

A Search for Masculinity: The Meaning of Male Homosocial Bonding in the Beats

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Introduction

While critics continue to debate, classify and reclassify the writers of the Beat Generation, prominent Beat scholars such as John Tytell agree on the importance of three white men in a male-centered community as it developed in New York City in the 1950s: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs.¹ Their creative and individualistic styles were marked by spontaneity, improvisation, and self-expression, and in their major works — such as *On the Road* (1957), *Howl* (1956), and *Naked Lunch* (1959) — the Beats portrayed themselves isolated from materialistic consumer society, rejecting the postwar masculine ideal of hard work, family responsibility, strict heterosexuality, juvenile delinquency, and anti-communism.²

In their comradeship the Beats developed a defiant masculine subculture in which personal freedom is defined by sexual license, drug abuse, alcohol addiction and literary experimentation. Women served in Kerouac's work to highlight by contrast the theme of masculinity, which in a hyper-idealized form also functions to marginalize homosexuality. Kerouac “fetishized the (hetero) sexual prowess of [his literary protagonist] Neal Cassady and celebrated the rough camaraderie of men on the road.”³ In fact it was through

1 John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives & Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976).

2 Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Critical History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 237.

3 Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 30.

these road trips that the Beats established their bonds and realized their artistic potential, a process demonstrated in Kerouac's writings.

This research on the Beats' homosociality follows my previous research mainly focused on representations of masculinity in works of the Beat writer Jack Kerouac, as well as his deep devotion to his mother, and separations with wives he married. Considering the enlargement of studies on men and masculinity in the 1980s, it will no longer be possible for men to take masculinity for granted, or to recognize one uniquely dominant model of masculinity seen in a way Kerouac saw his own masculinity, particularly during the mid 50s when he was energetic in both his writing and relationships with the other Beats. In exploring men's masculinity, what Michael Kimmel has discussed – the story of working-class men, gay men, men of color, and immigrant men who were thought to be different from straight white men, as he says “the story of the marginalized others”⁴ – hints at the importance of conceiving of one's masculinity not as domination, but in relation to the fear of others (heterosexual men) dominating men. More specifically, this fear is also seen in Kerouac's writings that are partly judgmental, as well as his role in male homosocial bonding, which is discussed in a later section of this paper. This paper aims to broaden a previous view mainly focusing on men's masculinity and domination over women into other possible subjects, such as male same-sex relations, namely homosocial bonding, and here in particular I have examined the sexual identity in male Beats' behavior and relation to others axing Kerouac's case, which will later be expanded into the studies of homosexuality and queerness, one of the larger projects of my research in understanding notions of masculinity in the Cold War white men and the Beat community.⁵

In this paper, I will examine the meaning of this bonding process among the Beats in two stages. In the first, “Masculinity and Male Bonding,” examples of the male bonding process from the writings of Beat writers (mostly Ginsberg and Kerouac) will be explored, while in “‘Homosocial’ and

4 Kimmel, 6.

5 Both this paper analyzing homosexual/homosocial dimensions of white masculinity, in particular the Beats, and the expansion into matters of queerness, are parts of my larger Ph.D. dissertation.

Kerouac's Male Bonding," I will look specifically at Kerouac's examples through Eve Sedgwick's concept of homosociality, a sociological and psychological construct for defining types of same sex relationships. In his narratives and his private life, Kerouac's episodes of homosocial bonding are replete with notions of homosexuality and homophobia, and a reading informed by such concepts can help us understand how gender identity was constructed in society and culture of the United States in the 1950's. The term masculinity as used in this paper refers to white masculinity.

Masculinity and Male Bonding in the Beats

In this section, I will briefly reconsider some representative Beats in their relation to masculinity and male bonding.⁶ With regard to the issues of gender and sexuality in their literature, the most complex and problematic issues seem to relate to "their production of an unprecedented kind of masculinity – [a] redefinition of male homosociality."⁷ This unprecedented masculinity is found in the work of Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and other openly gay writers who straightforwardly and obsessively expressed their sexuality in their novels and poetry, such as *Howl* and *Naked Lunch*. While their work is hardly noticed today outside academic circles, the Beats weren't always so ignored. Public reception was at times openly hostile. In 1957 publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti was brought up on obscenity charges for releasing Ginsberg's *Howl*; the unintended and ironic result was to make *Howl* a best-seller in San Francisco and raise Ginsberg's stature among the Beats.⁸

As a group the Beats exhibited a heterogeneous set of sexual orientations and behaviors. While Ginsberg was openly gay, Burroughs was radically so,

6 With regard to the Beats and homosexual/homosocial behavior, there are numbers of scholars whose queer readings of major American novelists and poets like the Beats of the 1950s and '60s shed new light on the complexities of Cold War culture and our understanding of both normative and non-normative masculinities. Some prominent scholars on the Beats and the areas of homosexual/homosocial are Davidson, Savran, Corber, and Ehrenreich, who are quoted in this paper. See bibliography in this paper.

7 David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 65.

8 Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 314.

putting forward a sophisticated misogynistic rejection of women and a defiant and masculine homosexual identity.⁹ Surrounded as they were by such homosexuals, Kerouac and other heterosexual Beats must have experienced complex feelings about their own identities within the Beat community. Kerouac's protagonists are almost all men, while women play mostly supporting roles – such as wife, girlfriend, prostitute, and mother - defined almost exclusively by their relationship to men.¹⁰ A few of his leads, though, were gay, including his most well known protagonist, Neal Cassady, who was himself in real life gay and had been Ginsberg's lover. Yet Ann Charters, the Beats biographer, notes that “Kerouac never doubted about Cassady's interest in women,”¹¹ even though he knew that “Neal's attitudes toward homosexuality had to be fairly open after three stretches in the reform school.”¹² Still, Neal's three marriages and his wild and impulsive masculinity must have helped Kerouac to accept Neal as his best friend.

Kerouac, though, was not as straight as he let on. In an interview with Allen Young, Ginsberg said that Jack had actually asked him to perform fellatio at a time when Kerouac was without female partners.¹³ So while Kerouac was putting on a front of normalcy, even a hypermasculine front, he was, it seems, privately experimenting with his comrades and colleagues. And this contradiction is what makes Kerouac's novels so interesting in relation

9 Barbara Ehrenreich points out irresponsibility of the Beat Generation to women by calling them, “immature male[s],” and referred to Burroughs' killing of his wife and Ginsberg's homosexuality in the nastiest psychiatric diagnosis. See Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Fight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Press, 1983), 54.

10 Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* (1958) (New York: Penguin Books, 2001); Jack Kerouac, *Tristessa* (1960) (New York: Penguin Books, 1992). Women who appear in these novels by Kerouac are often depicted as secondary. In *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac depicted a Mexican girl named Mardou Fox (Alene Lee) and in *Tristessa*, he depicted his romance with a Mexican prostitute named Tristessa (Esperanza). From a critical viewpoint, these women of American minority groups are often portrayed in a humble and primitive manner without insight into their culture or social position at the time.

11 Charters, 73.

12 *Ibid.*, 73.

13 Allen Young, *Allen Ginsberg: Gay Sunshine Interview with Allen Young* (Berkeley: Grey Fox Press, 1974), 8. “In 64-65 he [Kerouac] said: ‘I'm old ugly, red-faced, I'm beer-bellied and I'm drunk and nobody loves me anymore. I can't get girls, come on and give me a blow job.’”

to masculinity, his intimate homosocial bonding with Cassady rubbing up against anxiety about being seen as gay. His novels deal with notions of both heterosexuality and homosexuality and through his narratives Kerouac seems to be representing how men in the Cold War era struggled to find a comfortable definition of masculinity. This was in a period of greater public awareness and discussion of sex, evidenced by the sensational Alfred Kinsey reports on male and female sexuality of 1948 and 1953.¹⁴

One way of examining masculinity in relation to the Beats is through “hegemonic masculinity,” an idea conceived by sociologist and men’s studies scholar Robert Connell to describe types of masculinity, such as subordinated, marginalized and stigmatized.¹⁵ According to Connell, hegemony convinces people to go along with a dominant ideology. It can affect any social group, not only the gay liberation or men’s liberation movements, but also the Feminist movement or the black Civil Rights movement. Feminists, for example, use this ideological power to claim women’s rights while at the same time being aware of their social marginalization. If a gay man like Ginsberg did not consider himself as stigmatized or marginalized in society, he would not be a part of the gay liberation movement. In this sense, it can be said that this effective power of hegemony also worked well in the Beats’ demonstration of their masculinity. Unlike Ginsberg, Burroughs had once married and his masculinity was clearly represented in his self-centered attitudes toward his wife, Joan Vollmer, in their years in Mexico; Burroughs liked Mexico because it was cheap to buy both tequila and boys there.¹⁶

Kerouac’s relationship with Ginsberg and Burroughs was that of mostly heterosexual, spiritual friends who could share the world of novels, poetry and philosophy, as they did in the apartment in Manhattan where the com-

14 Davidson, 9. “What was perhaps Kinsey’s most devastating revelation was that 40 percent of his male subjects reported that they had engaged in homosexual activities.”

15 Robert W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987), 183-184; Michael A. Messner, *Power At Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 18. Connell explains, “‘hegemonic masculinity’ is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women,” 183; Messner adds, “there are also competing masculinities – some hegemonic, some marginalized (e.g., black or lower class), some stigmatized (e.g., gay),” 18.

16 Savran, 41.

munity of the Beat Generation began. It is rather peculiar, though, that in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac did not depict Alvah Goldbook (Ginsberg) as homosexual even though he depicted him as the homosexual Carlo Marx in *On the Road*. This is strongly related to the circumstances of the times in which these books were written. In his interview with Allen Young, Ginsberg spoke about sexual encounters with Kerouac and Cassady.

You know, I made it [sex] with Kerouac often. And Neal, his hero, and I were lovers, also, for many years, from 1946 on, on and off, at least I wanted to be, and we got to bed quite often, we didn't really fully. . . finally he didn't want any more sex with me, he rejected me! That's what he did! But we were still making it in the mid-1960s after having known each other in the mid-40s, so that's a pretty long, close friendship-Neal and Jack, for that matter.¹⁷

What Ginsberg has described refers to his memory of a time out West when Beats such as Kerouac, Gary Snyder and some girls had a party in the cottage where they often gathered, a kind of sex party. Ginsberg also says, "Jack saw me screwing and was astounded at my virility."¹⁸ When Allen Young asked Ginsberg whether or not Kerouac identified himself as a gay person, Ginsberg replied, "no, he didn't," but "I guess he decided to write a novel in which I was a big, virile hero instead of a Jewish Communist fag."¹⁹ The making of Ginsberg into a heterosexual in *The Dharma Bums* further complicates the relationship between Kerouac's sexuality and his writings, especially in so far as Kerouac actually depicted a homosexual event in the original manuscript of *On the Road*, an episode later eliminated by Malcolm Cowley.²⁰ The setting was a motel where Dean Moriarty sodomizes a traveling salesman with whom they ride to Chicago in a Cadillac; more specifically, Gerald Nicosia describes the incident:

17 Young, 3.

18 Ibid., 3.

19 Ibid., 3.

20 Ibid., 3.

That night, in a hotel room in Sacramento, Neal hustled the driver, a homosexual, into bed. Their violent intercourse kept Jack cloistered in the toilet. Neal was annoyed that the man failed to pay him.²¹

Cowley must have eliminated this scene from the book because homosexuality was not fully acceptable source material at the time,²² a situation evident in public outrage at about the same time over Ginsberg's obsessive poetry in *Howl*. We can see this suggestion of fear of homosexuality and in being seen as gay in Kerouac's narrative male bonding with Cassady as well as in what Ginsberg described as Kerouac's emphasis on heterosexual masculinity (mainly represented by Cassady and Snyder).

In contrast to Ginsberg and Burroughs, male bonding with the Gary Snyder character as depicted in *The Dharma Bums* seems to be similar to Kerouac's relation with Cassady, that is to say, Kerouac also idealized Snyder, a figure after whom he could model himself. Among the Beats, Snyder is perhaps most often identified with Asian cultural values and the postwar counterculture. Snyder was a serious Zen Buddhist, spending close to seven years in Kyoto, and his masculinity seems to represent wilderness and primitiveness. This Kerouac depicted as another ideal male figure, Japhy Ryder: "Japhy wasn't big, just about five foot seven, but strong and wiry and fast and muscular."²³ In *The Dharma Bums*, Japhy asks Ray Smith (Kerouac's persona): "Take your clothes off and join in, Smith"²⁴ when they are trying the tantric sex practice of yab-yum with a girl named Princess. Smith/Kerouac says, "I was still afraid to take my clothes off; also I never liked to do that in front of more than one person, especially with men around."²⁵ Can this sentence be read as an attempt by Kerouac to distance himself from homosexuality? Perhaps being naked among other males is a

21 Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 289.

22 Savran, 64. "Despite its being peopled by a multitude of eccentrics, homosexuals, and misfits, the cannon of American Literature was singularly ill-disposed toward the Beats."

23 Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (1958) (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 11. Hereafter referred to as Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*.

24 Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 29.

25 Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 29.

heterosexual homophobic reaction. This may be true particularly in Kerouac's case as he has depicted a similar passage in *Big Sur*. When Jack Duluoz (Kerouac), Cody Pomeray (Cassady) and other friends drove to a hot springs bath in *Big Sur*, Jack's homophobic thinking is clearly revealed:

With horror I realized there's spermatozoa floating in the hot water - I look and I see the other men (the fairies) all taking good long looks at Ron Blake who stands there facing the sea with his arse for all to behold, not to mention McLearn and Dave Wain too - But it's very typical of me and Cody that we won't [won't] undress in this situation (we were both raised Catholics?) - Supposedly the big sex heroes of our generation, in fact - You might think - But the combination of the strange silent watching fairy-men, and the dead otter out there, and the spermatozoa in the pools makes me sick.²⁶

In the hot water pools where the "gang of fairies" are all naked, Jack Duluoz hesitates to take his clothes off not because he is afraid of being seen as gay, but rather because disrobing in front of other men causes an uncomfortable homophobic reaction. After leaving the bath site, Jack and his friends moved to a beautiful cliff top restaurant with a vast outdoor patio, and there Kerouac again depicts a group of homosexuals: "There are also some further homosexuals at a separate table;" then he talks about "homosexuality and war."²⁷ Here Kerouac repeatedly uses negative expressions pertaining to homosexuality, and rather than simply making jokes about them, his depictions of homosexuals here indicates Kerouac's expression of hatred against homosexuals. In *Big Sur*, Kerouac uses judgmental expressions and idealizes his hyper-masculine hero, Cody (Cassady), as he did Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*. Jack came to the West Coast only to see Cody; however, he soon noticed a change in Cody's personality: "he's [Cody] become quieter, more radiant, more patient, manly, more friendly even."²⁸

26 Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (1962) (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 84. Hereafter referred to as Kerouac, *Big Sur*.

27 Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 85.

28 Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 55.

As Dean Moriarty (Cassady) was the central figure in *On the Road*, he was also the center of Kerouac's other longer novels including *Visions of Cody*. He has also appeared in *The Dharma Bums*, *Big Sur* and *Desolation Angels*; there is no doubt Neal Cassady was a dominant influence in Kerouac's life, an extension of Kerouac's personality. In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac saw the ideal, primitive, masculine and Zen Buddhist-like male figure of Gary Snyder as representing "a vision of a great rucksack revolution, thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray."²⁹ However, Kerouac could not abide the suffering attitude and practices of Zen and his relationship with Snyder was gradually destroyed by Kerouac's alcoholism.³⁰ After this momentary intoxication with Buddhism, Kerouac's real masculine role model was the man who appeared in much of his writing - Neal Cassady.

As has been noted, the protagonist in all of the discourses by the male Beat writers is male. Invariably, the male protagonist is in a state of elation in a number of intense and passionate bonds that are difficult to distinguish from homosexual relations. In *On the Road*, for example, Sal Paradise promiscuously identifies with many of the men, but never the women whom he and Dean Moriarty encounter in their travels. The same is true in other novels, *The Dharma Bums*, *Big Sur* and so forth. Though his narratives foreground masculinity, Kerouac criticized homosexuals while idealizing his masculine heroic male figures of Snyder and Cassady. He lacked a consistent feminist perspective, and in fact women in his narratives appear to have helped him conceive close male relationships untainted by homosexuality. Kerouac's choice of men as protagonists and women in supporting roles might have been indispensable.

Eve Sedgwick's Concept of the "Homosocial" and Kerouac's Male Homosocial Bonding

"Homosocial" is a concept to describe non-sexual relationships between

²⁹ Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 97.

³⁰ Nicosia, 495. "In any case, when Gary criticized his excessive drinking, Jack would snap, 'enough of this shit! I'm gonna do what I wanna do!'"

members of the same sex. A man who prefers female sexual partners but male social partners may be referred to, for example, as a heterosexual homosocial. The concept is now most widely associated with feminist and queer studies scholar Eve K. Sedgwick, who claims there is no clear distinction between homosociality and homosexuality, that each implies the other, and that though they cannot be separated, commonly held distinctions between homosociality and homosexuality are culturally based.³¹ Besides Sedgwick, there is a number of scholars focusing on the concept of homosociality after her research in 1985, such as Michael Kimmel;³² however, as Sedgwick's idea of "male traffic of women" follows the aim of this paper, this section will mainly focus on Sedgwick's contribution on male homosociality. Sedgwick points out that "homosocial desire"³³ clearly exists in the male bonding process supporting male-centered societies; men's solidarity supports social systems premised on traffic in women as sexual subjects – for example, in marriage, the woman is assumed to move from her parental home to her husband's home, becoming as it were his property. It may therefore be said that homosocial society is mostly based on sexually discriminative heterosexuality, sexism and homophobia. Borrowing Sedgwick's ideas on male homosocial bonding and desire, Cultural Studies scholar Leerom Medovoi in his study of Cold War youth culture posits the concept of "fraternity" as an "important conceptual prototype[s] for imagining the 'identity of collectivities.'"³⁴ In the all-male collective of the Beat Generation Medovoi sees evidence of fraternal desire.³⁵

Scholars of masculinity often note a routine and persistent fear of homosexuality as a defining characteristic. In their research some emphasize this anxiety by focusing on male fraternal organizations, such as Boy Scouts of

31 Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 16.

32 Kimmel, 7. "American men defined their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment."

33 Sedgwick, 1.

34 Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 254.

35 *Ibid.*, 255.

America (BSA) and YMCA.³⁶ Though the latter supported men in building social bonds, Gustav-Wrathall's research of the YMCA from the 1940s through the 1960s found their facilities, such as swimming pools and locker rooms, may have functioned as sites for homosexual assignations — “like a sex place.”³⁷ To some extent, fraternities (including the male-centered community of the Beats) leave a space for the discussion of the relationship between male homosociality and fears of homosexuality, and looking at these cultural contexts also help to reveal what being masculine meant to Kerouac, as well as his homophobic feelings reflected in his novels. He represents one archetypal man of the Cold War era who criticized homosexuals and acted masculine to show that he was a hundred percent straight. In this sense, it may not be an exaggeration to say that homosocial society needs homosexuals in order to strengthen and reinforce their masculinity.

In fact it seems the stronger the process of male bonding, the stronger the homophobia among heterosexual men. This is particularly evident in early 20th century societies in which homosexuals were targeted for exclusion, such as the United States.³⁸ Growing up as he did during the 1930's, it may not be unusual for Kerouac in his narratives to emphasize masculinity (in characters such as Cassady and Snyder) rather than sympathy for homosexuals. Kerouac clearly expressed his homophobic feelings in a letter to Cassady written in October, 3, 1948:

I consider queerness a hostility, not a love. “Women exists because there was man — the penis exists because first there was void — (cunt) — therefore, “I have one of my own” (a void, or a penis) — “You have one

36 John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

37 Gustav-Wrathall, 180. “In the late 1960s, Wayne Flottman made regular business trips to New York City, and stayed at the 63rd Street YMCA. ‘That Place there was always something happening—a continuous sexual scene. If I went to the Y [YMCA] I might not make it to the village [because there was so much sex going on] . . . it was almost like the bath-houses of the '70s.’”

38 George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 8. “The very growth and visibility of the gay subculture during the Prohibition years of the 1920s and early 1930s precipitated a powerful cultural reaction in the 1930s.”

of your own — you do not *really* wish mine without envy, hostility, aggression, and inverted desire.”³⁹

Here, Kerouac is much more concerned with the biological differences between man and woman rather than socially constructed gender roles. In this letter, Kerouac expresses his fondness for Neal, saying, “I think I’m almost ready to say I no longer ‘care’ what you think about me, now all that concerns me is what I think about you — it’s you that counts,”⁴⁰ but being careful to clarify his sexuality, “I am not a fool! A queer! I am not! He-he! Understand?”⁴¹ For Kerouac, Cassady was his road hero, the model of mad man and travel buddy, but also, in Charters’ words, “blood-brothers”⁴² who shared everything in life; in Kerouac’s long letters to Cassady on December, 28, 1950, he relates his childhood memories and the death of his brother Gerald,⁴³ in which we can see Jack projecting the figure of Neal upon his older brother who died young of rheumatic fever. Cassady also shared almost everything that happened in his private life, including very specific details of circumstances; for example, he describes his desire for sexual pleasure in his letter to Kerouac written on October, 15, 1950.⁴⁴

With the critical depiction of homosexuals in *The Dharma Bums* and use of words describing genitalia in his letter to Cassady, it seems Kerouac may have been expressing a latent emotional and physical homoeroticism that lay suppressed under the weight of negative feelings towards homosexuality generated in the male bonding process. His emphasis is on his male body and his

39 Jack Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 167.

40 Kerouac 1996, 166.

41 *Ibid.*, 167.

42 Charters, 112.

43 Kerouac 1996, 246-263.

44 Neal Cassady, *Neal Cassady: Collected Letters, 1944-1967*, ed. Dave Moore (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 169. “I masturbate every day at least 3 times and have done so for years no matter how much I’m fuckin and blowing at the same time — I didn’t begin masturbating until the very late age of 17; I had fucked for almost 5 years before started masturbating (it began heavy and has since stayed that way from the time I did 11 months and 10 days in Colo. State Reformatory, etc., etc.).”

sexual interest in women. This is why Sedgwick analyzes male homosocial bonding not only from a feminist but also anti-homophobic point of view; she is primarily concerned with the way men paranoically project their feelings about homosexuality into homosocial bonding.⁴⁵ Unfortunately Ginsberg's comments on Kerouac's sexuality and sexual behavior are less than conclusive. In a documentary film called "*The Source*," Ginsberg clearly says that he never had sexual intercourse with Kerouac, and was positive about Kerouac's heterosexuality, but in Allen Young's *Gay Sunshine Interview*, Ginsberg seems to be hinting at sexual experience with Jack. Perhaps Ginsberg could be honest with a fellow homosexual, Allen Young, but was more guarded in protecting Kerouac's reputation in his comments for the documentary film. In the interview, Ginsberg describes how he saw Kerouac's sexuality:

Well, he was very mixed sexually. He had a lot of trouble with attachment to his mother and his mother's dependence on him. He was a football player, and he liked girls. He liked to eat girls and was really hung up on them. That's what really excited him: black panties! Black stockings! He also appreciated beautiful boys and had a really novelistic, personal appreciation of older queens - which was like a sharing of common humanity, and sharing of emotions, even a sharing of the erotic, except that he didn't feel it was right for him to participate in the erotic.⁴⁶

Kerouac's dis-ease in participating in the erotic can be seen through Sedgwick as an example of men paranoically projecting their fears of homosexuality in the process of homosocial bonding; in this case Kerouac must have been consciously negative about participating in the homoerotic (a novelistic appreciation of beautiful boys), indicative perhaps of homophobia. As the interview goes on, Ginsberg and his lover Peter Orlovsky began talking about their sexual encounter with Kerouac:

45 Sedgwick, 19.

46 Young, 7.

Orlovsky: [One time] he [Kerouac] was so drunk he couldn't even get it up.

Ginsberg: [Laughs] Yeah. Well, no he came that time. We were at Clellon Holmes', remember? I blew him and you screwed me.

Orlovsky: What about on Second St.? Do you remember that? Jack was gallantly drunk, laying in one of the small, side rooms, and you tried to blow him. He couldn't get it up and he was talking about his little cock; it was so tiny, so small, shriveled up, sad.

Ginsberg: He was very apologetic. But ten years ago [1964-1965] he was asking me to blow him all the time.⁴⁷

This is a good example of the findings in the Kinsey report of 1948, which revealed many heterosexual men engaged in homosexual activity.⁴⁸ In *On the Road*, Kinsey is actually referred to in the scene where Sal and Dean drink in Ritzzy's Bar near Times Square: "Kinsey spent a lot of time in Ritzzy's Bar, interviewing some of the boys."⁴⁹ Kerouac himself described Ritzzy's Bar:

You walk in there and you don't see a single girl, even in the booths, just a great mob of young men dressed in all varieties of hoodlum cloth, from red shirts to zoot suits. It is also the hustlers' bar — the boys who make a living among the sad old homos of the Eight Avenue night.⁵⁰

In his depiction of homosexuals in *On the Road*, Kerouac sounds discriminatory and disrespectful. While hitch-hiking to Sacramento, Sal and Dean find a driver, "[a] thin fag who was on his way home to Kansas; the car was what Dean called a 'fag Plymouth.'"⁵¹ Here Dean whispers to Sal, "Effeminate car!"⁵² As Ginsberg noted in the interview with Young, passages from

47 Ibid., 7.

48 Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 10-11.

49 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957) (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 131. Hereafter referred to as Kerouac, *On the Road*.

50 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 131.

51 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 207.

52 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 207.

the original manuscript referring to this homosexual event in *On the Road* were deleted. In the revised version, after Sal and Dean arrive in Sacramento, the fag slyly (as Sal reports) asks them to have a drink in a hotel room he has rented (Kerouac's word choice). Dean goes with him as he is in need of money; Sal feels the whole thing is insane. There is no depiction of sexual intercourse between Dean and the "fag." The scene ends with Dean asking the homosexual how much money he has. In both the original and revised scenes, Kerouac depicts homosexuals as unmasculine, effeminate figures, stirring negative feelings toward homosexuals in his readers. The original version of the homosexual event appears in *Visions of Cody*, in which Jack sees Cody (Cassady) having intercourse with a homosexual, the thin "fag" who took them to Sacramento:

Meanwhile the grave automobile, and the sensible pervert, carried us over the green hills of Vallejo to old Sacramento. That night the gangbelly broke loose between Cody and the skinny skeleton, sick: Cody thrashed him on rugs in the dark, monstrous huge fuck, Olympian perversities, slambanging big sodomies that made me sick, subsided with him for money; the money never came. He'd treated the boy like a girl!⁵³

Jack was "sitting in the castrated toilet listening and peeking" during this time, "horrified" with this sexual escapade.⁵⁴ Like depictions of homosexuals in *On the Road* noted above, Kerouac again expresses homophobic feelings, grouping homosexuals with the "dope fiend," the "dope pusher," the "mugger," and even the "Communist" — as threats to male subjects.⁵⁵ It is clear throughout the book that Cody and Jack love each other, but in what Freud referred to as castration anxiety caused by homosexuality, Kerouac carefully distinguishes between heterosexual and homosexual throughout the novel.

Much like homosexuals in Kerouac's narratives, women in *On the Road* such as Marylou (LuAnne Henderson) and Camille (Carolyn Cassady) are

53 Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (1973) (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 358. Hereafter referred to as Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*.

54 Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 358.

55 Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 261.

subordinated and marginalized. This is not terribly unusual in the age before the second wave of feminism during the Civil Rights movement. In *On the Road*, Dean leaves Camille, goes on a road trip with Sal and finds girls for sexual enjoyment.⁵⁶ As seen in the depictions of homo-heterosexual binary opposition in *The Dharma Bums*, *Big Sur*, *On the Road*, and *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac's depictions of the marginalized and stigmatized gay community seem to often contain irony as well as negativity. This may explain Kerouac's own sexual identity, no doubt tied to heterosexuality based on overt masculinity, particularly in his case a more hegemonic masculinity colored by sexist views toward gays and women. His depictions of gays clearly indicate their social position during the pre-Stonewall Riots age of the Cold War. Furthermore, Kerouac's clear distinctions between heterosexuals and homosexuals in his narratives function as to demarcate and protect, or as homosexual studies scholar Jonathan Ned Katz notes, "to refute the homosexual's inferiority or to affirm the heterosexual's superiority."⁵⁷ In Kerouac's case, gay men are depicted as rather stigmatized and inferior, but heterosexuals like Cassady and Snyder appear heroic and masculine.

Kerouac's homosexual activity with other Beats has been discussed by a number of his biographers, such as Charters, Nicosia, and others. However, writings of his former wives (Edie Parker, Joan Haverty) and girlfriends (Joyce Johnson) rarely refer to his homosexual engagement; they rather describe the man they saw in Kerouac.⁵⁸ In particular, Cassady's wife Carolyn's *Off the Road* depicts mainly the masculine male figures of Jack and Neal, as well as previous criticism about Neal's homosexual relationship with Ginsberg.⁵⁹ There seems to be no evidence of Kerouac and Cassady having had

56 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 187-188.

57 Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 187.

58 Joan Haverty, *Nobody's Wife: The Smart Aleck and the King of the Beats* (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1990); Joyce Johnson, *Door Wide Open: A Beat Love Affair in Letters, 1957-1958* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001); Edie Kerouac-Parker, *You'll be Okay: My Life with Jack Kerouac*, ed. Timothy Moran and Bill Morgan (San Francisco: City Rights, 2007).

59 Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* (New York: Penguin, 1991); *Heart Beat*, dir. John Byrum, perf. Nick Nolte, Sissy Spacek, and John Heard, Warner Home Video, 1980.

genital contact or homosexual intercourse; rather their relationship seems to demonstrate a pattern of intense male homosociality. For Kerouac homoeroticism might be the one thing he needed to continually disavow and displace from his narratives.

As Kerouac was intimate with Cassady through their road trips, both *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*⁶⁰ describe Kerouac's difficulty to separate what Sedgwick calls "homosocial desire"⁶¹ from his obsessive identification with his ideal hero, Cassady (Dean and Cody). Homosocial desire in these novels is expressed as a longing for Cassady, who "was years younger"⁶² and represented Kerouac's alter ego, the extroverted lunatic that contrasted with Kerouac's introverted nature. Refining Sedgwick's concept of "homosocial desire," Medovoi sees "men desir[ing] masculinity precisely for the privileges it affords." It comes, though, at a price, a "desire [that] often appears as a homosocial passion for other men," a passion which in Kerouac's case was directed at Cassady. In his writing we see Kerouac's desire tinged with homosexuality and homophobia, one that "threatens to represent its subjects (even to themselves) as homosexual in a homophobic society."⁶³

Evident as well in the homosocial bonding between Kerouac and Cassady is Gayle Rubin's paradigm of the "male traffic of women."⁶⁴ In an act intended to construct a triangular relationship, or in Sedgwick's words, an "erotic triangle,"⁶⁵ Cassady once offered his wife Carolyn to Kerouac. In the exchange of the female they seem to cement their bonds and displace their homoerotic

60 *Visions of Cody*, written in 1951-1952, was published in 1973. It heavily focused on Kerouac's perception of and relationship to Cassady. What is significant about this novel as a primary source is that its third section consists of the transcription of taped conversations between Kerouac and Cassady. See Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*.

61 Sedgwick, 1.

62 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 190.

63 Medovoi, 226.

64 Sedgwick, 16, 25, and 26. "It [form of the traffic in women] is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men," 25-26.

65 *Ibid.*, 25. "Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy in terms of 'relationships between men,' in making the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men, suggests that large-scale social structures are congruent with the male-male-female erotic triangles described most forcefully by Rene Girard and articulated most thoughtfully by others."

desires. Not content to offer only his wife, Cassady also offered his girlfriend LuAnne Henderson, who appears as Marylou in *On the Road*: “he [Cassady] wanted me [Kerouac] to work Marylou. I didn’t ask him why because I knew he wanted to see what Marylou was like with another man.”⁶⁶ In offering his women, Cassady implicitly asks Jack to return the favor by offering his own. If in fact this trade functions to clarify and solidify their relationship as heterosexual, it seems there is some need to define the concept of “desire” as expressed for both men and women, especially since “desire” seems connected to homoerotic feelings. Sedgwick herself sees homosociality and homosexuality as forming a continuum in terms of desire.⁶⁷ This homosocial desire underpins intimate relations in a male-centered society that are most commonly played out in the public sphere. Men purposely make displays of their masculinity to show that they are unquestionably heterosexual, as in Kerouac and Cassady’s trading of women. In contrast, the private sphere may not function effectively to reinforce masculine stereotypes as there is no observer to offer confirmation of their sexuality. Viewed from the vantage of the public, it appears to Medovoi that “the homosocial bonds represent the beat generation as a masculine community.”⁶⁸ In his mind, Kerouac might have felt psychologically compelled to act hyper-masculine in order to overcome gender stereotypes of the Cold War era that tended to identify as effeminate, or “fags,” men with no overt signs of masculinity. By introducing women not as members that construct social bonding, but as aids in reinforcing homosocial bonding, Kerouac builds a facade of heterosexuality around his very intimate relationship with Cassady. While Sedgwick has said male traffic of women (male-male-female) stabilizes male bonding,⁶⁹ it may nevertheless be interesting to examine the opposite triangular relationship, that is female-female-male. By looking into the depiction of the homosexual relationship between Dean (Cassady) and Carlo (Ginsberg) in *On the Road*, Medovoi’s study chal-

66 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 131.

67 Sedgwick, 1-2. “To draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual — a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.”

68 Medovoi, 227.

69 Sedgwick, 25-26.

lenges more complex triangular relationships (heterosexual-homosexual-female)⁷⁰ and makes further exploration in the concept of homosociality through examination of the scene in which Dean rushes back and forth between Carlo, Camille (Carolyn Cassady) and Marylou (LuAnne).⁷¹

Conclusion

In exploring Jack Kerouac's homosocial bonding, particularly with Neal Cassady, I have examined how this process functioned to emphasize masculinity and heterosexuality in his narratives. The narrator (Kerouac) most always experiences a masculine identity crisis. In order to resolve this, he engages in homosocial relationships that refine and reaffirm his masculinity. Kerouac's novels take place in Cold War America in which, as Kimmel claims, "the decade's preoccupation with juvenile delinquency and the disheveled rebelliousness of the beatniks, or the new fears of effeminate homosexual men, provided several negative stereotypes against which American men played out their yearnings."⁷² Kimmel explains that, "[the Beats] knew more what they were against — railing against the drone of self-made masculinity, the relentless pursuit of happiness through material possession — than what they were for."⁷³ In this cultural context, Kerouac's portrayal of Cassady's wild, impulsive, and masculine character offers one alternative to agency (for Kerouac, it is Cassady), male behavioral expectations which are placed on men's social roles and particularly on their masculine identities.

In his novels, Kerouac's identification with Cassady empowers his masculine identity. In depicting homosexuals and women as marginalized, subordinated, and stigmatized objects, and in criticizing homosexuals and trading women, the same-sex relation between Kerouac and Cassady was stabilized. In the end of *On the Road*, after Sal and Dean could not find Dean's father, they chose a different path. As evidenced in Kerouac's words, "[the] only thing I [Sal] could do was sit in the back of the Cadillac and wave at him

70 Medovoi, 235.

71 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 42.

72 Kimmel, 243.

73 *Ibid.*, 243.

[Dean].”⁷⁴ Here Kerouac finally finds a sense of his own agency; he does not need to follow Dean’s masculine role model, but can now act on his own. But if Kerouac had not met Cassady and bonded with him homosocially, it seems likely his narratives of wild masculine men traveling across the country could not have been written. In this sense, his novels, then, present male homosocial bonding as a necessary part of the construction of masculinity as in Sedgwick’s “erotic triangle,” men solidify their masculinity by exploiting women into their homosocial bonds. As has been noted, Kerouac lacks a feminine perspective, and his novels represent Beat homosociality as opposed to domesticity. His homophobic reactions seem rather defensive (as with a large number of men eager to prove their masculinity after the release of the Kinsey report), and in so realizing his own identity Kerouac sacrifices the identities of the people around him. For a number of scholars with interests in the study of men and masculinity, these victims cannot be easily forgotten.

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74 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 206.

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