

High Off the Page: Representing the Drug Experience in the Work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg

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This article explores attempts by Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg to transcribe their drug experiences onto the written page. Utilizing both Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on intersubjective communication and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's conception of the "Body Without Organs," it argues that by writing "through the body," Kerouac and Ginsberg are able to transmit the physical and emotional effects of the drug experience to the reader via the medium of the text. The reader thus receives not just an objective account of the drug experience, but becomes privy to the alterations in temporal perception and intersubjective empathy that drug use inaugurates.

Just what is the body's knowledge? A scar traces the history of a laceration, a pain in the back indicates bad posture, a runny nose predicts a cold. The body is ours to read like a text, provided something occurs. Otherwise, it becomes all too often a mere given, an instrument used to grasp, to move, to live. Only through the prism of a rent do we witness the body itself in all its fullness and possibility. For those of us that desire such a glimpse, alteration becomes a necessity. But how should we attempt such a mutation without damaging our precious vessel? Drug use is one answer. Perhaps no other word creates such a wealth of connotations—addiction, transgression, criminality, overdose. With all the dangers attached to them, drugs seem an unlikely candidate for such experimentation.¹ Yet there are advantages. Drugs provide a temporary alteration with fairly predictable results. A user can ingest a substance, experience the embodied consciousness of the drugged state, and return with their tale. What is needed, then, are such accounts of drugs that can provide the user and non-user alike with insights into how drug use intersects with subjectivity. How exactly do drugs alter human perception and how might that shed light on our understanding of the body and its potential?

Fortunately, such an account already exists in the work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. These writers were involved in a postwar project that saw drug use as an invaluable means of expanding their range of experience beyond accepted channels. Written during the period of intoxication, Kerouac's and Ginsberg's works provide not just an abstract comment but a concrete record of the effects of drug use on embodied consciousness. The

gains these writers experienced while mapping this terrain are twofold. On the one hand, the drug-inspired works of Kerouac and Ginsberg reveal an emphasis on the temporality of the drug experience. Their works become studies in speed, concerned with the increases, decreases, and stoppages in the perception of time that drug use enacts. But it is important to note that Kerouac and Ginsberg were primarily writers, and thus the role of communication becomes of paramount importance in their work. Not only do their drug writings relate their own personal experiences, but they likewise seek to explore the interstice between the drugged state and the Other who stands outside that experience. We become privy to the changes drug use inaugurates both within the single body and between multiple ones. Kerouac's and Ginsberg's willingness to experiment on themselves and bring back the results in the form of literature provides us with accounts of drug consumption's effects on subjectivity and, ultimately, sheds light on what it means to alter the body and to portray this alteration to another.

Before exploring the specific results of the drug state, one must first understand the literary process by which information concerning this state is conveyed from writer to reader. For these two authors, communication between the reader and the drugged Other can only take place when writing attains the status of original speech. In his work *Phenomenology of Perception*, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty differentiates between two types of language: original and secondary. He writes, "I may say that 'I have been waiting for a long time,' or that someone 'is dead,' and I think I know what I am saying. Yet if I question myself on time or the experience of death . . . there is nothing clear in my mind. This is because I have tried to speak about speech, to re-enact the act of expression" (391). Original, "authentic" expression is already full, since in the act of saying something we attain an "immediately apprehended clarity" (391). Problems arise only when we attempt to speak about speech. The sentence turns into a reified object that loses its immediacy and thus its immanent meaning. This is precisely the reason writers like Kerouac and Ginsberg are so adamant that writing should emanate from elsewhere than the "ego." Thus in his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," Kerouac advises, "If possible write 'without consciousness in semi-trance' (as Yeats' later 'trance writing'), allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so 'modern' language what conscious art would censor" (70). What Kerouac is advocating is writing from what phenomenology terms the "intentional consciousness." Instead of writing about objects and ideas, the writer is ad-

vised to transcribe the workings of their “subconscious” as objects and ideas are grasped intentionally.² In “Notes Written on Finally Recording ‘Howl’” Allen Ginsberg explains it thus: “Mind is shapely, Art is shapely. Meaning Mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image—gets to Last Thoughts” (81). The ego is an impediment. Forcing the world through the filter of the “I” reduces externality into easily-manageable representations. It is only through composing with the intentional consciousness that the writer is able to produce authentic work that originates meaning through interaction with the world.

Original speech, however, is tied closely to the body. This can be seen in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of linguistic communication, which is built on the gesture. In discussing a threatening gesture, Merleau-Ponty explains that “The gesture *does not make me think* of anger, it is anger itself” (184). One need not search his or her experience of gestures or reason by analogy in order to understand the meaning of a raised fist since this gesture contains the significance of “anger” within it. For Merleau-Ponty, the spoken word is also a gesture, and thus “the meaning of words must be finally induced by the words themselves . . . their conceptual meaning must be formed by a kind of deduction from a gestural meaning, which is immanent in speech” (179). Original speech is not concerned with simply communicating a set of facts to the listener, but aims at conveying a style of being from one body to another. Thus Kerouac has recourse to the simile of gesture in explaining his technique. In his “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” Kerouac compares the line to “a fist coming down on a table with complete utterance, bang!” (69). This “bang!” denotes the “telepathic shock and meaning-excitement” (69) that the reader receives from such expression. Language is not first a matter of communication, but of alteration. Merleau-Ponty claims that “I begin to understand a philosophy by feeling my way into its existential manner, by reproducing the tone and accent of the philosopher” (179). Before content comes to form, a certain style of being gets communicated from the speaker to the listener, causing not a “process of thinking on my part, but a synchronizing change of my own existence” (183-84). Original speech can bridge the gap between self and Other since, as Kerouac maintains, the listener has the “same laws operating in his own human mind” (69). Kerouac spontaneously composes through his drugged body and the results appear on the page. The reader then comes along and reads, activating all the latent characteristics of the drug state buried in the text. Thus the “truth” about the drug state comes to reside not simply in overt content, but in the form

of the work itself.

The importance placed on corporeality should come as no surprise, since the body figures prominently in all of Kerouac's and Ginsberg's manifestoes. Jack Kerouac claims that his work relies on "the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)" ("Essentials" 69). Here the body becomes a privileged site for poetics. Breath is tied to the body, and by breathing life into the poem the poet breathes a part of himself into the poem as well. Allen Ginsberg deepens this connection between breath, body, and writing in his essay, "Improvised Poetics." He declares that "physiologically in the body . . . is . . . the key to suddenly waking up . . . a whole Reichian chain of muscular reactions . . . it's like having the basic patterns of physiological reactions built into the language, into the alphabet" (36, ellipses in original). Writing that takes its cue from the body imbues language with a physical presence. As Daniel Belgrad observes in his book, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, such a poetic act is possible "only because of the very physicality of the poet's body-mind, which situated him or her as an object in place and time" (130). The Beat poet Michael McClure uses a different metaphor but to the same effect. In *Scratching the Beat Surface*, McClure speaks of a "systemless system" which "alters itself in the waves with a living anarchism" (54). The poet allows energy to flow through the body in order to create a "systemless system" that is the poem. McClure writes that poems become "extensions of myself as much as my hand or arm are extensions of me" (89). Again, physicality is infused directly into the work in order to embody the poem. But if the body is the basis for poetics, then an alteration of that body through the use of drugs is going to alter the writing as well.³ Composing through the drug-altered body allows the effects of the drug to be transferred onto the written page, providing the reader with a novel account of the drug experience unavailable through mere descriptions of the event.

But how exactly does a reader experience the written drug account? Here again the work of Merleau-Ponty is instructive. Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body grounds the individual in the world. But it also provides a means for intersubjective communication. Merleau-Ponty claims that "as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other person's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon" (354). It is only through encountering the Other's body that communication can be established, that this "system" can be comprised. Writing done "through the body" allows for intersubjectivity to be established between

bodies via the medium of the text. McClure explains it thus: “Blake is as present today as if he were biologically alive. His works are extensions of himself Blake’s works, like all artifacts of all high artists, are his body. Gestures come so directly from his physical being that their presence is real and physical” (137-38). Blake’s works are traces of his body, and from them we are able to connect with a man dead for over a century. Discussing the use of mantra in his poetry, Ginsberg explains in “Improvised Poetics,” “the . . . rhythmic . . . units . . . that I’d written down . . . were basically . . . breathing exercise forms . . . which if anybody else repeated . . . would catalyze in them the same *pranic* breathing . . . physiological spasm . . . that I was going through . . . and so would presumably catalyze in them the same *affects* or emotions” (33-36, ellipses in original). When the text is infused with a bodily presence, the reader is able to connect with the work on a visceral level. Merleau-Ponty claims that “Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself” (183). While it is the writing itself that we phenomenologically confront, this “existence” that is the text retains bodily properties that allow the reader to experience it physically as well as mentally.⁴ Beat theories of the body provide a means of connection between the writing of an author and the body of the reader. The written word retains a physical impact conveyed from author to reader through the medium of the text.

Yet Merleau-Ponty’s paradigm of bodily intersubjectivity is only one side of the coin. If drugged writing is working through an altered body to record new experience for the reader, how do we theorize this re-orientation towards the world? In contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s reliance on the body as a means to ground experience, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call for an experimental body in constant flux and change. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe a “set of practices” which create a limit known as the “Body Without Organs” (150).⁵ This “Body Without Organs” is equated with “the full egg before extension of the organism and the organization of the organs, before the formation of the strata; as the intense egg defined by axes and vectors, gradients and thresholds” (153). The egg knows no strict organization. It is only after the egg develops that the organs coalesce into a regimented structure that becomes immobile. The “Body Without Organs” is championed as a way of breaking down this reified body in order to find a new means of experiencing phenomena by opening the body up to sensations and “intensities” that were previously imperceptible. Rather than relying on a rigid, fixed conception of the body

as a means of experience, these philosophers are calling for a reorganized body where “experimentation has replaced all interpretation” (162). Although Deleuze and Guattari warn of the dangers involved in creating a drugged body, it is clear that in crafting a “Body Without Organs” the drug user is attempting to open herself up to new experience and phenomenological data by altering the very foundation of knowledge itself: the body.

But if the bodily consumption of drugs is a means of altering perception, the question becomes: What novel perceptions are drugs inaugurating? According to Deleuze and Guattari, the fundamental issue here is one of *speed*. They write:

the problem is well formulated if we say that drugs eliminate forms and persons, if we bring into play the mad speeds of drugs and the extraordinary posthigh slownesses . . . if we confer upon perception the molecular power to grasp microperceptions, microoperations, and upon the perceived to emit accelerated or decelerated particles in a floating time that is no longer our time. (283)

The body as “ground” gives way to the “Body Without Organs.” These alterations created through drug use, these “accelerations” and “decelerations,” provide the drug user with a means to perceive what was before imperceptible. This new sense of time opens up new vistas of the “molecular” for the drug user and allows for what Deleuze and Guattari call a “hecceity.” Subjectivity is replaced by a becoming that involves both speed and affect: “You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles” (262). If speed is what you are, altering your speed will change your very being, allowing the world (and yourself) to be perceived in new ways. Writings about the drug experience often address this notion of an altered temporality, but do so on the level of content. How might an investigation of the formal nature of literary work shed light on Deleuze and Guattari’s emphasis on speed? These thinkers downplay the individuality of the drug substance, preferring to organize their thinking under the rubric of speed. Yet a closer inspection of writing under the influence reveals that each drug creates a specific “hecceity” that should not be overlooked. Deleuze and Guattari may be concerned with the overall effect of drugs, but it is important to flesh out some of the distinctions in speed between various drugs if we are to fully understand both their effects on temporal perception and their possible literary representations.

The fundamental problem in discussing the speeds associated with drug use is that there is no objective yardstick with which to measure deviations from a norm. Philosophy has attempted to solve this problem by positing the notion of a “real” present that elides perceptual difference. As Richard Gale notes in *The Philosophy of Time*, this solution has the result of making any perceptual present “specious” with regard to a “real or true present, which is supposed to be punctual” (294). Experience dictates, however, that the present always remains relational—a second for one person is never a second for another. What do “acceleration” and “deceleration” mean in such a situation? An answer can be found in an appeal to the notion of attention. In his work *Patterning of Time*, Leonard W. Doob presents the results of a study that discovered “subjects under the influence of the depressant tapped and drew a mirror image more slowly than when affected by the antidepressant” (313). Let’s call the time it takes to draw the “mirror image” the present. Under the influence of a depressant like marijuana, the subject expends more attention to the process than he would under the influence of an antidepressant such as amphetamines. The person high on marijuana thus experiences an expansion of the present that concomitantly leads to the feeling that objectified clock time has slowed. As Peter Hartocollis claims in *Time and Timelessness*, under the influence of marijuana there is a “concentration on the present” (133). The amphetamine user, by contrast, attends to her task more quickly, leading to a contraction of the present, which means the next present will be encountered more rapidly. Here objective clock time seems to speed up. It is important to note that within each of these presents the number of stimuli remains unchanged—it is not the number of objects encountered but the length of attention fixed upon them that distinguishes the variation in speeds between the two types of drugs used.

This expansion of the present that occurs under marijuana use is literally “captured” in Kerouac’s texts. Writing under the influence of marijuana, Kerouac’s work is able to represent the distinct attentional effects of the experience to the reader. Take a passage from *Visions of Cody*, where Kerouac explains a “gray afternoon” to the reader:

that kind of day, that’ll only know a rosy cloud at sundown when the sun will find its tortured way through masses and battles of fevered darkening matter—raw, dank, the wind going like a gong through your coat and also through your body—the wild woolly clouds hurrying no faster in the heavens above than the steam from the railyards hurrying over the fence and up the street into town—fantastic, noisy . . . (85)

This passage continues on for another five lines, as Kerouac continually infuses his descriptions with detail upon detail in an effort to convey the feeling of a “gray afternoon” to the reader. According to Kerouac’s friend and fellow Beat writer John Clellon Holmes, such passages in *Visions of Cody* were written while under the influence of marijuana: “He’d blast, get high, and then he’d write all night. And the reason why those sentences are so long and exfoliating and so incredible is because of pot” (Gifford 77). The expansion of the present that takes place under marijuana allows Kerouac to delve deeper and deeper into his descriptions. With its abundant use of commas and space-dashes, this passage decelerates as Kerouac packs his explanation of “that kind of day” with an array of particulars. Sentence length expands correspondingly as Kerouac’s perceptions “exfoliate” into additional clauses that nuance the overall description while slowing down the reading process. By the time the reader comes to the end of the line, the idea of a “gray afternoon,” registered momentarily by a sober observer, has been explored in the extreme depth that marijuana use allows. Kerouac’s passage not only presents his thinking process while under marijuana, but conveys the speed of the experience as well.

For Kerouac, this expansion of the present that marijuana produces allows for what is known as “digging.” Consider a letter Kerouac wrote to his friend Neal Cassady:

First let me say that I have been digging the World Series and the tones of the various announcers. This morning I did the World Series the honor of getting up early and blasting ahead of time. There’s an announcer from Philly called Gene Kelley who is an exact replica of John Holmes (that is, dig John as a radio announcer), with the same way of *being proud of his verbs*, and so on, like when a groundball is hit, he’ll say . . . ‘a slow, *twisting*, weak roller’ as if baseball was the significance of life itself, the things happening in it representing in symbols of action, the symbols of (twisting) despair in the ‘modern world.’ . . . Then quickly I turn to old reliable southern-accent Mel Allen, who has that simple back-country mind, like Dean, just pointing out things like . . . ‘Well, there’s Johnny Mize mopping his face with a handkerchief’ . . . You can tell Neal, how I dig all this; my mind, wrapped in wild observation of everything, is drawn, by the back-country announcer, back to the regular, *brakeman* things of life. (*Selected Letters* 230-31)

As with his “grey afternoon” description, Kerouac meanders through clause after clause that slowly draws out the details of Gene Kelley’s and Mel Allen’s announcing that inspire the account. Yet “digging” not only expands the moment, but opens the “digger” up to a new range of empathetic feelings as well.⁶ In his letter to Cassady, Kerouac’s description of Kelley as “being proud of his verbs” is not simply a comment on his technique. Instead, it demonstrates a desire to understand the announcer on some sub-linguistic level. Kerouac continues to equate Kelly’s tendencies with “life itself” and “symbols of (twisting) despair in the ‘modern world.’” In much the same manner, Allen’s “simple back-country” announcing draws Kerouac to “the regular, *brakeman* things of life.” Kerouac thus reinterprets the announcer’s words in his own terms, extrapolating attitudes and feelings that the two announcers never explicitly verbalize. Marijuana-induced “digging” is a means of understanding an Other and empathizing with their plight. In *On The Road*, Sal and Dean smoke “a tremendous Corona cigar of tea,” (283) then proceed to “dig” their newly-acquired Mexican friends. Dean exclaims, “Will you d-i-g that weird brother in the back . . . And they’re talking and wondering about us, like see? Just like we are but with a difference of their own” (283-84). Despite the barriers of language and culture, marijuana use builds a bridge from one self to another. Slowing the world down so that a moment may be taken in more fully, marijuana-inspired “digging” allows for a leisurely contemplation of the world around the “digger.”

Unsurprisingly, amphetamine use produces the opposite effect. While marijuana expands the moment and leads to a decelerated reading experience, amphetamines contract the moment, leading instead to a sense of acceleration. Consider a passage from Kerouac’s novel *The Subterraneans*. Kerouac wrote this work in a benzedrine-fueled three day marathon (Charters, *Kerouac* 185), and this often-quoted passage retains the increased energy that the drug induces:

So there we were at the Red Drum, a tableful of beers a few that is and all the gangs cutting in and out, paying a dollar quarter at the door, the little hip-pretending weazel there taking tickets, Paddy Cordavan floating in as prophesied (a big tall blond brakeman type subterranean from Eastern Washiington cowboy-looking in jeans coming it to a wild generation party all smoky and mad and I yelled ‘Paddy Cordavan?’ and ‘Yeah?’ and he’d come over). (13)

Digging involves an attention to a few details within the moment, expanding on them until an empathetic understanding of the object being “dug” is reached. Here, however, Kerouac is obsessed with novelty—his attention continually shifts from character to character as they parade across the room. Even when Kerouac does begin to explicate a character like Paddy Cordavan, he quickly shifts to another facet of the event, explaining how when he “yelled ‘Paddy Cordavan?’” Paddy responded “Yeah?” and came over. Rather than dwelling on the inner souls of his characters, Kerouac instead gives quick visual descriptions then immediately moves on to the next scene or occurrence. By collapsing the present in such a way that more of them can be included in his account, Kerouac provides the reader with a sense of the “acceleration” associated with amphetamine use.

The shortening of the moment that results from amphetamine use is best exemplified in the life of veteran “speed freak” Neal Cassady. As William Plummer notes in *Holy Goof: A Biography of Neal Cassady*, the “raps” and letters of Cassady which would go on to inform Kerouac’s prose style were themselves “sped by amphetamine” (129).⁷ As a boy, his brother Jimmy would imprison him in a wall-bed, where Cassady experienced a sensation of time having had “gradually apexed to about triple its ordinary speed of passage” (*First Third* 113). Later in life, Cassady was able to control this sensation,

to hold still as death and listen intently for the inner ear to speed up its buzz until, with regular leverlike flips, my mind’s gears were shifted by unknown mechanism to an increase of time’s torrent that received in kaleidoscopic change searing images, clear as the hurry of thought could make them, rushing so quickly by that all I could do was barely catch the imagery of one before another crowded. (*First Third* 113)

This constant “kaleidoscopic change” of “searing images” is an apt description of the type of change in attention that amphetamine enacts. The moment of perception shortens so drastically that Cassady barely had time to perceive an image before “another crowded” to replace it. While digging expands the present to focus ever-more-closely on singular details, amphetamines like benzedrine shorten that present so that details can be accumulated, leading not to explication but to cataloging.

The “digging” inspired by marijuana use finds a corollary in the confessional nature of amphetamine consumption. While marijuana use expands

the present to allow the “digger” to understand an Other more fully, amphetamine use creates an intense desire for personal revelation that finds expression in the hurried pace of the narrative itself. At the beginning of *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac announces that “another confession must be made, as many I must make ere time’s sup” (3). As the novel develops, Kerouac continually divulges personal and oftentimes unflattering facts about his life in an effort to tell everything as quickly as possible. Belgrad notes that “Beat works do not invoke what Michel Foucault called ‘the rituals of confession’” but instead “elicit not a judging authority but an intersubjective ‘moment of rapport’” (205-6). Both drugs are involved in an attempt at empathetic union that Kerouac and Ginsberg continually seek. However, each achieves that union in a different manner. In *On The Road*, this desire to “confess” to the Other is tied even closer to amphetamine use. Carlo (Ginsberg) explains to Sal (Kerouac) that he and Dean (Cassady) “are embarked on a tremendous season together. We’re trying to communicate with absolute honesty and absolute completeness everything on our minds. We’ve had to take benzedrine” (42). Unfortunately for the amphetamine user, however, there never seems to be enough time. Despite conversing the entire night, come daybreak Carlo and Dean’s task remains incomplete, and they must meet again to continue their discussion. Marijuana expands the moment so that there always seems to be enough time, while amphetamines like benzedrine create a feeling that time is always running out. Kerouac’s frantic confession in *The Subterraneans* is an attempt by an author to describe everything desperately, to tell the whole story, to unburden all of his problems on the sympathetic ear of another “ere time’s sup.”⁸

Kerouac is trying not only to describe and explain his connection to others, but also to *show* the reader physically his experience through the text. In his “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” Kerouac delineates his idea of “scoping,” comparing the act of writing to “a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang!” and then advises the writer to “Blow as deep as you want—write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind” (69). Writing is a means to capture experience, to trap it between the lines on a page. Drug-induced writing thus works through the body to inscribe the sensation of the drug state onto paper in order to deliver the “telepathic shock and meaning-excitement” of this state to the reader. *The Subterraneans* offers a frantic cataloging of doubt which triggers a parallel sensation of ac-

celeration in the reader, a reading driven on by the narrator's relentless account of the innermost details of his love relationship. In much the same manner but with different results, Kerouac's letter to Cassady and *Visions of Cody*, with their ambling, hyper-detailed descriptions, slow the reader down into a world constantly expanding with minute detail upon minute detail. Both types of accounts are packed with perceptual data, but the form of the work receives its impetus from the drug that fueled it, and each works in a different manner to shape the reader's experience.

But if writing through the drug state offers a revolutionary means for connection, this technique reaches its limit case with LSD. The difficulty posed by LSD, however, has not deterred Allen Ginsberg from attempting to transcribe his experience with the drug. Experimenting with LSD-25 at Stanford University in 1959, Ginsberg found the type of empathy that he and Kerouac were seeking. In a letter to a relative, Ginsberg claims that he discovered "a sort of identity common with everything" (Schumacher 311). Unfortunately for Ginsberg, this vision was difficult to transcribe into poetry. In "Lysergic Acid," Ginsberg composes under the influence of the drug, but as his biographer Michael Schumacher concludes, the "result was some interesting, though confusing, writing" (312):

A We
 and that must be an It, and a They, and a Thing with No Answer
 It creepeth, it waiteth, it is still, it is begun, it is the Horns of Battle it is
 Multiple Sclerosis
 it is not my hope
 it is not my death at Eternity
 it is not my word, not poetry
 beware my Word (*Collected Poems* 232)

Ginsberg is clearly struggling to explain the LSD experience to his readers. But rather than allowing the drug to speak through him onto the page, he instead attempts to reflect on its effects. The poem thus remains mired in negativity, forced to describe what the experience is *not* instead of what it *is*. "Magic Psalm," written after the hallucinogenic experience, takes the opposite tack. Where "Lysergic Acid" searches for a means to describe the drug's effects, "Magic Psalm" employs the formal structure of Ginsberg's earlier poems in a vain attempt to capture the temporal impact of LSD. Ginsberg writes "croak my voice with uglier than reality, a psychic tomato speaking Thy / million mouths" (*CP* 255). Structurally, the lines of this poem follow those of "Howl." But the benzedrine-inspired format

of “Howl” fails to convey LSD’s sense of temporality. Juxtapositions such as “psychic tomato,” claimed to make “incarnate gaps in Time and Space” in “Howl,” fall short of the more celebrated “hydrogen jukebox” and “reality sandwiches” found in his earlier work. Ginsberg’s use of preestablished forms to convey his idiosyncratic LSD experience means that his presentation of the intoxicated state remains filtered through an unspontaneous, sedimented, secondary consciousness. As Ginsberg himself claimed in a 1976 interview with Paul Portuges, he was “trying to superimpose the acid vision on the old memory of a cosmic-consciousness, or to superimpose the old memory on the acid vision—so that I was not living in the present time” (Portuges 121).

It is only when Ginsberg returns to his body in “present time” that his writing begins to capture the drug experience. Despite his advocacy for drugs as a tool for mind expansion, by the time Ginsberg journeyed to Asia he had become disillusioned with their use. As he explains to Thomas Clark in a *Paris Review* interview, “I don’t renounce drugs but I suddenly didn’t want to be *dominated* by the nonhuman anymore . . . or do anything any more except *be my heart*” (Ginsberg, “Interview” 316). Instead of trying to leave the body and meld into the “nonhuman,” Ginsberg decides to return to the body as a means of establishing “human relationships rather than relations between the human and nonhuman” (Ginsberg, “Interview” 314). With this new mindset, Ginsberg once again took LSD and produced the poem “Wales Visitation.” In it, Ginsberg writes:

Bardic, O Self, Visitacione, tell naught
 but what seen by one man in a vale in Albion,
 of the folk, whose physical sciences end in Ecology,
 the wisdom of earthly relations,
 of mouths & eyes interknit ten centuries visible (*CP* 480)

Where his earlier LSD poems focused either on explaining the mental conceptions the drug was building or reverting back to the earlier forms as a means of making sense of the experience, “Wales Visitation” immerses itself in the objective minutiae of the LSD moment. Drawing on “what seen by one man in a vale,” Ginsberg gets back into the body in order to link up with humanity. As Ginsberg claims in Portuges’ *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, “for the first time I was able to externalize my attention instead of dwelling on the inner images and symbols” (122). This “externalization” allows Ginsberg to get outside himself and connect up with the “wisdom of

thus leaves the reader with a sense of time “standing still” even as elements within the poem vibrate with life. Yet one wonders if “Wales Visitation” has the formal impact that its imagery suggests. How can you write the feeling of timelessness when the act of writing itself places you squarely back into temporality? Ginsberg experiences a pure presence during the LSD moment, but the sense that this attention is eternal is impossible to capture on the written page.

The difficulty Ginsberg encountered in describing LSD sheds light on the limits to which drug temporality can be represented to another. Ginsberg’s experience, however, highlights another limit that needs to be addressed when dealing with drug use–dependency. Ginsberg came to believe that he needed drugs in order to perform acts of consciousness-raising, even though they caused him to become physically ill. Deleuze and Guattari are equally aware of the dangers that drug use raises, and they ultimately remain skeptical about their utility: “the line of flight of drugs is constantly being segmentarized under the most rigid of forms, that of dependency, the hit and the dose, the dealer” (284). Imprisoned by the “hit and the dose,” the addict spirals downward rather than upward; drug use leads to more drug use, not to a higher plane of understanding or a new “line of flight.” This problem is acute in the Beat canon—witness the history of Burroughs’ heroin addiction or Kerouac’s untimely death due to alcoholism. Such examples lend credence to Deleuze and Guattari’s ultimate announcement that drugs fall short of their emancipatory claims. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “Instead of making a body without organs sufficiently rich or full for the passage of intensities, drug addicts erect a vitrified or emptied body, or a cancerous one” (285). The drugged body may open the user up to new “intensities,” but the strict reliance on a chemical substance to effect this change leads to a circular pattern of use, withdrawal, and eventually death.

Despite these reservations, Deleuze and Guattari do not denigrate drug use entirely. Drugs can still show the way. What Deleuze and Guattari are looking for is the point where “drugs have sufficiently changed the general conditions of space and time perception so that nonusers can succeed in passing through the holes in the world” (286). And it is precisely here that Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s writing has been successful. By shifting temporal perception through the written word, they have provided the “nonuser” with a means to experience the altered drug reality. This “nonuser” has acquired the insights to be gained from the drug but without facing the negative consequences of drug use that Deleuze and Guattari describe. Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s audi-

ence is a step ahead. Rather than always starting “over again from ground zero,” they are able to “start from the ‘middle’” (Deleuze and Guattari 286). These works are thus a blueprint, a launching pad where the reader can shift her or his experience in a fundamental, bodily manner simply by opening a book. Where Henry Miller wanted to “succeed in getting drunk, but on pure water” (Deleuze and Guattari 286), Kerouac and Ginsberg actually achieve such ends, getting the reader “high” off the page.

To raise the question of drug use within the Beat canon is to risk several commonplaces. Discussion often turns to addiction as the stamp of a Beaten-down lifestyle, to drug use as a conduit for highly idiosyncratic personal visions, or to Beat rebelliousness against moral, social, and legal codes. All of these factors are indeed relevant to any discussion of drug use. But to end there would be to ignore some of the most valuable insights that Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s drug writing have produced. What Beat writers like Kerouac and Ginsberg are most concerned with is the intersection between drugs, bodies, and consciousness. Drugs are not some amorphous entity, but have a specificity which makes various types of perception possible. Each drug builds a body that encounters the world differently, opening up the drug user to speeds and perceptions previously unavailable. And these perceptions are not isolated. Drug use acts on embodied consciousness to produce shifts in relationships between bodies—a new type of intersubjectivity gets established, a stronger type of empathy is reached. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg recorded a moment in history when the drug state was more than an issue to be avoided, a social blight to be fixed, or an intellectual problem to be studied. Instead, the drug state was a site where something new could take place that held the possibility for a radical altering of human potential. Rather than letting these gains slip further into the past, it is time to listen even more attentively to the call.

Notes

¹ Who gets to speak about drug use? Certainly not the addict, who is either busy satisfying his or her need for narcotics or repenting in an effort to avoid incarceration. Public rhetoric may have changed from the overly bombastic anti-drug campaigns of the Reagan years to the “don’t ask don’t tell” election strategies of Clinton and Bush, but the notion of handling the question of drugs in an open, honest manner is tantamount to political suicide. And while the scientific community is invested in drug studies, gone are the days

when such research meant controlled experiments with individual human subjects. When not in the service of pharmaceutical corporations, research in this field has come to mean highly specific neurological experiments on laboratory animals rather than investigations of altered states of bodily consciousness. What is missing in all of these forays into the world of drugs is an interest in their possibilities for human existence.

² Nomenclature creates some difficulty here. In “Sartre and Merleau-Ponty: A Reappraisal,” Monika M. Langer explains the distinction between the “prereflective consciousness” and the “ego” that Jean-Paul Sartre describes in *The Transcendence of the Ego*: “In its primary mode (that is, as prereflective consciousness), consciousness is absolute, non-personal spontaneity The subject, or ego, on the contrary, is an object constituted and apprehended by reflective, or secondary, consciousness” (103). It is this “prereflective consciousness” that Kerouac labels the “subconscious” and that he is trying to tap.

³ This does not mean, of course, that the mind is elided. The point here is that the body should be given equal consideration when discussing the subjective experience of the drug state.

⁴ What is the exact nature of these “bodily properties” that allows this connection to be established? All of these manifestoes rely on the notion of “energy fields” developed by Alfred North Whitehead. As Charles Olson explains in his “Projective Verse” essay: “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge” (148). Yet the dynamics of this transfer of energy need explication. Does the reader release the writer’s latent energy during the act of reading? Or does the artistic work (re)direct the energy that the reader brings to the work?

⁵ According to Deleuze and Guattari, you never actually reach the “Body Without Organs,” but “you are forever attaining it” (150). While the use of the term “limit” appears incongruous with these philosophers’ insistence on experimentation and expansion, their deployment of the word circumscribes a space within which there remains infinite possibility. Just as “energy field” poetics bound the interpretive possibilities of a text without reducing it to one final meaning, the “Body Without Organs” seeks to create a bodily container that does not stifle change and adaptation.

⁶ William S. Burroughs’s notion of “digging” is a bit more pejorative. In his introduction to the original *Junky*, Burroughs defines “to dig” as “to size up,”

a definition that implies an invidious distinction between self and Other. In a paper dealing with Beat drug use, Burroughs is conspicuously absent. The reason for concentrating on Kerouac and Ginsberg instead of the more obvious choice of Burroughs is that his drug of choice, “junk,” is notoriously difficult to represent to another. As Burroughs himself has noted, he produced little while actually under the influence of this drug, and thus for the purposes of this study his contributions are minimal.

⁷ Culling examples from disparate sources of writing raises the question of genre distinctions. While a letter is not the same as a novel or poem, Beat works tend to conflate such distinctions, viewing all writing as equally literary. In her introduction to *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956*, Ann Charters rightly observes that Kerouac’s “letters bring us closer to the life he actually lived before he turned it into literature” (xxi). Nevertheless, for purposes of exploring writing done under the influence of drugs such distinctions are unproductive.

⁸ Compare Kerouac’s own reading of his work on the CD *Jack Kerouac on The Beat Generation*. His “Excerpts from ‘The Subterraneans’” reads much faster than the next two tracks from “Visions of Neal.”

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