to write in Bengali. He warned against mimicking Western poetic models and emphasised grounding their work in local language and tradition. This can be read as a gesture of solidarity. Yet, it remains complicated. Ginsberg's position—as a recognised American poet with international visibility—granted him a level of freedom unavailable to those he sought to support.

Even while engaged, Ginsberg operated from a different vantage point. He could travel freely, access publishing platforms abroad, and maintain his global presence. The Hungryalists, in contrast, wrote under surveillance and political pressure. The risks they faced were significant and constant: censorship, state scrutiny, and possible arrest. That imbalance—though rarely overt—structured their relationship and shaped the space in which dialogue occurred.

This disparity echoes through Ginsberg's poem *September on Jessore Road*, written in 1971 amid the crisis following the Bangladesh Liberation

War. In lines such as "Millions of babies watching the skies / Bellies swollen, with big round eyes" (Ginsberg 209), the poem strikes a tone that's difficult to categorise. It blends the impulse to document with a lyrical register. The shift from inward reflection to outward witnessing marks a new mode of expression—part compassion, part artistic framing.

What's unresolved in the poem is telling. It doesn't settle the question of how to represent suffering without aestheticising it. Instead, the poem holds that tension. What it offers is an imperfect cosmopolitanism—fractured, aware of its own limitations, and shaped by the unequal distances between observer and subject.

Burroughs's transnational trajectory offers a different, though related, case. *Naked Lunch*, largely composed in Tangier, is often interpreted through themes of addiction and psychological fragmentation. But the novel also carries the traces of empire—its setting saturated with postcolonial tensions that go beyond the personal or hallucinatory. However, the text also bears the imprint of colonial residue—less explicit, perhaps, but no less present. The city itself becomes a site of disorientation shaped by empire, surveillance, and uneven mobility. Tangier, a free zone until Moroccan independence in 1956, functioned as a zone of ambiguity—politically unmoored, linguistically hybrid, culturally entangled. As Brian Edwards demonstrates, Burroughs's engagement with Tangier was shaped by its unique political and cultural instability. The city operated, in Burroughs's own words, as "a frontier between dream and reality—the 'reality' of both called into question" (Burroughs 302). This spatial dislocation is mirrored in the hallucinatory structure of Naked Lunch, which emerges from the contradictions of Tangier as both a site of libertarian excess and nationalist unrest—a zone suspended between U.S. hegemony, colonial residue, and Arab resistance. The text's polyvocality, its recursive structure, and its performative dismemberment of the narrative body mirror the geopolitical fracturing of colonial modernity.

Yet, Burroughs's engagement with Tangier remains ambivalent. His use of Arab settings and Arabic phrases often slips into orientalist tropes, aestheticising danger and ambiguity while eliding the voices of the colonised. The city becomes a cypher for inner disintegration rather than a community with its agency. Burroughs's engagement with Tangier can be read as both an aesthetic strategy and a geopolitical reaction. Rather than offering a coherent political position, his writing performs a disjunctive, often cynical engagement with his context. As Fazzino observes, "Burroughs's kaleidoscope of obscene violence in *Naked Lunch* is used to launch an avant-garde critique of colonialism that reverberates far beyond that one work and its immediate Moroccan context." (Fazzino 158) Yet this critique is refracted through surrealist excess and affective ambiguity, which often displaces political solidarity in favour of fragmentation, irony, or withdrawal. Nevertheless, the

very instability of *Naked Lunch*—its resistance to closure, linearity, and unity—enacts a kind of formal cosmopolitanism, one that refuses the coherence demanded by national narratives.

Paris offered a different kind of transnational formation. For Corso, Paris became a theatre of loss and transformation during his residence from 1959 to 1960. His poem "The Sacré-Cœur Café," as Fazzino reads it, stages a nostalgic lament for a revolutionary past now hollowed out by consumerism and postcolonial fatigue. Corso's references to Danton and Murat echo France's revolutionary legacy. Still, the fundamental dissonance lies in the poem's evocation of the Algerian War, which raged through the streets of Paris in the 1950s and 1960s. The line "the bombed Algerians observe each others' burning teeth" (Corso 1960: 66) captures a glimpse of imperial violence rupturing the poet's reverie. Corso does not entirely centre the Algerian perspective. Still, his poem registers the political unrest as a fracture within the lyric self, implicating the poet's alienation in a wider geopolitical rupture.

In Mexico, Beats like Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and Brenda Frazer found another crucible of transnational complexity. Kerouac's *Tristessa* romanticises Mexico City through the lens of Catholic martyrdom and addiction, casting the eponymous woman as both saint and spectral muse. Gregory Stephenson suggests that in *Tristessa*, the protagonist is cast in contradictory terms—she is seen as both spiritually elevated and physically diminished. The way she is described—"the object of the narrator's religious adoration and of his romantic-erotic affections"—reflects what Stephenson identifies as the "beat-beatific condition" (Stephenson 33–34). At the same time, she's depicted as addicted, impoverished, and voiceless. The narrative does not give her much agency. Rather, her suffering seems to serve a purpose for the narrator, offering a symbolic pathway toward his own spiritual inquiry. Mexico City, too, functions less as a material setting and more as a projection of his emotional state.

Brenda Frazer's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*, written many years after her own time in Mexico, takes a noticeably different approach. Her perspective is shaped by direct experience—as a woman navigating illness, economic instability, and gendered vulnerability. In contrast to the mysticism often projected onto Mexico in works like *Tristessa*, Frazer's narrative refuses the exotic frame. Instead, she presents Mexico as a lived space—full of contradiction, tension, and at times, danger. Her account pushes back against the kind of spiritualized and symbolic renderings common in male-authored Beat texts.

It is worth noting that countries like Mexico—and also India—are frequently used in Beat literature not as settings in the usual sense, but as imaginative sites of personal transformation. However, when viewed more critically, these "Beat geographies" appear far from neutral. They are marked

by historical asymmetries and cultural translation, often shaped by the privilege of the writers who move through them. They are political spaces shaped by inequality and structural asymmetry. The Beats, though often presented as wanderers or outsiders, were typically travellers with Western privilege—passports, publishing opportunities, and freedom of movement that local populations didn't enjoy. This doesn't erase their insights, but it does add a layer of complexity. What looks like openness or curiosity may also reflect uneven power.

As Nancy Grace and Jennie Skerl emphasise in their introduction, the Beats were not only understood as American literary rebels. Still, they were also "received as such outside the United States" (Grace & Skerl 1) and formed "a global configuration of artists whose work in total resists the simplistic binaries of square versus hip 1950s culture and the equally simplistic binary of bad nationalism versus good transnationalism." (Grace & Skerl 11) The movement's reception abroad was shaped by complex transnational currents, with Beat writing serving as a model of cultural dissent and global exchange across Cold War contexts. They became emblems of dissidence in contexts as diverse as Czechoslovakia (where Ginsberg was crowned King of May), Nicaragua (where Ferlinghetti supported Sandinista solidarity), and Japan (where Gary Snyder and Nanao Sakaki forged ecological poetics). These transnational affiliations complicate the view of the Beats as insular rebels or naïve seekers. They reveal a network of affiliations—some ethical, others problematic—through which the Beats participated in global dialogues on liberation, identity, and art.

But this participation was consistently mediated by fracture. The Beats did not form a unified cosmopolitan ideal; instead, they enacted what I call a fractured cosmopolitanism—a mode of engagement shaped by longing, asymmetry, contradiction, and rupture. Their journeys were not linear, nor were their affiliations stable. As we will explore in the following section, these fractures were evident in their exclusions: of women, of racialised others, and of alternative modes of being in the world.

Gendered and Racial Silences: Revising the Community

While the Beat Generation positioned itself as a community of outsiders, iconoclasts, and mystics, this community was, from its inception, constructed through exclusions—gendered, racial, and ideological. The Beat "we" was often, in effect, a masculinist fantasy: a band of wild, suffering men transcending convention through poetry, travel, intoxication, and sex. This fantasy operated not only as a literary trope but also as a social reality, one that relegated women and minority figures to the margins of Beat mythology, even as they cohabited, collaborated, and created alongside the movement's major male figures.

In recent decades, feminist scholarship has undertaken the urgent task of revising this one-dimensional narrative. Polina Mackay's *Beat Feminisms* offers one of the most comprehensive reevaluations of gender in Beat literary history, contending that the image of the self-divided man, as embodied in Peck's physical appearance, is reworked by these women writers into alternative models of subjectivity and authorship. She argues that women like Diane di Prima, ruth weiss, and Anne Waldman did not simply write within Beat culture but against its dominant masculinist myths—especially those that link literary genius with suffering, sexual freedom, and psychic extremity. Waldman's Fast Speaking Woman, for instance, is said to rewrite Beat spontaneity into "visionary cleansing," drawing on indigenous chants and feminist ritual to "link writing as a woman [with] being an activist against various forms of oppression" (Mackay XIV). These figures developed Beat feminisms that "chart intertextual emergence through poetic visions," reclaiming the maternal, the communal, and the body itself as vital sites of literary and political production.

Diane di Prima's *Loba*, an epic feminist counter-myth, rewrites the lyric "I" as a polymorphous goddess, exploding the monotheism of Beat selfhood. In contrast to Kerouac's protagonist—whose spirituality often hinges on a blend of Catholic guilt and a search for ego-erasure through Buddhism—di Prima's *Loba* turns toward a vision grounded in multiplicity, incarnation, and the sacred feminine. As Mackay argues, the poem's fragmented and incantatory structure doesn't simply mirror Beat aesthetics; it reworks them. Di Prima's form avoids the disembodied transcendence often associated with the male Beat quest and instead explores a more rooted kind of spirituality—one tied to the body, ancestry, and cyclical regeneration (Mackay 109–114).

Yet, the marginalisation of women within the Beat movement went beyond formal experimentation. It played out socially and structurally. In *A Different Beat: Writings by Women of the Beat Generation*, Richard Peabody curates a series of essays and poems that capture the emotional, physical, and intellectual labour women contributed—often without recognition. Figures like Hettie Jones, Brenda Frazer, Elise Cowen, and Joyce Johnson reflect on how they were both participants and outsiders—writing, raising children, navigating cross-racial relationships, and often being reduced to roles such as lovers, muses, or "beat chicks" (Johnson 60). In her memoir *How I Became Hettie Jones*, Jones explores what it meant to be both Jewish and in an interracial marriage with LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), confronting layers of racial and religious exclusion within the very communities that claimed radical openness.

Brenda Frazer's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*, written decades after her time with Gregory Corso and others, can be seen as a feminist counter-

narrative to earlier Beat travel writing. Unlike Kerouac's *Tristessa*, which filters Mexican experience through Catholic allegory and idealised suffering, *Troia* centres lived complexity. It portrays Mexico not as a metaphor but as a real, unstable environment—one where a young woman navigates illness, motherhood, exploitation, and cultural dislocation. The narrative of *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* is formally fragmented, driven not by a linear plot but by the embodied disorder of memory and affect. This structure mirrors Frazer's psychic disorientation and her gradual reclamation of subjectivity. As Ronna C. Johnson argues, Troia "deforms the genre the text performs" by subjecting the transnational road tale—a foundational narrative of Anglo-American myth and Beat existentialism—to a proto-feminist critique. Bonnie's simultaneous subject positions as "wife, mother, daughter, sister, whore" reconfigure the Beat ethos of travel, sex, and visionary experience, foregrounding how Beat aesthetics are not generically 'beat,' but fundamentally gendered. Through its "auto-ethnographic" performance, Troia intervenes in both the masculine mythos of Beat transnationalism and the critical reception that historically partitions female-authored texts from the canon, instead articulating an insurgent politics of gender, genre, and embodiment (Johnson 53).

The racial politics of Beat cosmopolitanism are equally fraught. While Beat writers admired Black jazz musicians, Latin American surrealists, and Eastern mystics, these forms of admiration often bordered on appropriation. Ginsberg's encounters with Indian poets, for instance, sometimes drifted toward a romanticism that sought a guru. However, his respect for the Hungry Generation poets and his later solidarity with global liberation struggles reflect a more politically mature evolution. Kerouac's depictions of Black characters in *On the Road*—notably the character of "Ray Rawlins"—oscillate between exotic admiration and narrative disposability, rendering them symbolic rather than fully realised subjects.

Yet within the Beat matrix, Black and Brown writers also carved out autonomous zones of artistic innovation. Ted Joans, Bob Kaufman, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), and Jayne Cortez wrote poems that challenged white Beat fantasies while drawing from surrealism, jazz improvisation, and Afro-diasporic traditions. Black Beat writers expanded the boundaries of Beat poetics by confronting the structures of white liberalism, systemic racism, and imperial power. Their work did not merely embrace aesthetic experimentation; it was rooted in lived experience, political defiance, and cultural reclamation. The statement "Jazz is my religion" (Joans 87) embodies a cosmopolitan vision forged through historical struggle and embodied dissent—one that resists abstraction in favour of material presence and insurgent creativity.

Bob Kaufman, too long overshadowed in Beat histories, offers a key counter-voice. His "Abomunist Manifesto" parodies the consumerism of the American dream while invoking diasporic rage and surrealist fracture. As

Mackay notes, Kaufman's silence during the Vietnam War operated as a deliberate and potent political gesture, subverting the Beat valorisation of performative speech and presence (Mackay 107–108). His poetic vow of silence during the Vietnam War constitutes a powerful act of resistance that reconfigures the Beat emphasis on speech and visibility. Rather than celebrating expressive performance, his silence enacts a radical withdrawal, a refusal to participate in dominant discourses, that challenges the core assumptions of Beat literary identity (Fazzino 77-79).

Queer voices in Beat literature have often been met with mixed treatment. Ginsberg, of course, was openly gay, and his writing reflects a lot of that—desire, vulnerability, spirituality—but his public role shifted over time. He went from an outsider to someone more aligned with liberal political ideals. But not all queer Beat writers had the same trajectory. Elise Cowen is a clear example. She died by suicide at twenty-eight and, for a long time, her work was barely visible. Most of her poetry was nearly lost. What remains shows a different tone entirely—one filled with romantic yearning but also deep frustration. Her writing doesn't echo the typical Beat celebration of freedom. Instead, it reads like a record of being watched, constrained, and erased.

So, trying to rethink or "revise" the Beat community isn't just about remembering who was left out. It's also about asking why. What allowed certain identities to thrive while others were ignored or pushed aside? That inclusive "we" the Beats loved to claim—like in *Howl*—wasn't universal. It came out of very particular social and political positions. And, as some critics have pointed out, what made that "we" possible were also moments of exclusion, strategic alliances, and access that others simply didn't have.

The broader Beat archive—if we take a wider view—is far more diverse than the early histories suggested. Yes, there are the famous road novels and manifestos. But there are also letters, journal entries, translations, even collaborations—created by women, queer writers, and marginalised voices across different cultures. These aren't just side notes. They change the story. They make it clear that the Beat movement wasn't just about lone rebels on the road or mystical poets. It was a messy, sometimes contradictory cultural project, shaped by difference, and by who had the power to speak—or be heard.

Fractured Cosmopolitanism: A New Theoretical Framework

The Beat Generation's persistent search for self-transcendence, community, and literary truth cannot be fully understood within the confines of national or aesthetic boundaries. Their writing and travel reveal an engagement with the world that is neither traditionally cosmopolitan—enlightened, elite, nor universal—nor naively internationalist. Instead, what emerges is a complex,

unstable stance that oscillates between radical openness and implicit complicity. This article proposes the concept of *fractured cosmopolitanism* as a means of understanding this ambivalence: a mode of global engagement that is sincere yet partial, visionary yet uneven, and often marked by the very exclusions it seeks to transcend.

The theoretical lineage of cosmopolitanism spans from Kantian ideals of global citizenship to postcolonial critiques of empire and liberal universalism, as noted by Kwame Anthony Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. The cosmopolitan spirit, as he notes, involves "universal concern and respect for legitimate difference" (Appiah V). Yet as many scholars have argued, this liberal ideal has often been wielded in ways that obscure power imbalances, especially in cultural and literary discourses shaped by Western imperialism. Pheng Cheah distinguishes between dominant models of cosmopolitanism—those based on abstract ideals of global belonging—and more grounded understandings of worldhood that emerge from the material realities of postcolonial modernity, migration, and uneven globalisation. He argues that normative visions of cosmopolitanism often obscure structural inequalities by conflating worldliness with the spatial expansion of intersubjective communication or market flows (Cheah 132–133). Similarly, Homi Bhabha's reflections in *The Location of Culture* emphasise that cosmopolitanism is not a fixed identity but a process of negotiation marked by hybridity, cultural translation, and the unsettling conditions of liminality (Bhabha 38–39).

The Beats did not formulate a coherent cosmopolitan theory. But they enacted, often improvised, a lived cosmopolitanism: crossing borders, learning languages, building relationships across cultures, and participating in what Grace and Skerl call "global poetics in a postmodern world" (Grace & Skerl 1). Yet their engagement was deeply fractured. This fracture was not simply moral or political; it was aesthetic and structural. The Beats embraced disruption—syntactic, narrative, ontological—as a literary principle. Their cosmopolitanism, likewise, is marked by rupture rather than synthesis.

Take, for example, Ginsberg's encounter with India. His journals and letters show both a profound effort to learn from South Asian spiritual traditions and a tendency to project personal longing onto cultural others. His interactions with the Hungryalist poets of Kolkata were marked by mutual recognition, but also by linguistic gaps, representational asymmetries, and the enduring privilege of movement. Ginsberg's cosmopolitanism was forged in humility and solidarity, but also refracted through the legacy of Orientalist desire. This encounter enriched his poetic vision, but he was never fully able to transcend the structures that had enabled his presence there in the first place.

Fractured cosmopolitanism accounts for this paradox. It recognises that cosmopolitanism is not a purity of intention or action, but a historically

entangled practice. For Beat writers, global engagement was always filtered through the conditions of Cold War mobility, whiteness, male privilege, and American exceptionalism. Their texts often voice a desire for radical identification with the oppressed, the poor, the mystical Other—but that identification is complicated by narrative control and representational ventriloquism.

This is especially visible in the case of William Burroughs. His works, from *Naked Lunch* to *The Soft Machine*, incorporate Arabic, French, and Spanish phrases; they are filled with international locations, coded geopolitical critique, and surrealist appropriation of indigenous cosmologies. Yet Burroughs's cosmopolitanism is textual, not ethical. His "cut-up" aesthetic, developed with Brion Gysin in the Beat Hotel in Paris, literally fragments the page as a model of resistance to state surveillance and narrative control. But this aesthetic also mirrors the colonial disassembly of cultural forms—it destabilises without necessarily reconstituting relations of understanding or reciprocity.

Burroughs's fractured cosmopolitanism is at once visionary and violent. As Véronique Lane has shown, his deep engagement with French literary modernism (especially Genet and Michaux) reveals a persistent search for anti-humanist alternatives to Western rationality (Lane 142). His cosmopolitanism is thus less about harmony than about breakdown: he seeks new affective and cognitive territories, but often through dislocation rather than dialogue. In this sense, Burroughs represents a negative cosmopolitanism—one that disassembles identity without reconstructing solidarity.

Kerouac, by contrast, exhibits a nostalgic, melancholic cosmopolitanism. Raised in a Franco-American working-class household, he often cast himself as a "Catholic Buddhist" pilgrim, seeking transcendence through the mystical geographies of Asia, Latin America, and the American West. His vision is suffused with longing for lost innocence, maternal love, and a divine beyond. However, as Grace and Georganta note in their analysis of Beat connections to Greece, Kerouac's writing often reterritorialises the foreign within a Christian-American spiritual framework. His cosmopolitanism is lyrical but centripetal: it gathers the world only to sacralise the self.

Fractured cosmopolitanism thus also accounts for aesthetic form. Beat literature resists closure. Its prose is elliptical, performative, and dialogic. Its poems are oral, incantatory, and often open-ended. These formal qualities mirror the ruptures of the world the Beats inhabited: a postwar order marked by decolonisation, displacement, Cold War paranoia, and rapid technological change. The Beat attempt to "be in the world" is constantly disrupted by the

disjunction between vision and structure, desire and reality. Their writing performs that disjunction.

Furthermore, fractured cosmopolitanism acknowledges the presence of voices within the Beat constellation that radically complicate the movement's self-image. Frazer's *Troia* deconstructs the male Beat travel narrative, not by refuting its aesthetic but by inhabiting it from the underside. Her fragmented memoir refuses linearity; her narrator drifts through border towns and hallucinations, caught between bodily vulnerability and poetic lucidity. This is cosmopolitanism from below: forced, embodied, and self-critical. Similarly, Ted Joans's Afro-surrealism posits a Black internationalism that speaks through jazz, collage, and improvisation, not in the service of Beat myth but in dialogue with it.

Importantly, fractured cosmopolitanism is not a condemnation. It is a critical mode that enables appreciation of the Beats' global vision without flattening its contradictions. It resists both romanticisation and dismissal. By foregrounding fracture—textual, political, and ethical—it allows us to read the Beats not as ideal cosmopolitans, but as symptomatic figures of a mid-century cultural crisis. They inhabit a moment when the world opened up and collapsed simultaneously—when the map of empire crumbled but its aftershocks shaped every path they took.

In this light, the Beats become unlikely theorists of our present. Their work anticipates current debates around cultural appropriation, globalism, decolonial solidarity, and the ethics of travel. Their fractured cosmopolitanism is a model not of how to be in the world, but of how to confront the brokenness of world-systems—and to write from within that brokenness. It is a poetics of contact, misfire, and imagination. It begins not with a passport, but with a question: Who are we when we step beyond the nation's frame? And who do we silence when we speak from "everywhere"?

Case Studies: Geographies of Fracture and Contact

To grasp the lived complexities of fractured cosmopolitanism, one must move beyond abstract theory and consider how individual Beat writers negotiated the material, political, and aesthetic tensions of transnational experience. These encounters were not merely literary expeditions or spiritual pilgrimages; they were historically embedded gestures, fraught with contradiction, marked by aspiration, and shaped by uneven power. Examining three pivotal moments—Allen Ginsberg's engagement with India, Gregory Corso's poetic confrontation with postcolonial France, and Brenda Frazer's radical rewriting of the Beat travel narrative in Mexico—allows us to witness how cosmopolitan desire collides with the fractures of history, identity, and representation.

Ginsberg's journey to India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal in 1962–63 is often recalled as a key moment in the Beat movement's international turn. That said, his time in India in particular did not unfold in the mystical, idealised way it's sometimes remembered. At first, Ginsberg viewed India as a spiritual landscape—filtered through Emersonian ideals and an imagined Buddhist purity. But his actual experience turned out to be far more grounded—marked by political complexity and historical depth.

His journals and letters from that time reflect this shift. In Kolkata, he met the Hungryalist poets—Malay Roy Choudhury and Sunil Gangopadhyay, among them—who weren't just playing with poetic form; they were taking real political risks. Unlike many Beats whose rebellion often felt performative, these poets were actively resisting nationalist ideologies and postcolonial aesthetics. Ginsberg urged them not to mimic Western literature, but to write in Bengali—to reclaim a literary voice rooted in their own context.

Still, Ginsberg's position was structurally different. He arrived with the privileges of citizenship, international recognition, and mobility. The Hungryalists did not share that freedom—they wrote under surveillance, facing censorship and potential arrest. That imbalance didn't disappear—it shaped their interaction.

Nearly a decade later, during the fallout of the Bangladesh Liberation War, Ginsberg penned *September on Jessore Road*. Its tone is markedly different—more outward-facing than introspective. Phrases like "Millions of babies watching the skies / Bellies swollen, with big round eyes" (Ginsberg 209) are both haunting and poetic, forcing us to sit with the tension between empathy and aesthetic distance. The poem moves between witness and artistry. And it doesn't resolve that tension. In a way, it can't. The distance between Ginsberg and the suffering he describes remains unbridgeable, and the poem seems to know that. Ginsberg's voice here is shaped not only by empathy but by the uncomfortable distance of privilege—a poet moved by suffering, yet inevitably separated from it. The poem doesn't pretend to resolve anything. It sits in that uneasy space between witnessing and representing, between compassion and the inevitable distance that comes with privilege. And maybe that's the point—it shows what it means to speak from a place that can observe but not fully share the experience.

Gregory Corso's poetic exile in Paris in the late 1950s and early 1960s similarly reveals how cosmopolitanism, for the Beats, could become a site of both critique and collapse. Known for his metaphysical wit rather than his political commitment, Corso's collection, *The Happy Birthday of Death*, nonetheless features two poems— "Bomb" and "The Sacré-Cœur Café"—that register the psychic and political dissonance of postcolonial France. In "The Sacré-Cœur Café," revolutionary figures from France's past—Danton, Murat—are ironically conjured in a Parisian scene now domesticated,

gentrified, and oblivious to its colonial violence. The reference to Algerian suffering—evoked in the stark image of bodies marked by violence—interrupts the flow of the poem with unsettling force, pointing to a racialised conflict that lingers at the margins. It emerges briefly, almost obliquely, as if haunting the lyric without being fully assimilated into its narrative structure or thematic core. Fazzino describes this absence as a form of haunting, a spectral trace of empire lingering in a scene of supposed postwar civility. In the more formally experimental "Bomb," Corso embraces the surreal beauty of destruction—"O Bomb I love you I want to kiss your clank" (Corso 32-33)—only to end in absurdist, almost ecstatic disintegration. Rather than advocating for peace or directly critiquing militarism, the poem undermines any coherent moral position, staging the annihilation of the lyric self. Cosmopolitanism here is not a redemptive global vision but an implosive response to the trauma of history. It is an unstable, ironic detachment—a refusal to reconcile self with world, politics with poetics.

If Ginsberg's and Corso's cosmopolitanisms are marked by moments of asymmetry, disorientation, or withdrawal, Brenda Frazer's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* offers a radical counterpoint. Written retrospectively and published long after her years in Mexico City during the early 1960s, Frazer's memoir breaks with the dominant Beat narrative of movement and transcendence. In contrast to Kerouac's *On the Road* or his mystical, male-centred *Tristessa*, Frazer's Mexico is neither exoticised nor redemptive. It is a fraught, unstable space in which she navigates linguistic alienation, bodily illness, motherhood, and abuse. Her mobility is constrained, not liberated; her journey is not one of revelation but one of survival. Troia's structure—fragmented, lyrical, disjunctive—reflects the embodied experience of trauma and isolation. Drawing on techniques from confessional poetry, montage, and stream-of-consciousness, Frazer articulates a form of feminist transnationalism that is rooted in vulnerability rather than mastery. As Ronna C. Johnson argues, her memoir complicates the masculine myth of Beat freedom by exposing the risks and exclusions embedded in transnational space. Frazer's cosmopolitanism is deeply situated and political: not an adventure but a reckoning.

These three figures—Ginsberg, Corso, and Frazer—do not offer a unified model of transnational engagement. Instead, they reveal the multiplicity and instability of what it meant to be a Beat abroad. Their geographies of fracture emerge not despite their desire for global communion, but through it. Ginsberg's solidarity is sincere but partial; his lyric is haunted by its representational anxiety. Corso's disaffection veers toward aesthetic nihilism, utilising irony as both a shield and a scalpel. Frazer's memoir dismantles the very premises on which the Beat journey is founded, grounding cosmopolitanism in bodily risk and feminist critique.

Together, these case studies underscore the central premise of fractured cosmopolitanism: that differences of gender, race, class, language, and power consistently mediated the Beat engagement with the world. These differences did not nullify the Beats' global reach; instead, they shaped it, complicated it, and ultimately rendered it more human. The fractures are not failures. They are the contours of a literary imagination striving, imperfectly, toward a more entangled sense of what it means to be in the world.

Conclusion: Beyond the Road

The Beat Generation has long been framed as a movement of cultural fugitives—figures fleeing from America's postwar conformity in search of truth, transcendence, or kicks. Yet as this article has argued, to read the Beats solely as domestic rebels is to miss the deeper entanglements and tensions that animated their literary and lived experiences. By introducing the concept of fractured cosmopolitanism, this study has reframed Beat literature as a contested, partial, and often contradictory engagement with the world. Cosmopolitan in scope but fractured in execution, the Beats' global imaginary reflects not a smooth embrace of cultural difference, but a persistent oscillation between openness and opacity, aspiration and limitation.

This fractured stance is evident in the structure and affect of their writing—disjunctive, nonlinear, digressive, incantatory. The Beats did not write from a place of secure belonging but from thresholds: between East and West, self and other, confession and performance. Ginsberg's poetry trembles between political witness and spiritual lyricism. Corso's ironic cosmopolitanism captures the surreal absurdity of Cold War imperialism. Frazer's feminist counternarrative rewrites the very terms of what it means to move through the world as a Beat. In each case, the writer is negotiating a relationship to the global that is marked not by mastery, but by rupture. Their cosmopolitanism is not a final destination, but an unstable, ongoing encounter with alterity.

Fractured cosmopolitanism is not a moral judgment, but a descriptive and interpretive framework. It names the aesthetic, ethical, and political ambivalence at the core of Beat world-making. It allows us to see the Beats not as failed idealists nor as romantic egoists, but as symptomatic figures of a mid-century cultural transition, caught between the collapse of imperial structures and the emergence of global consciousness. Their literature is haunted by the very histories they try to escape, and enlivened by the contacts they could neither fully absorb nor control.

This reorientation has implications beyond Beat studies. It speaks to the broader challenge of constructing global imaginaries in a world marked by unequal mobility, historical trauma, and asymmetrical power. The Beats offer no blueprint, but they do provide a poetic archive of attempts—sometimes

flawed, sometimes luminous—to write the world from within its fractures. Their failures are instructive. Their insights, when refracted through voices long marginalised in Beat discourse—women, racialised writers, queer poets—offer generative possibilities for remapping the literary field.

To look "beyond the road" is thus to see the Beats anew: not just as wanderers, but as witnesses to the uneven terrain of postwar globality. Their cosmopolitanism was not perfect. But it was real—and it remains instructive today. In an era of rising nationalisms and retreating global solidarities, the fractured cosmopolitanism of the Beats reminds us that literature's power lies not in erasing borders, but in marking where they fail, and in imagining how we might speak across the divide.

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