

## Handout 1 - Beat Writers

### Allen Ginsberg

American poet, writer, and activist, Allen Ginsberg was one of the foremost voices of the Beat Generation. While a student at Columbia University, Ginsberg met Lucien Carr after hearing him play a record of composer Johannes Brahms in his dorm room. Carr went on to introduce Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Neal Cassady, and the core group of Beat writers was formed.



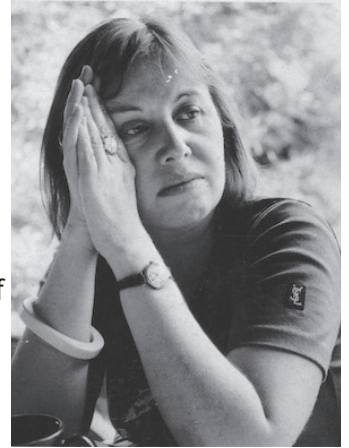
Ginsberg attained national prominence after the publication of *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956. “Howl” was a sprawling poem which openly discussed homosexuality and drug use, while critiquing the materialistic, capitalist culture brewing in the United States. The publishers and booksellers of “Howl” were arrested for publishing the book and put on trial for obscenity charges — which they beat, on the basis of the poem’s “redeeming social importance.” Ginsberg is represented in *On The Road* as the character Carlo Marx.

### Excerpt from “Howl”

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,  
 who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on  
 tenement roofs illuminated,  
 who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light  
 tragedy among the scholars of war,  
 who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of  
 the skull,  
 who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and  
 listening to the Terror through the wall. . .

## Joyce Johnson

Like many of the writers of the Beat Generation, Joyce Johnson's career is marked in many ways by her rebellion against the social norm—a position made all the more difficult given her status as a woman in mid-century America. Johnson was born in New York City in 1935. At age thirteen, she began living largely independently of her parents, and entered into Barnard College at sixteen years old. Three years later, she began working for a literary agency. Johnson's first novel, *Come and Join the Dance*, was published in 1962, when she was twenty-six. The novel's frank treatment of the lives of women in the 1950s, including their sexual experiences, broke many taboos in 1950s America, and today it is considered an important contribution in Beat Literature. Johnson has since published two additional novels, a memoir, a collection of letters, and a variety of articles and essays. As an editor, she played a primary role in the publication of famous books related to the Civil Rights and New Left movements, including works by Amiri Baraka, Harold Cruse, and Abie Hoffman.



In 1957, Johnson was introduced by Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, initiating a relationship that lasted two years. After Kerouac's death in 1972, Johnson played a vital role in getting his novel *Visions of Cody* published. Later she would write a biography of Kerouac entitled *The Voice Is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac*.

### Excerpt from "My Decors"

Apart from weekends, national holidays, and periods of unemployment, I worked by night, after returning from whatever office job was paying the rent. In fact, after I began frequenting the enticing Cedar Tavern, where a whole nocturnal world of painters, poets, dancers, and jazz musicians—broke, brilliant, and boozy—opened up to me, I sat down to write later and later. This was the "real life" I'd longed to be part of and I didn't want to miss any of it, even though I should have been devoting every spare minute to my book. Shortly before I moved downtown, I'd been stunned when the editor-in-chief of Random House offered me a contract after reading the 50 pages I'd managed to produce in the workshop he taught at the New School. I felt embarrassed about my contract. Since I'd gotten it when I was only 21, I hadn't suffered very long, while most of the writers and painters I was meeting had experienced years of rejection for their avant-garde works. I was sure they'd think I hadn't earned my lucky break, and since I doubted they would be very interested in what a young woman was writing, I didn't talk much about it. My novel was not avant-garde, though my editor thought he'd seen something new in it. It had been inspired by a remark by one of my Barnard College professors, a man who taught writing to his female students while actively discouraging them from pursuing it. "Oh, you girls have such uninteresting little lives," he'd scrawled on one of my papers, making me instantly determined to write a book that would prove him wrong.

## Neal Cassady

Neal Cassady was an American counterculture icon most well-known for his role in promoting psychedelic drugs and a nomadic lifestyle. Together with author Ken Kesey, he was a part of the iconic Merry Pranksters, a group that pursued a cross-country bus journey immortalized in journalist Tom Wolfe's book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. In 1945, he moved to New York City, where he developed a close relationship with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Cassady appears as himself or character influences in a number of Beat generation writings. In *On The Road*, he serves as inspiration for Dean Moriarty.



In 1950, Cassady wrote a 18-page letter to Kerouac known as “The Joan Anderson Letter.” The prose in that letter is considered to have greatly inspired Kerouac’s writing style in *On the Road*.

### Excerpt from “The Joan Anderson Letter.”

Oh, unhappy mind; trickster! O fatal practicality! I was wearing really filthy clothes but had a change promised me by a friend who lived at 12th and Ogden Sts. So as not to hangup my dwarf cabbie savior when we went to see his buddyboss next A.M., my foolish head thought to make a speedrun and get the necessary clean impediments now. Acting on this obvious need—if I was to impress my hoped-for employer into hiring me—I promised to hurry back, and left. Where is wisdom? Joan offered to walk with me, and I turned down the suggestion reasoning it was very cold and I could make better time alone, besides, she was still pretty weak, and if she was to work tomorrow the strain of the fairly long walk might prove too much—no sense jeopardizing her health. Would that I'd made her walk with me, would that she'd collapsed rather than let me go alone, would anything instead of what happened! Not only did the new promise for happiness go down the drain, and I lost Joan forever, but her peace was to evaporate once and for all, and she herself was to sink into the iniquity reserved for a certain type of beaten women!

## Diane Di Prima

With Allen Ginsberg, Di Prima was one of the most celebrated poets to come out of the Beat Movement. Di Prima began writing at age seven, and made the decision to become a poet at age fourteen. In 1951, she dropped out of Swarthmore College to join the bohemian community in New York's Greenwich village, where she came to meet Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac.

At age 24, Di Prima published her first book of poetry, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*, and has gone on to write dozens of books. In addition, Di Prima co-founded the New York Poets Theater and the Poets Press, opening up places for the work of Beat and other poets and playwrights. Like many writers of the Beat Generation, Di Prima's work is known for its open discussion about issues such as sexuality, class and counterculture—so much so that she has been charged by the FBI multiple times in her career for publishing “obscene” material.



### “The Window”

you are my bread  
and the hairline  
noise  
of my bones  
you are almost  
the sea

you are not stone  
or molten sound  
I think  
you have no hands

this kind of bird flies backward  
and this love  
breaks on a windowpane  
where no light talks

this is not time  
for crossing tongues  
(the sand here  
never shifts)

I think  
tomorrow  
turned you with his toe  
and you will  
shine  
and shine  
unspent and underground

## William S. Burroughs

William S. Burroughs was an American author and visual artist most known for semi-autobiographical works, largely drawn from his experiences with heroin, that helped shaped the Beat scene. Burroughs followed his friend Lucien Carr to New York City, becoming friends with Allen Ginsberg and sharing an apartment for a time with Jack Kerouac. Burroughs struggled with addiction throughout his life, a fact he made clear in his written work since his first publication, *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*. In *On the Road*, Burroughs is represented by the character Old Bull Lee.



### Excerpt from *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*

One day I was walking down San Juan Létran and passed a cafeteria that had colored tile set in the stucco around the entrance, and the floor was covered with the same tile. The cafeteria was unmistakably Near Eastern. As I walked by, someone came out of the cafeteria. It was a type character you see only on the fringes of a junk neighborhood.

As the geologist looking for oil is guided by certain out-croppings of rock, so certain signs indicate the near presence of junk. Junk is often found adjacent to ambiguous or transitional districts: East Fourteenth near Third in New York; Poydras and St. Charles in New Orleans; San Juan Letrán in Mexico City. Stores selling artificial limbs, wig-makers, dental mechanics, loft manufacturers of perfumes, pomades, novelties, essential oils. A point where dubious business enterprise touches Skid Row.

There is a type person occasionally seen in these neighbor-hoods who has connections with junk, though he is neither a user nor a seller. But when you see him the dowser wand twitches. Junk is close.



## Herbert Huncke

Hustler, burglar, addict, and philosopher of the streets, Herbert Huncke served as an inspirational figure for the Beat generation writers, an example of the hedonistic danger of living on the edges of civilized society. In 1939, Huncke hitchhiked to New York City, and soon became a mainstay in the city's counterculture. Equally comfortable among the Columbia-educated Beats as the junkies on the street, Huncke spent his life in and out of jail, and survived selling drugs, prostituting himself, committing burglaries, and being a con-man. All the while, he wrote in great detail about life in the New York City underground. In the final years of his life, he lived in an apartment in the Lower East Side, with his rent being paid by members of the Grateful Dead. In *On The Road*, Huncke is the inspiration for Elmer Hassel. He coined the phrase "Beat" in conversation with Jack Kerouac, defining it as having no money and few prospects. Kerouac took the term to apply it to his generation.



### Excerpt from "Florence"

She called me to please bring over a bag and the works and please hit her because I knew how impossible it was for her to hit herself. I made the run, delivered the bag, cooked up the fix, and hit her. She had taken several Doraphen, and when the stuff hit her, she sort of zonked out. I shook her and made some kind of contact, asking if she had taken goof-balls, and she lied and said that she hadn't. I couldn't get hung up with her at that point, going over and shooting her up, having her collapse, with doubt in mind about whether she'd Oded or not. She staggered over, [dog] Pooka by her side, and stood in front of the building rocking back and forth, staggering away finally to Avenue A. This all settled into a regular routine, and then one afternoon she had convulsions. It was my first experience with a physical condition where there was a violent muscular contortion, a stiffening on the body, quivering rigidity, gurgling, gasping for breath, dribbling streams of saliva hanging from the lips, jerking, straining black eyes, fear and confusion. I held her. I spoke with her. I pleaded with her, tried placing a silver spoon on her tongue—something about no swallowing her own tongue. I cradled her in my arms, trying every way to calm her and to help her. . .