

Cool: A Postwar Aesthetic and Mode of Being

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Abstract:

This thesis examines cool and coolness, both as word and as mode of affective deportment. It treats cool as an historical and literary phenomenon in late twentieth-century Anglo-American culture, during the period between 1945 and the present day. From relatively obscure origins among the subcultures of nineteen-forties African-American inner-city communities, this word, and its cognate forms of disposition towards personal and political agency, diffused through society in the course of these six decades to become, by the turn of the 21st century, near ubiquitous: highly visible, highly recognizable, and closely bound up with certain kinds of social cachet and approval.

Through literary-critical analysis I aim to challenge and to deepen the accounts provided by the established literature on the topic, including the work of Lewis MacAdams (2001), Dick Pountain and David Robins (2000), Alan Liu (2004), and Ted Gioia (2009). The narrative emerging from these and other sources offers a unidirectional account of cool’s passage through the culture, from fringe to mainstream to wide acceptance – a story that belies the more complex and fractured evolution to which literature can grant us access. An account of cool based in literature and literary analysis reveals how social and political forces, as well as individual authorial interpretations and creative misreadings, established a much more uneven interpretive terrain.

In terms of critical framework I look to a hitherto unexplored intersection between affect theory and historical-etymological criticism in order to examine cool and coolness not as a particular affect, but rather a polyvalent deportment towards affect in general: a muting of emotional display and flat affective presentation that connotes and encodes implicit resistance to, and nonparticipation in, mechanisms of power and associates itself with marginal experience. The simultaneous deployment of these two critical mechanisms can be used to assess how labeling participates in the creation of affect (or what Sianne Ngai calls ‘tone’) and can correct the historical limitations of affect theory by examining how period-specific instances of the word became the sites of shifting, nuanced negotiations of both cultural politics and personal identities.

Given its remarkable diffusion within an historically limited space of time, its conflation with desirability and approval, ‘cool’, I believe, represents a prime candidate for such a literary analysis. Added to this is the fact that its primary mode of transmission to a wide public occurred through the medium of the literary text, via the Beats and other authors, and we are left with the conclusion that a literary exploration. Properly positioned, can grant us unique access to the issues that surround the word and its use.

In order to accomplish this, I undertake a series of sustained readings of literary texts from the Anglo-American tradition to examine the function, role, and understanding of cool that each text enacts, variously in accordance with, or against the grain of, the social, political, and affective forces that informed the word’s contemporary use. The critical method employed will be both historical and thematic, examining in depth how each text dramatizes and reacts to the period-specific usage of the term (roughly

demarcated by decade) and/or to the particular thematic preoccupations embedded in the connotative complex of cool and coolness. These usages generate, across the years, recurrent questions of political and personal commitment, irony, consumerism, affective labour, racial identity, and sexual and gender relations.

The authors treated in the course of my sustained readings include Jack Kerouac, Thomas Pynchon, Martin Amis, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, Bret Easton Ellis, Norman Mailer and Richard Wright. In order to fully examine the background to their appreciation of the term I also explore musical expression (particularly the ‘cool jazz’ movement of the nineteen forties and fifties) and plastic art (including the ‘new cool art’ touted by Irving Sandler and David Hickey, centered on the 1960s), and assess the critical discourse that surrounds both. In the course of the thesis I engage with philosophical and anthropological literature, including existentialism, particularly in its intersection with African-American culture and literature of the nineteen forties and fifties, anthropological and linguistic theories by Robert Farris Thompson, and more recent theories of race and resistance.

In sum, this project aims to challenge and to problematize a consensus that surrounds ‘cool’ in the extant literature, and to explore the playing out of many of the most important cultural and literary forces of the late twentieth century in relation to this term. The thesis will highlight the role of the text in shaping, and being shaped by, affective attitudes and comportments. The governing aims are to broaden our understanding of the term and its nuances as historically determined, and to deepen our understanding of literary texts in which ‘cool’ functions as a keyword. Not least, the dissertation makes a case for the importance of the literary text in the transmission

and shaping of the compacted set of ideas about emotion and agency that are carried by this term across the latter twentieth century and are still with us today in the word's current usage.

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List of Abbreviations:

BP - Blues People: Negro Music in White America.

DA – Desolation Angels.

GR – Gravity’s Rainbow.

IM – Invisible Man.

LtZ – Less than Zero.

M – Money.

OtR – On the Road.

Out – The Outsider.

RoA – The Rules of Attraction.

SL – Slow Learner.

Sub – The Subterraneans.

WN – ‘The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster’.

0.1. Cool.

This is a critical exploration of a word, and of the attitude that it describes. It is a cultural history of how ‘cool’ passed through the latter part of the twentieth century, from the final years of World War II to the present day. It tracks the term’s changing valences, assesses the meanings and significances it has accrued and shed, and attempts to account for how it came to occupy the place it now holds in British and American language and literature.

Why should literary critics be interested in cool? And how should we talk about it?

The word ‘cool’ has spread throughout international English over the second half of the twentieth century and has inserted itself directly as a loan-word into numerous other languages (‘*ku*’ in Mandarin, ‘*ku-ru*’, in Japanese, for example). Coming into widespread popular usage in the U.S. and U.K., as well as much of Europe, in the nineteen sixties, it initially connoted a stance of outsider hostility towards authority: a subcultural streetwise know-how, a youthful, mysterious, and rebellious aloofness. Over the next three decades it became a term of broad approbation and approval, almost synonymous with ‘good’. It has defied the expectation of slang theorists in persisting far beyond the expected lifespan of most slang lexemes and now comes naturally and reflexively to hand to billions of users worldwide to cover any range of positive experience, from the tolerable to the deeply compelling.

Lexicographers have identified the first appearances of the modern affirmative use of cool in the 1890s Etonian slang phrase ‘a cool fish’, meaning one who was cocky and self-possessed. We can see a similar semantic usage of ‘cool’ in the work of 1920s writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, who, in *This Side of Paradise* (1920), describes how ‘in his search for cool people he remembered Mrs. Lawrence, a very intelligent, very dignified lady, a convert to the church, and a great devotee of Monsignor’s’.¹ The criteria for Mrs. Lawrence being ‘cool’ are ‘perfect grace and dignity’, her ‘New England ancestry’, the ‘symmetrical restraint’ she acquired through a long residence in Italy and Spain, and her possession of unobtrusive domestic servants.² ‘Cool’ here bespeaks urbanity, cultivation, sophisticated deportment. It is one facet (among the most respectable) of a wider ‘world-weariness’, ‘cultivated detachment’ and alienated decadence associated with the nineteenth-century cosmopolitan cynic, the principal model for which was Byron, the quintessential cosmopolitan aristocrat.³

A much closer antecedent to today’s usage of cool flourished following the Second World War. This usage marks it as related to, yet distinct from, these Anglo-centric roots. The proliferation of the usage of ‘cool’ in the postwar world finds its point of origin in the African-American subcultural argot of ‘hip’ or ‘jive talk’, going back at least to antebellum slavery, and (as we shall see) probably having its first origins in the African cultures from which America’s slaves were predominantly taken. ‘Cool’ took on a special meaning in urban centers of black culture in the nineteen forties and fifties, especially in New York, where it was a keyword of the musical and cultural revolution taking place in avant-garde jazz. The term ‘cool’ referred, in this context,

¹ Susie Dent, ‘Mapping the Word: Local Vocabulary and its Themes’, in Clive Upton and Bethan L. Davies (eds.), *Analysing 21st Century British English: Conceptual and Methodological Aspects of the Voices Project* (Oxford, 2013), p.114; F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (Oxford, 2009), p.179.

² Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, pp.180-181.

³ Helen Small, ‘George Eliot and the Cosmopolitan Cynic,’ *Victorian Studies* lv.i (2012), 85-105.

to a deportment or affect. It denoted a low, flattened affect, control of one's emotional presentation, a capacity to remain mysteriously unmoved in the face of social threats. It was (and is) in many contexts a highly politically tinged affect. It encoded a certain scepticism towards authority and mainstream society. It bespoke individuality and hard-bitten self-sufficiency. It was (and on occasion still is) the possession of the outsider and the outcast: apart, aloof, sceptical. 'Cool Jazz', and the attitudes and styles that came with it, became a significant cultural force drawing the hitherto underground lingo and styles of personal presentation to the attention of the American mainstream. The white Beatniks did much to promulgate awareness of cool via the success of their literature, and, by the advent of the 1960s counterculture, 'cool', in its specialized sense, had become widespread.

For me, the origins of this project go back to when I was a small child, perhaps six or seven years old. Then, the world divided into cool and uncool experiences.

Everything good was 'cool'- a new toy, a movie, junk food, feelings of happiness, our pet dog, the sunshine in summer. Everything bad was 'uncool' – school, homework, long visits with relatives. Tedium. Fear. I can't remember the exact context, but one day my parents, no doubt looking for a bit of peace, challenged me on my binary and nebulous deployment of cool/uncool. 'What exactly *is* cool?' they asked me, 'What does it *mean*?' They dared me not to use the word until I could provide a satisfactory definition. I was struck temporarily dumb. My primary categories for approval and disapproval had been taken away from me. No other adjectives did that particular job of so vehemently and completely expressing my approval and disapproval. Nothing else would do.

Years later, I would come across a quotation from Lionel Trilling's classic *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971):

Now and then it is possible to observe the moral life in the process of revising itself, perhaps by reducing the emphasis it formerly placed upon one or another of its elements, perhaps by inventing and adding to itself a new element, some mode of conduct or of feeling which hitherto had not been regarded as essential to virtue.⁴

Trilling takes the entry of new words into the language, or the reorientation of an existing word toward a new significance, as evidence of such 'moral revision'. His litmus test for this phenomenon has two components: there must be a general showing-forth of the phenomenon in observable behaviour (the external 'conduct' that accompanies the interior 'feeling'), and there must be engagement with the word-concept in the literature of the relevant period. The marriage, in Trilling's phrasing, of 'conduct' with 'feeling' also bespeaks the particular affective valence of these 'moral' shifts. Reading this brought me back to the episode from my childhood. What *did* cool mean? It had passed from the marginalized communities of a segregated society and come to me. It had expressed the radical stance of the oppressed in the antebellum south, the children of prisoners and slaves, as a way of encoding implicit resistance to a hostile society, and ended up in the mouth of a middle-class preteen boy in Ireland expressing his fondness for a toy spaceship. So here I am, years later, still trying to answer the question 'What does it mean?' How should we talk about cool?

We are constantly reminded of cool's intangibility, its ineffability, its indefinable nature. Key connotations are taciturnness, aloofness, and mystery. Cool does not tend

⁴ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), p.1.

to speak, and, if it does, not at length. Cool keeps itself to itself. Cool just *is*, or at best, is deliberately elusive. The slang lexicographer Jonathon Green tells us that cool has its representative expression in ‘the junkie’s nodding silence’.⁵ Meanwhile, Norman Mailer, among others, reminds us of the futility of trying to grasp anything like a stable definition of cool, or any other ‘hip’ slang terms.⁶

‘It is impossible’, Mailer tells us, ‘to conceive a new philosophy until one creates a new language, but a new popular language (while it must implicitly contain a new philosophy) does not necessarily present its philosophy overtly. Mailer stresses the deliberately vague and flexible nature of the argot, and the ability of what he calls the ‘hip’ words (in which he includes ‘cool’) to express shifting and polyvalent meanings.

Since Hip sees every answer as posing immediately a new alternative, a new question, its emphasis is on complexity rather than simplicity (such complexity that its language without the illumination of the voice and the articulation of the face and body remains hopelessly incommunicative) (WN 280-1)

Hip language as Mailer describes it is willfully protean. The exterior deportment of the speaker works in tandem with the word itself to disclose meaning, and, for Mailer, the meaning of hip terms is inseparable from the attitudes they encode: the ‘inarticulate’ and ‘un-illuminating’ veneer of cool behaviour. Cultural significance, here, leans heavily upon observable conduct. Hip terms are also situation specific: ‘the nuance of the voice uses the nuance of the situation to convey the subtle contextual difference’. Mailer insists that these words are morally neutral:

Given its emphasis on complexity, Hip abdicates from any conventional moral responsibility because it would argue that the results of our actions are

⁵ Jonathon Green, *Odd Job Man: Confessions of a Slang Lexicographer* (London, 2014).

⁶ Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster’, *Advertisements for Myself* (London, 1961), pp.280-1.

unforeseeable, and so we cannot know if we do good or bad, we cannot even know whether we have given energy to another, and indeed if we could, there would still be no idea of what ultimately they would do with it. (WN 280)

Despite what Mailer portrays as the shifting and inscrutable nature of hip or jive slang, here he is very ready to attach a single philosophical outlook to it ('it would argue...'). This outlook, in Mailer's view, is fundamentally individualistic, even self-centered. The hipster speaks (and acts) without relation to the other (the 'they') or to moral consequence. Mailer's linguistic analysis thus codifies the popular picture of the hipster as self-serving monad, uninterested in the communal mores of mainstream society.

Marty Jezer, in *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States 1945-1960* (1999), picks up on the elusiveness of the language hipsters adopted:

Their rejection of the commonplace was so complete that they could barely acknowledge reality. The measure of their withdrawal was their distrust of language. A word like *cool* could mean any of a number of contradictory things—its definition came not from the meaning of the word but from the emotion behind it and the accompanying non-verbal facial or body expressions. When hipsters did put together a coherent sentence, it was always prefaced with the word *like* as if to state at the onset that what would follow was probably an illusion. There was neither a future nor a past, only a present that existed on the existential wings of sound. A Charlie Parker bebop solo—that was the truth.⁷

Such perspectives on hip, formed, as they are, from the outside looking in, provide only a limited picture. The importance of embodied ephemera such as facial

⁷ Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States 1945-1960* (New York, 1999), p. 249.

expressions or body language are used both to explain away the apparently shifting and context-dependent nature of ‘cool’, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to its reliance upon an associated comportment or display: it is embodied as much as it is spoken.

This project aims at respecting, and exploring, the dual status of ‘cool’ as a bodily comportment and a linguistic construct (dependent, that is, upon linguistic recognition by others). For that reason, I have found it necessary to deploy a range of critical tools. The dissertation began with a focus on language, looking to the social, political, and historical contexts and debates that informed British and American literary deployments of ‘cool’ in the mid to late twentieth century. My original inspirations were Empson’s *The Structure of Complex Words*, (1951), Williams’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (1976) and, of course, Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Like Trilling, both Williams and Empson work to unpack the period- and culture-specific importance of single words to a given text, and use their textual insights to shed light on the wider cultural implications of a term’s ‘compacted doctrine’. My initial intention was to use literature as the evidence base upon which to build an analysis of coolness as a cultural force, unraveling its importance to the work of certain texts in the hopes of catching ‘cool’ in the literary moment of disclosure – the moment when an author’s priorities and a culture’s shifting values intersect, disclose, and clarify one another.

As the project grew and developed, it became clearer that attention to bodily comportment alongside external description was required. Two important argumentative strains emerged: the racial and the affective – first, it became

imperative to describe and engage with the ongoing racial negotiations that attend to cool, as a product of the African-American urban communities of the American midcentury. The white literary vanguard helped proliferate the term and its attendant stance throughout Anglo-American, and, eventually, global culture, but cool, I argue, retains significant status as a product of African-American culture. The second argument concerns the shifting and evolving affective characteristics that cool and coolness has come to represent at different periods of the later twentieth century. These evolutions reflect the different priorities of the discursive communities through which the term has passed, and the different priorities of individual writers across the decades. The politicized affect that ‘cool’ encodes, as we will see, becomes the focus for a changing set of historically-determined priorities and concerns, but always retains a reference to its original American contexts among the black communities and avant-gardes.

Alan Liu’s 2004 work *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and The Culture of Information* is one among a few texts to seriously examine coolness, each one of which approaches the phenomenon from a particular angle. Like Stearns (1994) and MacAdams (2001), and the rest of the extant literature on the subject, Liu approaches the phenomenon from an angle that reflects the political priorities of the critic. In this case, Liu deals with coolness in a contemporary context pertaining to the attitude of the individual within postindustrial corporate culture. Whilst my approach will differ, I will also be addressing myself to, and making use of, the body of work this represents. Liu’s text ends with a call to action, a call for academia to examine cool as an ‘historically determined condition’.⁸ This is my attempt to answer that call, and to

⁸ Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (London, 2004), p.378.

add a new dimension to the understanding of the term, and its importance in the intellectual and cultural life of the twentieth century, as it travels with us, deeper into the twenty-first.

A brief note on terminology: I take “coolness” to be an affective stance, that is, an emotional display, projection, or deportment, which often places itself in opposition to the cool subject’s assumed deeper emotional state, that is, their private interior condition of feeling. In the case of the slavery-origins theory, African-American coolness stands in opposition to the anger and rage the subject experiences, or is believed by others to be experiencing. It is in this sense that I call cool an aesthetic – an aesthetic of self-presentation, a mode of being and of comporting oneself in the world. As an aesthetic term, we will see how ‘cool’ becomes a label for various strains of avant-gardism in the plastic as well as the musical arts, but it is this personal aesthetic that I wish to focus on above all.

The personal-aesthetic dimension to coolness is an embodied phenomenon. As we have already seen in Jezer and Mailer, it is inseparable from considerations of posture, of expression, and a myriad of other markers such as gait, speech pattern, and reactions to situations or events. These (as well as the markers of attire and fashionability) represent a large sector of the conceptual space that coolness occupies, and could easily be the subjects of a thesis in their own right. Terminologically, for the purposes of this endeavour, I will use the terms ‘deportment’ and ‘comportment’ interchangeably as a stand-in for the embodied nature of cool that shows forth in the world as a bearing or manner, often, but not always, accompanied by a complementary style of sartorial self-presentation. Put another way, if an affect can be

taken as a commitment to the exterior manifestation of an interior state, then comportment can be taken to be a particular manifestation of a particular affect.

0.2. The Birth of The Cool.

Cool emerged in the predominantly black urban zones of America's Northern cities between 1910 and 1920. Harlem, in New York City, was a formerly all-white neighbourhood that by 1920 housed more than 200,000 African-Americans. It became a melting pot for black migrants from all over the country and fertile ground for a self-conscious black American culture. Harlem provided a locus for the mobile African-American working and middle class from all over the country. Here a large urbanized Afro-American population came together and carved out a niche within American modernity, geographically, linguistically and musically.

It is to music that we must look to understand the rise of 'cool.' For nothing is more closely associated with cool in that period than a style of jazz music that came out of Harlem in the nineteen-forties and fifties. Among the pioneers of bebop were Dizzy Gillespie, Kenny 'Klook' Clarke, Thelonious Monk, and, above all, Charlie Parker. Parker was a relatively late migrant to New York. Born in Kansas, raised in Missouri, he moved to Harlem in 1939 at the age of nineteen. In Minton's Playhouse, Parker and others pioneered a new form of jazz that became inextricably linked with the word 'cool', to the extent that when, in 1944, the trumpeter Miles Davis joined the Minton's session band, bebop had already begun to be called 'Cool Jazz.' Davis's iconic 1957 compilation album was titled *Birth of the Cool*. The recordings were chosen to showcase the avant-garde and experimental nature of his music, the title

chosen to emphasize the marriage of this style of uniquely Harlemit musical expression to the jive argot that surrounded it.

The lifestyle associated with the jazz scene and with African American cool had about it a marked antipathy towards the mainstream. The jazz musician rejected the dominant white mainstream of society, polite culture, and the political dispensation of the day.⁹ According to Lewis MacAdams, the proponents of bebop and cool jazz ‘refused to accept racism, poverty or economic exploitation’ of black Americans. They saw “coloured” soldiers returning from the war to segregation in schools and buses, to “coloured sections”, despite having fought for their country. Clarke, Monk, Parker and Davis were all rejects from the armed forces while Clarke is recorded as saying that ‘If America wouldn’t honour its constitution and respect us as men, we couldn’t give a shit about the American way’.¹⁰ Dizzy Gillespie, in his autobiographical *To Be or not to Bop* (1979), recalled that, when he was summoned to his army physical, he arrived with his horn in a paper sack under his arm and told the attendant psychologist that white America was as much his enemy as Nazi Germany. He recalls that ‘at this stage of my life here in the United States whose foot had been in my ass? The white man’s foot had been in my ass hole buried up to his knee’.¹¹ Ross Russell, Parker’s friend and biographer, wrote in 1973: ‘the revolutionary nature of his [Parker’s] music was explicit. Implicit in his lifestyle was defiance of the white establishment’.¹² And the music itself, indeed, reflected a broader hostility toward the mainstream. Aggressively avant-garde, it redefined the jazz performer, elevating his

⁹ Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History* (New York, 1993), p.290.

¹⁰ Lewis MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop and the American Avant-Garde* (New York, 2001), p.45.

¹¹ Dizzy Gillespie, with Al Fraser, *To Be or not To Bop* (Minneapolis MN, 2009), p.120.

¹² Ross Russell, *Bird Lives! The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie Parker* (New York, 1973), p.52.

or her status from entertainer to artist.¹³ Kenny Clarke recalls playing experimental pieces with titles such as ‘Epistrophy’ ‘to keep the other guys off the stand because we knew they couldn’t make the chord changes. We kept the riff-raff out and built our clique on new chords’.¹⁴ The jazz community, according to Alan P. Merriman and Raymond W. Mack (1960), was a social grouping drawn together by ‘specific attitudes and behaviors which stress the differences of the musician and his public from people at large, his superiority to the layman, and the advantages to be gained from self-segregation and isolation’.¹⁵

At this time, outside of Harlem and the jazz ‘scene’, the word cool tends to appear in quotation marks—a new and still alien term betokening a secret code. In the *Saturday Review* of 29 March 1952, even a professional music critic feels alienated by this strange word, and is forced to reach for the music in search of ‘Some of the clearest exposition this reader has yet encountered of the whys, hows and wherefores of the jazz music known as “progressive”, “bop” and “cool”’. *The New Yorker* of November 7th 1959 reports that ‘Of all the queer, uncommunicative, secret society terms that jazz has originated, few are lumpier or more misleading than “bebop”’.¹⁶ So what do we know about the esoteric code that was cool in Harlem at this time? Charlie Parker seems to have been among the first to use ‘cool’ in its modern sense, as almost interchangeable with ‘good’. As Ross Russell writes: ‘it [cool] denoted all good qualities and situations under control [...] when he had enough [heroin] to shoot, he was cool’.¹⁷ MacAdams writes that, during this time, ‘cool was a way of staying

¹³ Tirro, *Jazz: A History*, p.290.

¹⁴ Quoted in Alan P. Merriman and Raymond W. Mack, ‘The Jazz Community’, *Social Forces* xxxviii (1960), 211-222, (222).

¹⁵ Merriman and Mack, ‘The Jazz Community’, p.222.

¹⁶ *The New Yorker*, 7 November 1959. p. 158.

¹⁷ Russell, *Bird Lives!*, p.87.

below the radar screen of the dominant culture without losing the respect of one's peers'.¹⁸ We also find 'cool' being used to describe, among other things, a truce between gangs during this period, e.g., that 'a cool was negotiated'.¹⁹

Based on certain accounts, we can assume an history of usage of the term among, and specific to, African-Americans, and (to borrow a term from biology) a period of 'cryptic evolution' prior to coming into its own in the cool jazz community of the nineteen forties. In 1933, anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston gives an instance of 'cool' in her short story 'The Gilded Six-Bits', set in Eatonville, Florida: 'And whut make it so cool, he got money 'cumulated. And womens give it all to 'im'.²⁰ Even further back, in 1884 we see the term in use among Afro-Americans, in James A. Harrison's linguistic study, *Negro English*. Harrison includes 'Dats Cool' as an example of the form of English spoken by African Americans, but provides no comment, analysis or context for the term.²¹

0.3. R.F. Thompson and Distant Origins.

Anthropologist and art historian Robert Farris Thompson, writing in the 1960s and '70s, set out to explore this period of cryptic development. His thesis is that cool arrived in America in the holds of slave ships from West Africa. Thompson sought to bring to light what he saw as a pan-Atlantic African tradition with its roots in the classical cultures of West Africa, which spread throughout the Atlantic world with the forced relocation of African populations via the slave trade. He outlines his program

¹⁸ MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool*, p.50.

¹⁹ MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool*, p.42.

²⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, *The Gilded Six-Bits* (Minneapolis MN, 2001).

²¹ James A. Harrison, 'Negro English', *Anglia* vii (1884), 232-279. Reprinted in Joe L. Dillard, *All American English* (New York, 1975).

for studying Afro-American culture in a transatlantic perspective as consisting of three parts:

1. The identification of strategic West and Central African visual traditions, traveling in the minds of blacks to the Americas during the period of the infamous Atlantic Trade;
2. the citation of persisting strands from these ancestral patterns, now richly interwoven and recombined by Afro-American artists, and the definition of their vibrant creativity on its own terms—that is, taking pains to scan the horizon for signs of departure, development, and grand cultural achievement, as well as originating impulse;
3. the definition of a common ground of philosophic assumptions, the mediating process of worldview, accounting in part for similarities in form and function characterizing Afro-American creative vision.²²

Examining Afro-American, Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian and related cultures, Thompson identified a common cultural motif running through the African diaspora of the Atlantic, fragmented though it was by the trauma and dislocation of slavery. He writes that the cultural life of these peoples

has occurred in relation to seemingly eternal ideals of symbolized generosity and power. I have called this shared philosophy “an aesthetic of the cool,” after an ancient African idiom for the fullness of social balance within the deepest capabilities of men and women’.²³

²² Robert Farris Thompson, ‘An Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History: Remarks in Anticipation of a Coming Golden Age of Afro-Americana’, *Discovering Afro-America* ed. Roger Abraham, (Leiden, 1975), p.58

²³ Thompson, ‘Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History’, p.63.

In ‘An Aesthetic of the Cool’ (1973), Thompson identifies thirty-five West and Central African languages that contain a lexeme equivalent to cool. These words have equivalence to temperature value, just as the English ‘*cool*’ does, all denoting a state of not-too-hot-and-not-too-cold, although they extend into connotative areas of comportment and temperament as well as cultural or ritual practices.²⁴ He stresses that these Sub-Saharan and Afro-American concepts of coolness should not be taken as equating to our more familiar English sense of ‘moderation or coldness, or to sang-froid except as parts of a deeper structure of belief’. He insists that African coolness ‘does not cite the Western convention for lack of social warmth, as in the phrase ‘why was he cool to me today?’ but rather has strong connotations of social equanimity and positive sentiment when attached to African-influenced usages of the term. To be cool, in this sense, he argues,

means to become composed in a sharing sense, to remember the way one ought to be. To be cool means to return to laughter, people and responsibility. [...]

Black cool is an idiom of social balance and internal spiritual balance, the sign of clear conscience when one returns to oneself in an ideal sense, achieving or rediscovering character when what one does and what one ought to be are one.²⁵

The table below lists Thompson’s candidate-words for linguistic/cultural forerunners of black American cool.

Society	Term	Semantic Range
Abakpa	<i>tebede</i>	In a cool manner; unrushed; not harsh
Baguirmien	<i>kulu</i>	To be cold, calm, tranquil
Bamana	<i>súma</i>	To cool; to cam
Bobangi	<i>tilima</i>	To be cool; to be allayed; become still; be eased; to settle (a quarrel); be sober
Bushman	<i>kwerre</i>	To cool; to be cooled;

²⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, ‘An Aesthetic of the Cool’, *African Arts* vii.1 (1973), 40-91.

²⁵ Thompson, ‘Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History’, p.62.

Diola	<i>ma-kunkul</i>	Coolness; beauty
Edo	<i>Ewuare (a title)</i>	It is cool; trouble has ceased
Efik	<i>suk</i>	To cool; exorcise; reduce to quietude and reason; to moderate the strength of anything
Ejagham	<i>ekwen</i> - <i>ki etok</i> <i>ekwen</i> - <i>ki ntea</i> <i>akwan</i>	To cool -May the town be cool (peaceful) -Make your heart cool (be composed, do not make trouble)
Fongbe	<i>fifa</i>	Cool (water); coolness; peace; placidity; gentleness
Gā	(vernacular not given)	To cool; to heal by prescribing a diet of cool food and drink
Onitsha Igbo	(vernacular not given)	To cool; to render the land safe
Kaonde	<i>tarala</i>	Be cold, wet, green, raw, unripe; be silent; untroubled (as the surface of the water); be serene; cease to pain
Kenyang	<i>bekwen</i>	To cool; to restore order
KiKongo	<i>zizika</i> - <i>zizila</i>	To make cool -Calm, patient, tolerant, faithful, brave, firm, courageous, imperturbable
Kikuyu	<i>horo</i> - <i>mundu wa kanua kahoro</i> - <i>horoha</i> - <i>horohia</i>	Inactive, calm, at peace, cool (water), soft (i.e. silk) -A smooth-tongued person -To be reconciled with; be settled -Atone, pacify, restore to state of ritual well-being.
Kisongye	<i>kutaala</i>	To be cool; to be calm; to be like the river; to be beautiful (excluding music)
Kitabwa	<i>kutalala</i> - <i>kyayo</i> <i>kyatalala</i>	To be cool (water); to be silent; to calm oneself -The land is cool (at peace)
Kuba	<i>hio</i>	Coolness; wetness
Lala	<i>talala</i>	To be cool, silent, still
Lomongo	<i>cicimya</i>	To cool; moderate; assuage; calm; compose; pacify; set at ease; soothe; tranquilize
Lodagaa	(vernacular not given)	To make cool; render safe to inherit; to lessen social danger in crisis situation (e.g. death)
Luo	<i>mokue</i>	Cool, quiet, peaceful
Manganja	<i>kuzizira</i>	To be at peace; to be calm; to pacify; appease (quarrel, a child crying); to ease pain
Runyakore	<i>kuhoza</i>	To cool; to plead a case
Sesuto	<i>phola</i> - <i>pholiso</i>	Make cool -Healing; making cool
Songhai	<i>yenendi</i>	To “make cool”(provide spiritually insured calm; to cool men by the flash and roar of the thundergod; to cool the spirits by the promises made by men)
Tshi-luba	<i>talala</i>	To cool; pacify; to be cool; humid; become calm; be at peace
Tumbuka	<i>kutuna</i>	To cool down (anger or inflammation)

Twí	<i>dwo</i>	To cool; to be calmed; to relax from a state of excitement; to make quiet, tame, humble (not proud); to come to rest; feel comfortable
Xhosa	<i>phola</i>	Cool; calm down; heal
Woloff	(vernacular not given)	Cool; free from quarrels
Yako	<i>lopon fawa</i>	“Cooling the village” (ceremony of social purification and reconciliation)
Yoruba	<i>Itútù</i> -enun è tutu -ile yii tutu -ile tútù	Cool, green, raw, wet, damp -Silence (his mouth is cool) -Verdancy (this land is cool) -peace (cool house)
Zulu	<i>phola</i>	Heal; be cool; be calm

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The locus of cool is taken to be the head, as is richly evidenced by statuary and by the behavior of living persons: ‘doctrinal firmness of facial expression is considered the proper mask for those who are responsible for human continuity; one striking African extension of this universal quality of self-control is to freeze the face of the active dancer as well as the presiding judge or elder’, he writes.²⁷ African cool thus involves a separation of bodily gaiety from sobriety, and a high degree of self-control in dance and performance. He cites accounts from the Cape of Good Hope in the autumn of 1673 and Louisiana, at a sugarhouse before 1863, of dancers’ faces ‘frozen’ as if by ‘a sense of higher authority’ in these two accounts from ‘opposite ends of the black artistic empire’ almost two centuries apart.

For Thompson, the great diversity of African languages with an idiom of cool is significant as it points to a distribution over time, a distribution that can, he claims, be seen to extend into periods of slavery and dislocation to be found across the Atlantic world.

²⁶ Table adapted from Thompson, ‘Aesthetic of the Cool’, p.40.

²⁷ Thompson, ‘Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History’, p.62.

The presence of structurally similar idioms of coolness in Central African languages separated by great distances implies their antiquity. As another demonstration of historical depth for the concept we have seen that descendants of 17th and 18th century slaves in Surinam use the expression ‘to cool their heart’ (*koto di hiti f’en*) as an image of restored social tranquility. The precise idiom is used by Akan, Cross River, and some Bantu peoples.

The antiquity of this concept is attested by further evidence. Thompson looks to ancient African art, such as the sculpted heads from Nigeria’s Igbo-Ukwu and from Benin which emphasize facial serenity, and to the praise of past rulers, such as the 15th-century Nigerian king who took the title *Ewuare*, meaning ‘it is cool’, possibly to express a period of peace following a long conflict.²⁸ For these reasons, Thompson argues that we can consider African coolness as belonging to a Sub-Saharan classical tradition of great antiquity and significance.

What are the features of this purported African cool? First, it is related to the ritual restoration and maintenance of a society’s equilibrium. The Igbo-speaking people of the Niger Delta, for instance, have a ceremony of ‘cooling the village’ where material or ceremonial amends are made for acts and speech-acts that have upset the harmony of village life. In Onits ha Igbo culture, when there is a murder, the land is said to ‘become hot’.²⁹ When order and serenity are restored, villages and even whole countries are said to ‘become cool’. The phrase, “this country is cool” (*di konde koto*) is used with the same valence and the same suggestiveness by the descendants of African slaves on the Piki Lio in the interior of Surinam, in northern South America.³⁰

²⁸ Thompson, ‘Aesthetic of the Cool’, p.43.

²⁹ Thompson, ‘Aesthetic of the Cool’, p.43.

³⁰ From a personal communication between R.F. Thompson and Professor Richard Price, 28th November, 1972. (qtd. in Thompson, ‘Aesthetic of the Cool’, p.41)

The instances of cool identified by Thompson strongly connote ideas of restitution, as well as coolness as an absence of pride and aggression, of conflict and heightened emotion, which could threaten to undermine the harmonious functioning of society.

Control, composure and social stability are thus the key concepts in Thompson's pan-African cool. But his understanding of cool entails more than a mere display of composure in the interest of social harmony. Thompson argues that cool has a powerful spiritual dimension, that it represented a means of 'mastering reality'.³¹ This kind of cool is often linked, through ritual, to the sacred use of water and chalk. In this way, African cool signals, according to Thompson, transcendental balance, as in the divination rituals of the Manding, where good outcomes are signaled by one kola (a ritual totem) being half up, the other down, and this configuration is called 'cool'.³² Cool is also 'a sign of positive transition to ideal worlds.' The 'glazed eye' of nineteenth-century Afro-Louisianans, reported in 1673, implied that while dancing they 'had been translated from this existence to another world'. 'The facial seal' qualified the nature of this consciousness.³³ African cool also has a personal and aesthetic quality. In Yoruba culture, traditional dances 'express a philosophy of cool: patience and coolness of mind'.³⁴ In his *Flash of the Spirit* (1984), Thompson quotes a Yoruba telling him that 'coolness of character is important to our lives. Cool is the correct way to represent yourself to a human being'. Cool, Thompson argues, is central to this culture. The Yoruba word he translates is *itutu*, a term that has

³¹ Thompson, 'Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History', p.64.

³² Thompson, 'Aesthetic of the Cool', p.41.

³³ Thompson, 'Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History', p.63.

³⁴ Thompson, 'Aesthetic of the Cool', p.90.

equivalent connotations both of temperature and of personal comportment, as well as being an aesthetic category.³⁵ A definition of cool from the Gola of Liberia reads:

The ability to be nonchalant at the right moment, to reveal no emotion in situations where excitement and sentimentality are acceptable – in other words to act as though one’s mind were in another world. It is particularly admirable to do difficult tasks with an air of ease and disdain. Women are admired for a surly detached expression somnambulistic movement or attitude during the dance or other performance is considered very attractive.³⁶

Thompson thus speaks of ‘mystic coolness’ as a sacred concept of great cultural antiquity, an ‘ancient charter for entire black civilizations passing through fire and passing through heat’.³⁷

0.4. Prisoners and Slaves.

If these are indeed the distant origins of cool, as Thompson maintains, the question remains as to whether there is any continuity between the sacred, nuanced African idea of cool and the ‘cool’ we find in New York after World War II. For this to be so, cool would need to survive the trauma and dislocation of mass-slavery. The West-African Niger-Congo languages from which the instances of cool come were spoken in the kingdom of Dahomey, from which it is estimated as much as 20% of the Atlantic slave trade came, especially Yoruba and Fon-speaking people. But how much of a culture could survive such cultural upheaval among a people denied literacy as they were liberty, and the formal transfer of knowledge between generations?

³⁵ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (London, 1984), pp.70-2.

³⁶ Warren D’Azevedo, ‘The Artist as Archetype in Gola Culture’, paper presented at the Conference on the Traditional Artist in African Society (28-30 May 1965), Tahoe Alumni Center, Lake Tahoe California, preprint no.14, Desert Research Institute, University of Nevada, Reno, pp.31-32.

³⁷ Thompson, ‘Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History’, p.66.

The argument in favor of transatlantic importation of cool is made by Thompson, who believes cool did indeed come over the sea to America and successfully survive slavery. He cites Philip Curtin's census of the Atlantic Slave trade, which states that up to one fourth of all slaves taken from Africa in the eighteenth century were from the Bantu-speaking regions of Benin, principally Angola, where we find strong socially assuaging valences of the term cool in the Bantu roots *talala* and *zizira*. Thompson asserts that these Bantu values can be seen in the transmission of certain phrases to the slave population of Suriname, where the phrase *kato di hati f'en*, meaning 'to cool his heart' has a direct precursor in Bantu.³⁸ The case for transatlantic comparison can also be made by examining the pairings of Cross River and Lower Niger to Western Cuba, as well as Dahomey to Haiti. In these instances, the affinity of certain ritual categories can be seen as evidence for a transmission of values although without a direct linguistic link.³⁹

In his study of Igbo language and culture in the Americas, Douglas B. Chambers writes that diasporic Africans and their immediate descendants 'created new worlds', and that, after the crossing in the slave ships, these people drew on familiar ethnic African ways of being and doing in order to survive as slaves. He contends that the worlds the slaves made represent at least partial extensions of their various ancestral cultures and cultural logic, with distinct African 'nations' or national groupings of slaves drawn from the same culture eventually giving way to diasporic ethnogenesis, the creation of new African-derived ethnic identities in the New World.⁴⁰ Little is

³⁸ Thompson, 'Aesthetic of the Cool', p.42.

³⁹ Thompson, 'Aesthetic of the Cool', pp.43 and 64.

⁴⁰ Douglas B. Chambers, 'Tracing Igbo into the African Diaspora', *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* ed. Paul E. Lovejoy, (New York, 2009).

known of the condition in which African cultural logic and the language of cool survived slavery, however. Vocabularies and sentence lists of African languages, written in the Americas during slavery, such as Antonio da Costa Peixoto's 1741 *Obra Nova de Lingua Geral de Mina* or the anonymous nineteenth-century *Vocabulario Nago* illustrate only the basics of the language, without regard for the nuances of sacred terms such as those associated with cool. The kinds of sentences the slave-owning author of the text has chosen to translate illustrate graphically the dynamics of the master-slave dynamic: they include 'let us kill the white man' and 'please, please, don't kill me'. Presumably these were the kinds of sentences Peixoto thought slave-owners would benefit from recognizing. The *Obra Nova* illustrates the process of creolization, a diasporic mixing of various African Languages in a process of ethnogenesis. Ostensibly comprised of For-Portuguese translations, the Fon of the *Obra Nova* contains many Aladagbe words, Alada having been conquered by Dahomey in 1724, after which point Aladagbe-speaking slaves began to arrive in Brazil among the Fon-speaking slave population. Although no record of their use in the New Worlds of American slavery survives, it seems reasonable to suggest that the concept of cool, diffused through various languages, would become subject to this same process of creolization among slave populations, blending into one term through the close contact of African languages, and later the spread of English among the slaves.⁴¹

Whether it was an import, an adaptation, or something wholly new and native to America, Thompson and others believe that, during times of slavery, cool was an

⁴¹ Olabiyi Yai, 'Texts of Enslavement: Fon and Yoruba Vocabularies from Eighteenth-and-Nineteenth-century Brazil' *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* ed. Paul E. Lovejoy, (New York, 2009).

attitude cultivated by the slaves.⁴² Cool accordingly changes in its passage from the African cultures of origin to American slave cultures. Lewis MacAdams locates the most significant features of that adaptation. He calls African-American cool ‘a survival mechanism [...] passed down from the days of slavery, cool in the form of studied indifference was the only way in which a hip African-American could stifle rage at the same time he or she was expressing it’.⁴³ The cool man or woman responded to the impoverishment, material and spiritual, of slavery, by becoming as impoverished, yet elegant, as the simplified basic speech in which the blues are written. Slavery-era cool was a stance of prisoners and slaves. People forced to deal very directly with authority, and from whom almost all power had been taken, were retaining control of the one thing they can – their reactions and their temperament. Cool was the form taken by self-control on the part of men and women who could not even claim legal ownership of their own bodies.

In 1963, before Thompson’s work, African-American poet and writer Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) provided one of the most important and eloquent definitions of cool in his study of Afro-American music, *Blues People*. Anticipating Thompson’s core finding, Baraka refers to cool as a pre-existing phenomenon from the early days of Afro-American experience:

The term *cool* in its original context meant a specific reaction to the world, a specific relationship to one’s environment. It defined an attitude that actually existed. To be *cool* was, in its most accessible meaning, to be calm, even unimpressed, by what horror the world might daily propose. As a term used by Negroes, the horror, etc., might be simply the deadeningly predictable mind of

⁴² Especially MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool*, pp.1-30; and Dick Pountain and David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London, 2000), pp.35-42.

⁴³ MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool*, p.56.

white America.⁴⁴

LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka speaks of the Blues as a simplified language of despair in the face of brutality and an uncaring world. But cool, in his account, lacks much of the ritual and metaphysical nuance that Thompson describes. Where Thompson dwells upon the continuity of these pan-Atlantic traditions, Jones/Baraka and others portray slavery and segregation as the prime factors influencing the development of cool. By implication, slavery either forced a rupture in the tradition, and subsequent re-orientation of coolness, or provided an alternative story of origin altogether. Jones/Baraka does not himself suggest any cultural precedent for cool further back than the period of American slavery.

0.5. Cool and African-American Identities.

Thompson's intervention in Afro-African studies represents a gesture of restitution. As a white scholar, Thompson looks not only forwards, to a 'Coming Golden Age of Afro-Americana', but also backwards to a noble African-American cultural tradition. His exploration of cool and coolness received praise from black scholars who saw in it not only the dignified marriage of contemporary urban attitudes with classical African practices, but also a reversal of the historical stereotype of the childishly overemotional black psyche, brought about by an exaltation of the cool.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, 1963), p.213. And see 46-58.

⁴⁵ Lowery Stokes, Introduction, *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music*, by Robert Farris Thompson, (Pittsburgh PA, 2011).

To this extent, Thompson has much in common with Jones/Baraka, who constructed coolness as a self-conscious stance adopted by jazz musicians and their followers in the 1940s and '50s, in reaction to the emotionally heightened 'hot' jazz far more popular with white audiences of the time. Just as cool jazz resisted appropriation into the white-controlled musical marketplace, its related deportment resisted the infantilizing caricature of the 'emotional' black musician, and black music's 'primitive' appeal to heightened states via rhythm. (BP 200; 190ff) For Baraka, as for Thompson and his scholarly admirers, cool came to represent not only a black-centric cultural space separate from white influence, but also an affective deportment that resisted registering the effects of white control: a site of cultural dignity, historical or personal or both.

In stark contrast to these accounts, in 1999, art critic and champion of sixties pop-art Dave Hickey wrote an account of cool in the journal *Art Issues*, that departed sharply from the slavery-origins model. He objected to what he saw as the erroneous equivalency of 'cool' and 'ironic'. 'Having been personally accused', he says, 'of being cool and ironic [...] I have given some thought to their incompatibility'.⁴⁶ Irony, he contends, 'presumes repression', and arises in specific conditions: 'Those who fear "death from above," who dwell in bureaucratic, clerical or academic cultures where speech is regulated, relationships are permanent, and there is no free expression must resort to irony'.⁴⁷ Cool, on the other hand,

is a modality of expression for those who, live in a world where there are no hierarchies, no permanent enfranchisements, and, perhaps, a surfeit of free

⁴⁶ Dave Hickey, 'American Cool', *Art Issues* lvi (1999), p.2.

⁴⁷ Hickey, 'American Cool', p.3.

expression. Irony is a way of eluding the wrath of your superiors; cool is a way of not imposing on your peers.⁴⁸

Cool, for Hickey, is ‘a mode of democratic politesse’.⁴⁹ So, negatively, cool is for Hickey absolutely *not* irony, but he does also give a positive definition. Cool, he suggests, is the modern-day practice of Senecan plain declaration:

one doesn’t assert anything. One simply declares some truth to be self-evident on one’s own embodied authority as a citizen, without deigning to invest it with fancy justifications, personal explanations, or expressive urgency. One simply paints the soup can, or mounts the board in the slough of the wave, and proceeds, sans drama, into the fray. Cool, then, is theater without drama, demonstration without pleading, distinction without status, and dissent without violence – a discourse of peers and citizens.⁵⁰

Hickey’s idea of cool is, in its own way, historically specific: situated in, and responding to, 1960s pop culture. He states that the association “‘cool and ironic” marks a major cultural change that came into being during the nineteen sixties and seventies’, and that the discourse of cool had ‘its apotheosis in the sixties’.⁵¹ That said, he allows for cool having political significance and indeed looks to George Washington as the archetypal father of American Cool, saying ‘he didn’t really stand *for* anything. He simply stood, the embodiment of everything the republic might be’.⁵² For Hickey, Washington is cool precisely because of his honesty, his straightforward, seemingly guileless lack of irony. ‘Washington’s “image” in other words, wasn’t an image, He was the man – the incarnation of his own construction of virtue’. In

⁴⁸ Hickey, ‘American Cool’, p.3.

⁴⁹ Hickey, ‘American Cool’, p.2.

⁵⁰ Hickey, ‘American Cool’, p.4.

⁵¹ Hickey, ‘American Cool’, p.6.

⁵² Hickey, ‘American Cool’, p.5.

choosing Washington, Hickey opts, the historical gestures notwithstanding, for what looks like an a-historical, eternal version of cool, quite untouched by recent history.

Hickey's attempt to collapse man and image, or inner self and self-presentation, runs contrary to cool's function of establishing a discrepancy between felt rage and projected serenity in African-American writing of the same period. The cool of African-American communities of the nineteen forties and fifties was anything but Senecan plainness, its practitioners lacking the 'surfeit of free expression' that Hickey claims necessary for his formulation of cool. They certainly feared what Hickey glibly calls 'death from above' in a segregated and hostile society. Hickey insists that cool treats its observers as 'fellow citizens' whereas irony treats them as 'fellow slaves'.⁵³ The distinction is worth considering, given a cultural genealogy that locates cool as the self-protective stance of prisoners and slaves, rather than slave owning citizens with a surfeit of liberty. According to Hickey, the kind of cool that found its apotheosis in the sixties is nothing less than 'ethical opacity and embodied conviction'.⁵⁴

Hickey was not the first to apply the label 'cool' to pop-art, and, more broadly, to the iconoclastic culture of the nineteen sixties.⁵⁵ It is significant, however, that Hickey offers this positivistic account of cool as embodied virtue, thriving in free societies. His redaction of any indebtedness to, or inheritance from, the history of America's black communities now looks problematic to say the least. Puzzlingly, Hickey

⁵³ Hickey, 'American Cool', p.7.

⁵⁴ Dave Hickey, 'Beyond Dark Glasses', *New York Times*, 12 December 2000. www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/reviews/001112.12hickeyt.html. Last accessed: 10 June 2017.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Irving Sandler, 'The New Cool Art', *Art in America* lii.i (1965), pp.96-101, and Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago IL, 1997).

passingly agrees that Pountain and Robins (2000) are ‘probably right’ in ascribing cool’s origins to the urban black communities of midcentury.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, Hickey’s own construction of cool is timeless. That he finds its originators in the persons of Seneca and Washington belies the complex and often fraught history that attends cool’s passage across racial boundaries. This appropriation of cool for modern white America is by no means unique to Hickey, although he does provide one of the strongest articulations of it.

Thompson and Hickey can, in this way, be seen as opposite poles – the one insisting that cool and coolness have deep roots in black experience without which they cannot be meaningfully considered, the other sketching a coolness completely separate from any such tradition (and indeed finding its representative figure in a white President). The clear and important role of African-American discursive communities in fostering and developing cool and coolness appears to give the lie to Hickey. But that is not to say that his account must be entirely discarded. Considering the route that the term has taken through recent history – from the Harlem musical community to the Beat Generation and thence to broad recognition and usage, and, also, considering the manner in which ‘cool’ is often spoken and seldom critically discussed in popular discourse, misunderstandings, misreadings and misapprehensions regarding cool are a significant portion of its cultural history. Throughout this thesis I will be discussing the shifting and evolving significance of ‘cool’ to the articulation of racial relations and racial sympathies in modern America and, to a lesser extent, Britain. In this way I intend to negotiate the ‘choice’ between what we could call a ‘Hickey model’ and a

⁵⁶ Hickey, ‘Beyond Dark Glasses’.

‘Thompson model’ of coolness by locating it as a product of African-American culture with an important ongoing relationship to that community, whilst becoming subject to frequent and recurring misunderstandings and reformulations.

0.6. Cool as Affect.

‘Cool’, the term, and coolness, the affect, retain a close relationship throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Recent years have seen intense interest in Affect Theory. This school of criticism has been of considerable help to me as I have sought to unpack the socio-political implications of cool affect, offering access to what Gregg and Seigworth (2010) term the ‘hidden-in-plain-sight politically engaged work’ undertaken by subaltern groups living under the influence of ‘repetitious routines of normativizing power’.⁵⁷ The embodied work of affect, as opposed to the interior world of emotion, can be seen to provide the individual body, or the collective of bodies, with characteristics and behaviours imposed from without, by the operation of hierarchical structures. It simultaneously offers a mode of resistance, via quotidian ‘predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the [externally applied] norm’.⁵⁸

Affect theory’s proponents within literary and cultural studies have repeatedly touted it as a ‘middle way’ between the dominant poles of deconstructive or post-‘linguistic turn’ criticisms on the one hand, and historicist or new-historicist disciplines on the other.⁵⁹ Focusing on a text’s affective quality, its advocates argue, offers a critical

⁵⁷ Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham NC, 2010), p.6.

⁵⁸ Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, p.7.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (Palo Alto CA, 2012); and Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*.

approach that resituates the text in the immediate present, and makes the emotional communication between author and reader of paramount importance. My approach will be somewhat different to these visions of ‘third way’ Affect Theory. Though I make strategic use of affect-centric critical approaches, I retain a strong commitment to historicist methods. The use of cultural histories and archival materials will allow me to perform readings of my primary texts that explore their relation to the cultural preoccupations that inform, and are informed by, the author’s intervention. In so doing I hope to demonstrate the shifting nature of the debates that surround these politicized affective states. As the socio-cultural matrix that informs these affects changes, so too does the tenor and valence of the affect itself. My aim has been to extract the affective content from the ‘present’ of textual encounter and resituate it in the uneven and shifting ground of socio-historical context, the better to access the political and cultural work an affect can be seen to perform. This is my way of applying pressure back on the mechanisms of Affect Theory, in an effort to correct what seems to me its tendency to historical weakness. In doing so, I have sought to uncover the shifting nature of this particular named affect, ‘cool’, as it passes from period to period, context to context, and between discursive communities with differing expectations and norms of behaviour and feeling.

Sianne Ngai’s discussion of animatedness in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) has been perhaps the most influential contribution to affect theory in the past decade. Ngai regears affect theory to address what she defines as minor negative emotions and affects, which she posits are the site of ‘condensed interpretations of predicaments’. Her aim in doing so is to make explicit the work being done by these affects in terms of

negotiating instances of suppressed or impeded agency.⁶⁰ She makes use of a broad range of sources, both in terms of genre and period, to disclose, within each of them, patterns of asymmetrical socio-political relation along racial and gendered lines. Her account ranges from contemporary poetry, to Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857), Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952), to the late-nineties animated show *The PJs*. Revealing though it is, this approach comes at the expense of an understanding of the period-specific developments that stood to influence any given affect and alter its socio-political connotations. I will be responding particularly, over the course of this thesis to Ngai's affective category of 'animatedness'.

Ngai's formulation of 'animatedness' draws upon the work of Rey Chow's discussion of 'postmodern automata' (1993), the phenomenon whereby the marginalized body becomes animated by the dual influence of the machinery of capitalist labour and the othering gaze of the privileged observer. The marginalized body, say, of the racial other or the woman, in this way becomes a pliable instrument in the machinery of power, its behavior automated, to a greater or a lesser degree, to fulfill the stereotyped and marginal role that allows for this process of automation to occur in the first place. Ngai expands this concept with special reference to the styling of black bodies and black affect, outlining the ways in which historically informed caricature, literary apostrophe, and racial stereotype align to foist a racial marker upon black affective identity – that of an 'innocent' childish over-emotionality. Black affect becomes marked by an infantilizing pliability to power, a special susceptibility of the black subject to outside influences – be they states of spiritual 'ecstasy' or the 'primitive' hotness of the jazzman-entertainer, carried away by the rhythm and passion of his

⁶⁰ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge MA, 2005), p.3.

own music. The ‘plasmatic’ nature of animated black affect, which has its ultimate expression in the malleability of cartoon representations of black bodies and the frenetic gangliness of minstrel performances, ultimately displays an imperialist belief in the simplicity of the easily-led racial other whose tendency to be ‘carried away’ opens the ground for insidious notions of white responsibility, if not outright superiority.⁶¹

This dissertation makes a case for ‘coolness’ as an opposing category to ‘animatedness’—one deployed by the racialized other in an attempt to recover affective autonomy and dignity from a stereotype that would position black subjectivity as especially susceptible to external forces. Where animatedness is imposed from without, coolness, in the assessment of Baraka, Thompson, and others, arises from within – that is, from a cultural matrix that seeks to dignify black expression on its own terms. It stands for a reclamation of control, as much as it does for a reversal of dominant stereotypes. The stoical, inscrutable, aloof, and knowing affect of coolness marks a restitution of adult bodily integrity on the part of the relentlessly otherized and infantilized African-American. For the ‘cool cat’ of nineteen forties Harlem, this attitudinal projection of self-sufficiency and emotional untouchability can be seen as an implicitly radical and emancipatory stance.

0.7. The Road Ahead

I will argue that the special valence of coolness does not remain historically stable. With the entry of the white Beats onto the jazz scene, coolness becomes a competitively racialised marker, as the Beats and others engage in persistent

⁶¹ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, and Rey Chow, ‘Postmodern Automatons’, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington IN, 1993).

misreadings and mischaracterizations of cool. These misreadings and idiosyncratic interpretations that occur both on the level of discursive communities and individual authors will form the basis for my examination of the changing and developing ground of cool in the second half of the twentieth century.

What does remain constant is cool's status as a politicized stance. Whilst it does not represent a singular politics, and is not always radical, it is more than 'mere' emotional poise. The political nature of coolness, I argue, though more often than not implicit, always remains close to the surface. The serene but tough, detached but rebellious veneer cool retains through much of its history, maintains a relation to the stifled rage that underwrites it. This fundamental irony, or separation of consciousness and presentation, retains its relevance into the debates that surround cool in the nineteen seventies and beyond, where concerns that cool has 'lost' this relation to marginal social positions, and thus to rage; paradoxically underscore its vitality as a concept. Also significant is the fact that cool can be seen to persistently encode a certain outsider relation to the dominant power structures of society. It remains tinged with implications of hostility, and a sympathetic relation to the position of the excluded, even if the possessor of cool often falls short of significant engagement in political practice. It is this paradoxical coolness that I will explore – shifting yet constant, still, yet in motion. Moved by the vicissitudes of history and society, yet standing icily and stoically apart.

In the three main chapters I will take literary texts that deal with cool and coolness, and perform a sustained reading of cool's socio-political salience. The argument will progress by decade, using the textual concerns and preoccupations of the literary texts

as springboards to identify the period-specific debates that arose around cool, and examining how they shaped and were shaped by the cultural work of the text. In so doing I map the shifting territory of cool as it evolved and changed over the period between the end of World War II and the nineteen eighties and nineties.

Chapter One will deal with the nineteen forties and fifties, taking Kerouac's *Desolation Angels* (1965) and *The Subterraneans* (1958) as its primary texts. This chapter will establish the markers and meanings of coolness as expressed in African-American authors of the period, including Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Amiri Baraka's nonfiction *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963). It is against this background that I explore Kerouac's idiosyncratic formulation of cool as an aesthetic and literary category, as outlined in his letters, and use that to assess the evolution of his literary preoccupations. Kerouac's misreadings of earlier and contemporary articulations of cool, as well as the counter-articulations of cool by others, will be used to highlight and explicate the uneven asymmetric relationship between the white Beats and their African-American literary and cultural counterparts. Kerouac, I will argue, can be seen to recast coolness within the Anglo-American canonical literary tradition, with little or no recourse to his African-American contemporaries. As a result, Baraka would mount a poetic challenge to Kerouac and the white Beats, repossessing 'cool' as the marker by which he establishes his distance from them. The chapter will also consider similar contemporaneous appropriations and misreadings on the parts of Norman Mailer and existentialist commentators, to establish a common thread and demonstrate how attempts to square coolness away with Eurocentric intellectual movements and traditions contributed to its passage into the culture of the period.

Chapter Two will read Thomas Pynchon's *V* to explore coolness as an important site of countercultural negotiations. As the counterculture of the nineteen sixties sought to forge alliances between the black emancipation movement and white liberal activism, 'cool' again takes on the characteristics of a negative racialised marker; I position it as an affect and a stance that hovers, in this decade, at the boundaries of cross-racial engagement. During this time, negotiations of coolness cluster at the limits of racial solidarity, so that coolness comes increasingly to be aligned by its predominantly white critics with compliance to the dominant power structures, the millenarian impulses of certain white avant-gardes never really aligning with those of a blackness typically figured, in white counter-cultural writing, as regressive or even submissive. This chapter will challenge the received view in the extant literature on coolness: namely that the counterculture 'adapted' cool to its own ends, creating the persistent myth of coolness as synonymous with, or at the heart of, the engaged action of the 'youth in revolt' that typified that decade. I re-examine Pynchon and a wider countercultural literature and ephemera to uncover a deep antipathy between engaged radicals and the concept of coolness. It is against this cultural background that Pynchon declares the so-called 'golden mean' of 'keep cool, but care', marking, I argue, the author's attempt to navigate the counterculture's indebtedness to its Beat forebears, the limits of countercultural action, and the author's own anxieties about racial simulacra and racial understanding.

Chapter Three explores the changing status of cool as it is increasingly adopted into the mainstream culture of the nineteen seventies and eighties. During this period many commentators began to complain that 'cool' has been appropriated by the

commodity culture of the post-sixties, coming to refer to a commercialized rebelliousness that found its expression in lifestyle branding and consumer goods, a specific kind of pre-packaged rebelliousness that appealed to youth and rebellion that some saw as a betrayal of its genuine origins. Cool becomes, in the eyes of not a few commentators, a vague approbatory term, denoting approval in any degree from the merely acceptable or satisfactory to the powerful experience of the sublime.⁶² Via readings of Bret Easton Ellis' *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) and Martin Amis' *Money* (1984), I will push back against the charge levied by slang theorists and cultural commentators that cool 'loses its meaning' in adapting to the white middle class mainstream, and argue that its adaptation remains fundamentally tied to the debates and anxieties that shaped it in the preceding decades. I will discuss the affinities between coolness and postmodernism, with recourse to theories of the 'cool art' of the nineteen sixties and seventies, in order to locate Ellis and Amis in relation to a strain of social commentary that has viewed cool and coolness as an intrusive and threatening byproduct of the social upheavals of the preceding decades, responding, with them, to the shifting status of coolness in this period.

The second section of the thesis, entitled 'Cool Gestures', will take the form of shorter, more essayistic excursions on some features of cool. This will allow for the treatment of argumentative threads that appear across the historical main chapters, as well as more site-specific and particular appraisals of certain factors at play in recent and contemporary discussion of coolness.

Chapter Four will appraise the gendered nature of cool, taking a cross-period analysis

⁶² E. David Wong, 'The Rebirth of Cool: Toward a Science Sublime', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* xli.ii (2007), 67-88.

of the sexual differentiation at work in the performance and description of cool, as well as attempts by individual authors to push back against what they see as the implicit sexism inherent in cool's male-centric ethos. Beginning with the Beats, it will move on to examine the 'cool sex' movement of the nineteen sixties and seventies and the ways in which coolness informed, and was informed by, the cultural ramifications of the 'sexual revolution'.

Chapter Five will look at the nineteen nineties, in particular the 'Cool Britannia' moment in Great Britain, whereby the leadership style and aesthetic embraced by Tony Blair made coolness synonymous with neoliberal, postindustrial success. The discussions of cool that we find in this period occasion an analysis of cool's increasing affinity with neoliberalism and the service economy, prompting a peculiar strain of nostalgia to emerge in this time period that sets up a false opposition between a 'real' or 'genuine' bygone cool, and a 'fallen' present-day cool.

Chapter Six will build on the preceding chapter to critique jazz historian Ted Gioia's notion of the 'death of the cool', and the advent of a 'postcool' cultural style. Moving into the twenty-first century, it will assess the ways in which coolness may be adapting to increasingly specialized and idiosyncratic cultural movements, taking the case of the so-called 'Alt-Right', a far-right reactionary and white supremacist movement, whose strategic adoption of cool during the 2016 U.S. presidential election attests not only the enduring utility of the term and its associated stance, but also the vast distance it has travelled from its origins among the African-American avant-gardes of the middle twentieth century.

DIVISION ONE.**COOL DECADES.**

1.1. Uneven Ground.

The intersection of African-American cool with white hipster, or Beat, writers throughout the late nineteen forties and nineteen fifties, gives rise to a series of misreadings on the part of the white Beat authors, of cool and coolness, that mark a break with African-American models, and the appropriation of coolness into Eurocentric literary traditions and the self-regarding concerns of Beat-dom, whether Romantic-aesthetic, Zen Buddhist, or Existential. These attempts to create accounts of coolness, made from varying positions inside, or on the periphery of, the hipster ‘scene’, rely upon essentialized or otherwise truncated visions of black life and experience as much as they do upon white, western literary models of intense solitary imaginative experience. This leads to an asymmetry in white and black experiences and conceptions of cool, and to an uncomfortable alliance between black authors such as Amiri Baraka and their Beat counterparts. It is my aim to explore the racial politics of cool during this period with particular attention to Kerouac, Norman Mailer, and Baraka himself.

1.2. Reading Coolness in African-American Literature.

Robert Farris Thompson, in his anthropological discussion of cool, posits a strategy for reading literary sources in support of his own theories of coolness-as-transatlantic-inheritance. He offers an example of a story, circulating among Afro-Americans in Georgia in the second half of the nineteenth century and published in 1888. It represents, he suggests, the fragmentary literature of the slavery and

antebellum periods in which can be found the earliest Western instances of cool (or proto-cool). Thompson argues that this traditional wisdom not only illustrates the ‘heroic’ aspect of African cool, but provides evidence for its survival as part of an oral storytelling tradition.

The allegorical tale of ‘Brother Goat’ takes place in a symbolic and timeless natural world. Brother Goat is idly sitting on a big rock and chewing the cud in the sunshine. Brother Lion, catching sight of him, approaches the rock and prepares to attack. As he observes his potential prey, Brother Lion becomes confused, unable to discern exactly what brother Goat is eating. Curiosity gets the better of him, and, figuring that it will be an easy kill anyway, Brother Lion breaks cover and approaches Brother Goat.

he came up close and said, ‘Hey, Brother Goat, what are you eating?’ Brother Goat was startled when Brother Lion rose up in front of him but he kept up his courage and answered, ‘I’m chewing on this rock, then when I’m through with it I’m going to eat you’.

The story ends with a didactic lesson: ‘This bluff saved Brother Goat. A brave man will get out of difficulty, where a coward will lose his life’.⁶³ Thompson offers the following commentary:

To keep up courage is a form of cool. A person ideally works out strategy behind a mask of calm. The British are also said to possess this gift [...] (Hemingway’s “grace under pressure”), a quality sometimes parodied in films. But the difference is this: the black protagonist maintains calm to inherent dramatic point, with an audience close at hand, whereas, say, the solitary mountain climber, an oddity by African communal standards of heroic action, is

⁶³ William A. Stewart, ‘Understanding the Black Language’, *Black America* ed. John Szwed (New York, 1970), p.125. And Thompson, ‘Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History.

almost a paradigm of the individualist nature of much Western heroism. The cool hero shares his heroism by leavening his performance, where possible, with humour and other invitations to audience participation, even in the process of being challenged. He more than keeps his head; he has the presence of mind to direct both audience and enemy in a crisis situation.⁶⁴

Thompson's strategy looks to mythic fables that display the virtues he takes cool to encode. These themes and genres would continue to be important to African-American authors. Compare the tale of Brother Goat to Henry Dumas's short story 'Fon' (1968). Though written in the 1960s, long after slavery, this story illustrates the low affect stance of African Americans dealing with the direct violence of hatred, and we can see in it the same kind of mythological significances Thompson reads in the story of Brother Goat.

Nillmon, a white man in rural America whose car is struck by a rock thrown, he believes, by a young black boy playing, corners the boy's older brother, Fon. Nillmon 'stops in front of Fon and searches for signs of resistance. The youth holds his head level, but his eyes glare outward, always away from the eyes of the white man, as if they [a]re protecting some secret.'⁶⁵ Fon's detached stance enrages Nillmon. As he holds his pistol in Fon's face, imagining firing, he thinks 'I can't. It's all too easy. This Fon nigger ain't scared'.⁶⁶ Nillmon rounds up a lynch mob who burn down Fon's house, hold him at gunpoint and threaten to kill him. Fon calmly denies that it was his brother who threw the rock, asserting that he 'only shoots arrows'. The mob puts

⁶⁴ Thompson, 'Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History, p.64.

⁶⁵ Henry Dumas, 'Fon', *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* ed. Amiri Baraka (as Leroi Jones) and Larry Neal (Baltimore MD, 2007), p.457.

⁶⁶ Dumas, 'Fon', p.458.

dynamite in Fon's rear pocket and lights the fuse. And what irks Nillmon, what makes him delay and draw out the ordeal and the intimidation, is Fon's aloof detachment. Nillmon 'seems confused' when Fon refuses to show fear.⁶⁷ This delay ultimately leads to Fon's rescue, as his brother shoots arrows from the trees, driving away the mob.

The story has a fable-like quality from the beginning. The rock that strikes Nillmon's car comes from the sky, thrown seemingly by no one, or by some heavenly mythopoetic apparatus setting the story in motion. Fon's name refers to the Fon people of West Africa, traded as slaves en masse from the kingdom of Dahomey and sent to all parts of the Americas. Fon takes the role of the African warrior, who relies on his coolness to thwart the superior force and numbers of Nillmon and his mob until his brother-warrior rescues him with the traditional weapon. It is a parable of West African coolness transplanted to the American South. Significantly, Amiri Baraka chose to anthologize 'Fon' in his seminal anthology *Black Fire*, which appeared in 1968 and reflected a growing interest in pan-Africanist themes in African-American literature. The demonstrability of a link between Brother Goat, or Fon, and a continuous Afro-diasporic tradition, may be less important than the evidenced desire for a 'timeless' black cool transmitted as felt by writers of the nineteen sixties and seventies, the very period in which Thompson was developing his theories.

This method of reading, however, is too heavily indebted to myth, and too dependent on Thompson's own theories, to be adequately explanatory. Both explicitly and exclusively deal with an idea of coolness that relies heavily upon continuous lines of

⁶⁷ Dumas, 'Fon', p.465.

inheritance to slavery-era, or pre-slavery cultural contexts. A more varied picture can be seen by taking a more open-ended look at the American literature of the so-called ‘Birth of The Cool’ period – the nineteen forties and fifties – and the black urban cultures that produced it.

1.2.1. ‘As Secret a Phenomenon as Possible’ – Cool as Survival Strategy.

Cool, as it appeared in African-American urban contexts in the 1940s and 50s can be seen to be both a social deportment and an aesthetic achievement. It developed, according to Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones and others as a survival strategy of slaves, a mode of self-fashioning that encoded resistance to the appropriation and essentialization of black lives. Baraka lays out his account of cool in *Blues People*, a history of the interplay between African-American music and the wider society, which appeared in print in 1963. This was a transitional work for Baraka, who was, at the time, in the process of distancing himself from the Beat literary label and beginning to embrace what he termed ‘black cultural nationalism’. Although the creation of the book had been a long-term project, its appearance at such a critical time in Baraka’s ideological development places it, at least in part, as a reaction to, and a clarification of, the interaction between white hipsterdom and African-American cultural life. (BP 997)

The cool that emerged in African-American urban centers at and around midcentury had a twofold nature: it was both a deportment and an aesthetic. These two facets came together, more than anywhere else, in the personage of the bop or ‘cool jazz’ musician. The style of play that had its origins with Charlie Parker, Kenny Clarke and Dizzy Gillespie, and which found its most widely known expression in Miles Davis’

‘Birth of the Cool’ recordings (made 1949-50 and released 1957), was typified as much by a relaxed tempo and self-conscious avant-gardism as it was by an attitudinal performance by those on stage and in the audience. A studied disinterest on the part of the musician and a ‘cultish’ (Baraka’s term) exclusivism or snobbery towards the uninitiated on the part of the fans served to make cool jazz as intimidating and alienating a prospect for the outsider as it was for the (initially horrified) mainstream music press. (*BP* 200; 190)

The willful separatism of cool jazz is held by Baraka (writing, in 1963, as LeRoi Jones) to be a self-conscious reaction to urban black life at the time. Faced with the continued hostility of a society that was, in principle, amenable to assimilation, a state of affairs given the lie by the de facto segregation of poor African-Americans from polite, white society, the cool attitude and aesthetic were formed from an awareness that ‘it was not that a Negro was uneducated or vulgar or unfit for the society which determined why he was not accepted into it, it was the mere fact that he *was* a Negro’. (*BP* 185-186) The criteria for ‘successful adjustment’ to white society, at the time, were repeatedly belied by the experience of African Americans. (*BP* 185) Baraka saw the popularity of ‘swing’ jazz at the time as symptomatic of an appropriative tendency on the part of mainstream white society. ‘Even at the expense of the most beautiful elements of Afro-American musical tradition, to be a successful (rich) swing musician, one had to be white’ just as, in order to fully meet the criteria for ‘progressive integration’, one, ultimately, had to ‘be white’. (*BP* 185-186) It was in response to this that African-American musicians began to construct ‘bebop’ or ‘cool jazz’ with an air of exclusivity as well as the musically esoteric.

Baraka also locates the growth of the cool style in a reaction to the appropriation, into the white mainstream, of the ‘hot’ or big band style of jazz, made popular from the 1920s in dance halls. Baraka declares these styles, like the Blues, no longer representative of the cultural situation of African-Americans. The smiling jazzman obligingly leading the dance band, or the college educated blues musician pretending his field of emotional reference was ‘no different to his Mississippi slave great grandfather’, were, to Baraka and others, participants in an abhorrent pantomime that played into white expectations, a ‘form of modern minstrelsy’. (BP 218) The deliberate *weirdness* (again, Baraka’s term) of cool music served the dual purpose of representing the alienation experienced by African Americans in the 1940s, and enacting nonparticipation. (BP 219)

The problematization of jazz represented by the growth of ‘the cool’ thus marked a resistance to stereotyping (the definite article referring to the jazz style and its cognate ‘scene’, as opposed to the pre-existing attitude). The distant, intellectual avant-garde jazzman-as-artist broke from stereotypes of jazzman-as-entertainer, playing a form of music designed for a black audience with a sophisticated range of musical reference. The intellectual and experimental tenor of both music and ‘scene’, as well as the muted style of both play and reception, placed themselves in opposition to traditional portrayals of African-Americans as childlike in their emotional intensity, and thus incapable of the intellectual detachment that was held to be the provenance of the fully rational white race. Furthermore, it represented a new form of positive self-presentation on the part of the African-American artist that resisted appropriation.

Baraka draws a comparison with the contemporary phenomenon of African-Americans looking beyond white society, which they had for so long been told was the ‘correct’ model, and in which their low status was typically attributed to their failure to integrate. Realizing that this society would never fully accept them, Baraka argues, they were turning to other sources of culture and identity, including Islam and Africa, in order to avoid black life becoming once again absorbed by the ‘vertical’ appropriative apparatus of white society, as had been the case with the blues and hot jazz. (*BP* 210; 191) In the creation of a cultural milieu that resisted easy access from outsiders and catered predominantly to black audiences and black experience, it would, according to Baraka, be able to meet other cultures on a more equal footing, and allow for a ‘lateral’ or mutual cultural exchange as opposed to absorption, existing, as far as possible, on its own terms. It sought to establish ‘the emergence of the Negro as an autonomous human factor within American society’ through an overdue assertion of ‘cultural arrogance’. (*BP* 220)

The other important strand in the cultural DNA of African-American cool, according to Baraka and others, returns us to its origins in the experiences of slavery. Cool in this manifestation is an unconscious acquisition of “culture” defined as ‘how one lives’ and how one is ‘connected to history by habit’. (*BP* 181) It is a performance of low affect, emotional distance, and vigilance. Lewis MacAdams describes it as ‘a way of staying below the radar screen of the dominant culture without losing the respect of one’s peers’.⁶⁸ As ‘a survival mechanism’ that had been ‘passed down from the days of slavery, cool in the form of studied indifference was the only way in which a hip

⁶⁸ MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool*, p.50.

African-American could stifle rage at the same time he or she was expressing it'.⁶⁹ As an attitude, cool takes the form of double-consciousness: acting a certain way whilst felling another; positioning oneself on the inside (of society or legality) whilst knowing one is without. This double nature, this within-yet-without contradiction was, for Baraka, resonant with the cultural situation that gave rise to cool-as-aesthetic in the jazz world – the anomalous position of a black person in a society that nominally tolerated him but remained implicitly hostile. Baraka sums up the cool attitude with this powerful passage, worth quoting at some length:

In a sense this calm, or stoical, repression of suffering is as old as the Negro's entrance into the slave society or the captured African's pragmatic acceptance of the gods of his captor. It is perhaps the flexibility of the Negro that has let him survive; his ability to "be cool" – to be calm, unimpressed, detached, perhaps to make failure as secret a phenomenon as possible. [...] Given this term, as a consistent attitude of the Negro, in varying degrees throughout his life in America, certain stereotypes might suddenly be reversed. The "Steppin-fetchit" [*sic*] rubric⁷⁰ can perhaps be reversed if one but realizes that given his constant position at the bottom of the American social hierarchy, there was not one reason for any Negro, ever, to hurry. (*BP* 213)

Cool, as Baraka describes it, both gives the lie to black stereotypes, and informs the 'harsh, anti-assimilationist sound of bebop' which resisted absorption into the mainstream of the white middle class because 'it was exactly this America one was supposed to "be cool" in the face of'. (*BP* 213)

⁶⁹ MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool*, p.56.

⁷⁰ 'Steppin-Fetchit' ('step-and-fetch-it') refers to the character performed by African-American comedian Lincoln Andrew Perry, who, throughout the 1930s, appeared in both Vaudeville shows and motion pictures. Fetchit, the 'laziest man in the world' was portrayed as an inveterate shirker, incurably lazy and going to great lengths to avoid doing work.

1.2.2. Cool Survival Strategies in African-American Literature.

In the light of these cultural preoccupations, African-American literature of the 1950s, the period of the 'Birth of the Cool', provides fruitful ground for analyzing the affective survival strategies that would take on the name of coolness, and their ramifications. Having considered Baraka's assertion that coolness is a restorative agency enabling independence from external forces, we will now examine these texts in light of Ngai's category of 'animatedness', the racialized affective marker by which African-Americans have often been portrayed as particularly susceptible to external control, or animation.

In the course of her discussion of 'animatedness', Ngai employs a passage from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), which tells the story of an African-American's journey from rural America to Harlem. She uses an episode from the novel to illustrate animatedness in action. When the narrator comes across Todd Clifton, a Harlem community leader, puppeteering a black doll for a large street audience, he is overcome by a strong feeling of simultaneous fascination and revulsion in response to the doll, 'Sambo', with its 'infuriatingly sensuous motion' 'completely detached' from its immobile face. As Todd Clifton tells the crowd: '*He's Sambo, the dancing doll [...] Shake him, stretch him by the neck and set him down, - He'll do the rest. Yes!...*'.⁷¹ The narrator begins to notice not only the extent of his own feelings, but the disconcerting disconnect between doll and puppeteer.

I was held by the inanimate, boneless bouncing of the grinning doll and struggled between the desire to join in the laughter and to leap upon it with both feet, when suddenly it collapsed [...] and a broad black hand came down, its

⁷¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London, 1965), p.420.

fingers deftly lifting the doll's head and stretching it upward, twice its length, and releasing it to dance again. *And suddenly the voice didn't go with the hand.* (IM 421-2; Ngai's italics.)

Ngai emphasizes that the doll is animated by Clifton, whilst, at the same time, the act of animating the doll reduces Clifton to a set of compartmentalized mechanical parts – 'stretching hand, pressing toe, commanding voice', the very act of animating this racial caricature turning the process of mechanization back on the puppeteer himself.⁷²

If we can look to *Invisible Man* for an example of racialized animation, we can also look to it for an illustration of cool and its political and cultural potentials. We get a picture of African-American subcultural cool in chapter twenty-four, when the narrator dons sunglasses and a wide-brimmed zoot-style hat – the original 'cool' outfit, adopted by black and Hispanic subcultures in the US, the rich fabrics of the hat and suit, as well as the extravagant cut representing an open defiance of wartime austerity, which led to riots between minority groups and US Marines angry at the open flouting of the wartime spirit in Los Angeles in 1943. The narrator puts this outfit on to avoid being spotted by Ras's henchmen. Thus disguised, he is mistaken for a certain 'Rinehart' by, among others, 'a couple of hipsters' who, when they see him, shout at him in a friendly and approving way, telling him to 'play it cool, ole man, play it cool'. (IM 484) This Rinehart is a shifting, contradictory figure, but undoubtedly, unassailably cool: he speaks the lingo, wears the clothes and moves confidently in cool's American epicenter of Harlem. The narrator-as-Rinehart then explores cool subculture-as-survival-mechanism. 'It works, I thought, they see the

⁷² Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p.113.

hat, not me. There is magic in it. It hides me right in front of their eyes'. (IM 485)

Ellison explores Rinehart's seemingly contradictory nature, discovering his protean existence as gambler, womanizer, gangster and Christian minister. This is the 'cool-as-militant act' that MacAdams describes in action, whereby Rinehart 'stays below the radar' of the dominant culture without losing the respect of the hipsters.⁷³ To this end, 'Rinehart' is advised by his fellow Harlem residents to 'have a smooth tongue, a heartless heart and be ready to do anything'. (IM 493)

Rinehart represents a maximal flexibility of identity, in contrast to Todd Clifton's entrapment within the automization of the foisted identity of 'Sambo'. His indomitable agency flourishes through concealment, expanding to inhabit an ever-shifting multiplicity contingent on his 'hiding' his inner self 'right in front of their eyes'. Unlike Clifton, performing publicly on the street, Rinehart is not animated by any of the several roles he assumes, and is able to pass between them as the liberated operator of his exterior disguise.

This idea of cool as the stance of the mobile and the displaced, even of the protean and the socially invisible, can also be seen in Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1952). Cool repeatedly functions as a survival or coping mechanism based on emotion control in this novel. Cross, the protagonist, reacts to stressful or confrontational situations by adopting a disinterested stance of low emotional affect. His mistress, Dot, insists she will not get an abortion, 'telling him that she would not let go of the hold she had upon him, no matter what. He stood up. "I don't give a damn", he

⁷³ MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool*, p.50.

muttered. “I couldn’t care less””.⁷⁴ He beats his wife, pretending to be in a state of somnambulant madness, with intention of ending their marriage, covering up his motive by returning to the bar ‘coolly talking and drinking’. (*Out* 58) When he sees his wife after their separation, he can ‘tell that she was clamoring for an emotional scene. Well he’d refuse her the satisfaction. He’d be polite, bantering, if possible’. (*Out* 60) This calm coolness marks an attempt to get a piece of the security that African-Americans, as outsiders, have been denied, through adopting the pose of the secure – wresting back a degree of control in a world where one feels fundamentally out of control. In a telling passage from *The Outsider* Cross considers Finch, the white union lawyer: ‘He suddenly resented Finch’s whiteness, not racially, but because Finch was white and safe and calm and he was not’. (*Out* 64)

Like Ellison’s Rinehart, Cross, seeks a kind of ‘invisibility’ when he escapes from his life’s problems after surviving a subway crash in which everyone presumes he died. He self-consciously reinvents himself: ‘Was there more than one way in which to account for oneself?’ he wonders. (*Out* 79) He becomes a Proteus figure, resolving to ‘break with others and, in breaking with them, he would break with himself. He must sever all ties of memory and sentimentality, blot out, above all, the insidious tug of longing’. (*Out* 82) In his efforts to carve out a new identity for himself, Cross relies on the kinds of emotion-guarding behaviours associated with cool. He has to ‘cope with his impulse to confide’, keeping cool in the face of a hostile world: ‘The outside world had fallen away from him and now he was alone at the center of the world of the laws of his own feelings’. (*Out* 107) He isolates his feelings from his

⁷⁴ Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York, 1953), p.43.

performance, making a great secret of them in order to survive and even thrive in his new life of shifting roles and identities.

For the Afro-American migrant, recently arrived, anonymous in the crowd of the urban metropolis and segregated by an often-hostile society, cool represented the survival skills needed to navigate and to survive modern life. Moreover, it offered an alternative to the prescriptive and entrapping auto-mechanization of animatedness imposed from without in permitting a certain social slipperiness and flexibility.

1.3. The Appropriation of The Cool.

The post-nineteen-fifties evolution of cool cannot be understood without examining the appropriation of the term by the group of mostly white writers of the Beat Generation who lived in New York and came to establish themselves in a nominally friendly, but often complex relation to the black subcultures there. From the outset, coolness gave notoriety and significance to those whites who cast themselves in a sympathetic relation with marginalized black Americans, and who deliberately threw themselves into the culture that surrounded them. It was into this African-American cultural milieu of exclusivity, evasiveness, and dignity that the white hipsters inserted themselves, and when the Beat Generation, who were the literary expression of the hipster phenomenon, adapted cool to their own purposes, they did so often with little apparent recourse to the African-American contexts in which the term was understood and used.

Cool Jazz provided the point of entry for many. ‘Bird’⁷⁵ [Charlie Parker] was indeed a “white” hero’, as Ellison writes in his critical essays:

His greatest significance was for the educated white middle-class youth whose reaction to the inconsistencies of American life was the stance of casting off its education, language, dress, manners and moral standards: a revolt, apolitical in nature, which finds its most dramatic instance in the figure of the so-called white hipster. And whatever its justification, it was, and is, a reaction to the chaos which many youth sense at the center of our society.⁷⁶

Written in 1962, Ellison’s reflections are in sympathy with Mailer’s of five years earlier, though without the troubled and troubling racial politics. One of the very few to see Parker, Kenny Clarke, Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie perform at their now-legendary sessions at Mintons was Jack Kerouac. In Kerouac’s ‘Fantasy: The Early History of Bop’, Kerouac describes the pioneers of ‘cool jazz’ as ‘12th century monks’, ‘witch doctors’, with their ‘backs to each other, facing all the winds – bent, miserable and cold’.⁷⁷ Famously, in *On the Road*, Kerouac declares his apparent sympathies toward African-American subculture, ‘wishing I were a Negro’ and declaring that ‘the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me’.⁷⁸

There is every reason to argue that this idealized and essentialised wishing is part of a rejection, on Kerouac’s part, of what Ellison called ‘the chaos at the center of society’, a casting-off of his white identity, rather than be seen as in any way party to

⁷⁵ Charlie Parker was known as ‘Bird’ before he reached New York, and it continued to be the name by which he was popularly known. See Parker’s ‘Yardbird Suite’ (Spotlite, 1947).

⁷⁶ Ralph Ellison, ‘On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz’ *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1995), p.227.

⁷⁷ Jack Kerouac, ‘Fantasy: The Early History of Bop’, *Jack Kerouac: The Complete Collection: His 3 Acclaimed 1950s Albums*, Chrome Dreams Media, 2011. MP3.

⁷⁸ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (London, 2012), p.105.

mainstream society. The sensory and experiential intensity Kerouac saw in the African-Americans, above all their incommunicative coolness, represented a better alternative than repeating the conventionally 'white' revolt against the system, becoming like 'all my New York friends' who 'were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons'. (*OtR* 7)

From the outset, the coolness of white hipsters functioned as a badge of familiarity with the black circles among which they moved. Leaning heavily on the word's connotations of acceptance and initiation (he is 'cool with us', he is part of the group), their adoption of the term came to signify their insider status, and their understanding of each other as fellow outsiders. The willful obscurantism and definitional elusiveness with which they deployed the term, as commented upon by Mailer and Jezer among others, betokened an aspiration toward identification, and thus community, an assertion of shared experience (despite glaring differences) that deliberately excluded those not 'in the know'. White hipsters could performatively appeal to an ineffable kinship with their new black peers whilst encrypting their speech against mainstream ears, all via this 'secret code of shared, esoteric taste' that 'cool' encoded.⁷⁹

The Beats can be considered the literary iteration of the wider hipster movement, and their literary success can be thought of as the vehicle by which 'cool' was first encountered by the wider white public. But the question stands as to why this identification appealed to them: why did white youths, often from comfortable

⁷⁹ Pountain and Robins, *Cool Rules*, p.154.

middle-class backgrounds, want to adopt the stance and the terminology of their dispossessed and the segregated African-American contemporaries?

Nonconformity, the virtue most frequently ascribed to the hipster, must be considered in light of their relation to the Second World War. The Beat generation was composed of those who were either unfit (as in the case of Kerouac) or too young (as in the case of Ginsberg) to take part in the fighting. This put them at odds with the energies of society as they saw it – the wartime fervor in which they had no part to play, the daily dispatches detailing the results of total war on the European continent, the deaths of their friends and relatives, and, after the war, the beginning of a new world in which the twin horrors of the Death Camps and the Atomic Bomb were a frightening reality. In the accounts of the Beats themselves, as in those of their historians and chroniclers, World War II is the source of an existential imperative toward nonconformity, felt to be (somewhat tenuously) analogous to the role of slavery in African-American history. Frank Tirro calls the hipster the ‘underground man’: he is to the Second World War ‘what the Dadaist was to the first’.

He knows the hypocrisy of bureaucracy, the hatred implicit in religions—so what values are left for him?—except to go through life avoiding pain, keep his emotions in check, and after that, “be cool,” and look for kicks. He is looking for something that transcends all this bullshit and finds it in jazz.⁸⁰

In 1952, John Clellon Holmes, in an article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled ‘This is The Beat Generation’, explicitly identifies the Beats in relation to the war, writing that, although any attempt ‘to label an entire generation is unrewarding’, ‘the

⁸⁰ Tirro, *Jazz: A History*, p76.

generation which went through the last war, or at least could get a drink easily once it was over, seems to possess a uniform, general quality which demands an adjective'. He paints a melancholy and terrifying picture of the shared experience of those on the fringes of the war –

weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war, they [the Beat generation] distrust collectivity. [...] The fancies of their childhood inhabited the half-light of Munich, the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the eventual blackout. Their adolescence was spent in a topsy-turvy world of war bonds, swing shifts, and troop movements. They grew to independent mind on beachheads, in gin mills and USO's, in past-midnight arrivals and pre-dawn departures. Their brothers, husbands, fathers or boy friends turned up dead one day at the other end of a telegram. At the four trembling corners of the world, or in the home town invaded by factories or lonely servicemen, they had intimate experience with the nadir and the zenith of human conduct, and little time for much that came between. The peace they inherited was only as secure as the next headline. It was a cold peace. Their own lust for freedom, and the ability to live at a pace that kills (to which the war had adjusted them), led to black markets, bebop, narcotics, sexual promiscuity, hucksterism, and Jean-Paul Sartre. The beatness set in later.

He acknowledges the comparison of the Beats to the 'lost generation' that followed World War I, calling it valuable, but stopping short of identifying explicitly with the moralizing undercurrent and 'eloquent air of bereavement' he associates with the Roaring Twenties and their literature. Rather, according to Holmes, 'for the wildest hipster, making a mystique of bop, drugs and the night life, there is no desire to shatter the "square" society in which he lives, only to elude it. To get on a soapbox or

write a manifesto would seem to him absurd'. Cool, as used by the African Americans in whose circles the Beats began to move and mix, represented for them and for the hipsters a ready-made model of detachment, distrust and scepticism toward society that their own experience and the reality of war had primed them for. Holmes glosses 'cool' as synonymous with 'withdrawal'. In his estimation, the Beat generation adopted a pre-existing model, and took a pre-existing word, to describe the next generation's repetition of the preceding generation's formative relation to world conflict.⁸¹

1.4. Kerouac and Coolness.

One of the very few white people to witness Parker, Clarke and Gillespie pioneer cool jazz at Minton's in Harlem was Jack Kerouac, who was so faithful a supporter and patron of the club that Gillespie named a composition for him there in 1941. Despite the nuanced origins of 'cool' as both stance and term, Kerouac does not engage with it in terms of the African-American tradition that would be described by Baraka in 1963, nor does he demonstrate any understanding of it as a phenomenon with its roots in black experience, beyond a recognition that African-Americans seem to have a certain propensity for or predisposition towards coolness. Though 'cool' appears in his writings, the term was initially not his own, rather received from, as he puts it the 'new language, actually spade (Negro) jargon' that you 'soon learned', whereby there 'couldn't be a more economical term to mean so many things'.⁸²

Kerouac is, in the present popular imagination, second only perhaps to Charlie Parker as an originator of modern cool. An icon of the Beats, a group with whom our images of coolness are inextricably linked, Kerouac remains in general estimation the figure

⁸¹ John Clellon Holmes, 'This is the Beat Generation', *New York Times Magazine*, November 16th, 1952.

⁸² Jack Kerouac, 'The Origins of the Beat Generation', *Playboy* vi.vi (1959), pp.31-32, 42, 79, (42).

who, above all others, transplanted coolness from the musical to the literary, and even from the black to the white-dominated hipster spheres. Through the phenomenal success of his works, cool entered the general cultural consciousness of his generation and beyond.⁸³

An examination of Kerouac's own interaction with the concept of coolness, however, reveals a complicated picture. His engagement with cool can be divided into two periods, with the division falling in late 1953 and early 1954, when he 'discovered' Zen Buddhism. In the earlier period, Kerouac engaged with and formulated coolness in a nuanced and idiosyncratic way indicative of a circumspection bordering on hostility. He was influenced by his own personal experiences of the Beat 'scene' and his notions of literary history and aesthetic practice. In this period he casts cool in opposition to 'hot', and placed himself firmly in the 'hot' camp. The second period, in which he declared himself to have been 'cooled', represents something of a retreat from, or reformulation of, Kerouac's earlier romanticism, and a rehabilitation, through his writings, of coolness. In both periods Kerouac's ideas of cool are rooted in bodily temperament, embodied performance, and inherited ideas of romanticism and classicism. His unique and highly personal ideas of what cool and coolness signify not only inform his literary project and outlook, but also challenge for the first time the dominance of African-American accounts of cool, its origins and meanings.

⁸³ See especially Glenn O'Brien (ed.) *The Cool School: Writing from America's Hip Underground*, (New York, 2013), for an example of Kerouac's inclusion in a 'cool' movement of writers, despite nuanced and even hostile engagement with coolness on Kerouac's part in the very works anthologized. More circumspect appraisals in Gioia's *Laws of Cool* and MacAdams's *Birth of the Cool* explore Kerouac's own mixed feelings towards the concept while granting the conflation of Kerouac and coolness in the popular imagination.

The Subterraneans, published in 1958 but written over the course of three nights in the October of 1953, marks Kerouac's first public treatment of the topic of coolness beyond the occasional mention. In *On the Road* and other early-period compositions, the term appears in its familiar subcultural usage as a broad and adaptable praise term. *The Subterraneans* is a 'true life story', dealing with Kerouac's brief and ultimately unhappy love affair with Alene Lee. (They appear as Leo Percepied and Mardou Fox, respectively). Mardou, a mixed-race hipster in the orbit of the ultra-hip 'subterraneans', to whom Leo is both attracted and repelled, represents, together with her clique, the 'cool hipsters' coming up a few years in age below Leo. The aim of the novel is somewhat anthropological. Kerouac fought with his publisher to preserve the authenticity of the novel's voice out of a desire as much to preserve and present the language of the subcultures as to showcase his spontaneous method, this being the first of his spontaneous prose 'true life' stories to receive publication. As such, *The Subterraneans* displays as much historical interest in the taxonomy of hipster subculture as Holmes's *Go* (1952).

Like *Go*, *The Subterraneans* deals with the emergence of cool hipsterism as a recent phenomenon, belonging to those slightly younger than Kerouac and Holmes. The cool attitude of aloofness, silence and reserve is held, by the narrator of *The Subterraneans*, to have arisen in the space of five years, making him feel something of an outsider to the new youth culture: 'now it is no longer 1948 but 1953 with cool generations and I five years older [...] having to make it with a new style and stow the nervousness'.⁸⁴ Like Paul Hobbes, Leo Percepied treats the phenomenon with some distaste, though, unlike the narrator of *Go*, Leo's circumspection remains just that,

⁸⁴ Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* (New York, 1958), p.9

and does not generate the kind of jeremiad Holmes unleashes against the advent of cool. Leo grants the hipsters an undeniable charisma, even calling them ‘Christlike’, but is nonetheless unsentimental about the negative aspects of their performance of coolness. (*Sub* 1) Their tendencies, he tells us, veer toward ‘silence, bohemian mystery, drugs, beards, holiness and, as I came to find later, ‘insurpassable nastiness’ as the cool verges on the cold and interpersonally hostile or self-serving. (*Sub* 23) Against his ‘nervous’, talkative and ‘hot’ nature, Leo awkwardly attempts a cool posture of disinterest and distance in order to catch Mardou’s eye, berating himself for his ‘unhiplike, brash, smiling’ attitude, ‘me hot - them cool’, and pretending to ‘pay no attention whatever’. He conceals his deep emotions, even his passion for Mardou: ‘I sat back cool to pretend to be cool [...] I pretended to read. I pretended to pay no attention whatever’. (*Sub* 8; 12)

Apart from his reaction against the hipsters’ propensity for interpersonal coldness, to the point of unpleasantness, Kerouac’s specific objections to the cool of the subterraneans revolve around their intellectual intensity. This intellectualism, or over-intellectualism, runs contrary to the Kerouacian virtue of spontaneity, which he holds as equivalent to honesty and an index of intensity of experience, almost his highest good both in life and literature. Kerouac sets hipster cool in opposition to the ‘madness’ that, he holds, is a necessary precondition for visionary experience, opposing the silent, detached quietude of the cool hipsters, who value ‘ascetic strange intellectuals’ to the ‘big paranoiac bums of shipyards and railroads and novels’, Kerouac’s ‘crazy saints’. (*Sub* 6-7)

Kerouac associates cool reticence with either silence, or a mode of speech so crippled by over-intellectualization as to be worthless. The literary products of this stance appear throughout Kerouac's work as hilariously overwrought bad poetry. In *The Subterraneans* Leo derides the young poet Yuri's 'best line' which was something to do with 'seldom nocturne' and advises him to trust the 'spontaneous vision' in his writing rather than labour over highly-wrought speech. (Sub 83) Similarly, in *Desolation Angels* (1966), Jack Duluoz hurries out of a poetry reading upon hearing the poet 'Merrill Randall' (James Merrill) recite his first line 'The duodenal abyss that brings me to the margin/consuming my flesh', leading Duluoz to reflect that 'in it [the poem] I hear the craft of his carefully arranged thoughts and not the uncontrollable involuntary thoughts themselves, dig'.⁸⁵ This is consonant with Leo's observation, in *The Subterraneans*, that the 'cool' of the subterraneans, 'decadent intellectual dead-ended in cause-and-effect analysis', comes at the expense of what he values in 'hotness', namely 'the great JOY of being and will and fearlessness'. (Sub 58) Personal values and literary values appear to be inseparable for Kerouac in this regard.

1.4.1. Kerouac's Categories - the 'Hot' and the 'Cool'.

We can be relatively certain that Leo Percepied's negative attitudes towards cool correspond closely to Kerouac's own, and that the consonances between the hot vs. cool social comportments and literary practice are not accidental, based on a letter Kerouac wrote to Neal Cassady three years earlier, in October of 1950. An illness contracted in Mexico forced Kerouac into a period of recuperation and reflection at his mother's home prior to the composition of this letter, in which he states 'I've been

⁸⁵ Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* (London, 1966), p.188.

thinking about *cool* for the past week almost to the point of a theory [...] I've also been thinking of *cool* with regards to my writing'. In this letter, Kerouac lays out a nascent literary theory of cool, in which he defines cool writing in opposition to 'what fellows like you [Cassady] and me [are]... no word for it, but it sounds like RAW'. He takes his cues both from music and social performance or physical disposition. Coolness and what he calls 'rawness' in this letter are evident in, and probably derived from, an individual's bodily action and constitution:

The raw mind is usually associated with the physical life, whether athletic, work, or just beat (like Huncke); the cool mind is the intellectual emphasis and the physical counterpart of it is a kind of gracefulness... a gracefulness that is almost effeminate. [...] Our feeling for music is raw, too. Don't have to explain that. The reaction is more physical, more jumping-minded.

From this theory of embodied cool, Kerouac expresses a natural affinity for the frenetic and unreflective rawness in writing. He divides the literary canon in two along these lines, declaring that 'Holmes and Landesman et al are all becoming, or always have been, cool [...] Henry James is a cool voice; Hawthorne is cool'. Cool voices he disparages as reflective, unspontaneous, mannered - typical of 'an effeminate queer'. Kerouac ventriloquizes this cool voice with a brief parody: 'My name is Roger Dun. Some years ago I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a simply marvelous woman who...' Not only is this mannered and carefully considered, but, in Kerouac's parody, it is also clearly the voice of social privilege. Cool speech is thus a result, we can infer, of being out of touch with immediate experience, which Kerouac associates with the body. The raw 'type' is 'awkward' and

‘hulking’ and intensely masculine, and his powerful, spontaneous prose must reflect this, in opposition to the polished phrasing of the effeminate and elegant cool ‘type’.⁸⁶

Together with this letter and *The Subterraneans*, the third in the trio of texts in which Kerouac explicitly addresses coolness is an address he gave to Hunter College, New York in late 1958. No transcriptions or recordings of the event exist, but a version, based on Kerouac’s notes, appears under his name in *Playboy* the following June. Kerouac once more constructs cool against its opposite, this time, again, appearing under the term ‘hot’. Hotness is defined in a number of ways. The first and most superficial is, once again, embodied social performance.

By 1948 the hipsters, or beatsters, were divided into cool and hot. Much of the misunderstanding about hipsters and the Beat Generation today derives from the fact that there are two distinct styles of hipsterism: the cool today is your bearded laconic sage, or schlerm, before a hardly touched beer in a beatnik dive, whose speech is low and unfriendly, whose girls say nothing and wear black: the “hot” today is the crazy talkative shining eyed (often innocent and openhearted) nut who runs from bar to bar, pad to pad looking for everybody, shouty, restless, lushy, trying to “make it” with the subterranean beatniks who ignore him.⁸⁷

Energetic running, ecstatic dancing, and other performances of enthusiasm represent the physiognomic showing-forth of the deeper, interior, hotness that Kerouac values – a set of aesthetic and experiential beliefs and practices rooted in his romanticism. The romantic visionary was, of course, an important figure in Kerouac’s estimation.

Throughout *The Subterraneans* alone Leo Percepied ranges himself with personal

⁸⁶ Jack Kerouac, ‘Letter to Neal Cassady. 6 Oct. 1950’, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956* ed. Ann Charters (New York, 1995), pp. 230-234.

⁸⁷ Kerouac, ‘Origins of the Beat Generation’, pp.40-42.

idols that include Blake, and the ‘Rimbauds and Verlaines of America on Times Square’. (*Sub* 60; 36) The expression of hotness reaches its fullest, and most famous, expression in *On the Road* (1957) where it reaches the point of combustion and becomes a ‘burning’:

the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars. (*OtR* 6)

In his 1959 *Playboy* piece, Kerouac explicitly refers this hot ‘burning’ back to its source in Romanticism, by way of Pater: ‘Most Beat Generation artists belong to the hot school naturally since that hard gemlike flame needs a little heat’.⁸⁸ The quotation comes from Pater’s controversial preface to *The Renaissance* (1873): ‘To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life’.⁸⁹ Here Pater makes the case for a constant restless questing after powerful and ever newer experiences that earned him accusations of teaching hedonism in his own time. In the essay on ‘Romanticism’, (*Macmillan’s Magazine*, 1876), Pater defines the Romantic literary temperament as eager for novelty, restlessness, liberty as opposed to the received authority of the ‘classic’ - mannered, formed and orderly, ‘com[ing] to us out of the cool and quiet of other times’.⁹⁰ It is this urgency of ‘hot’ experience that most informs Kerouac’s celebration of spontaneity, both experientially and in terms of literary method. And it is most likely the dichotomy of romantic/classical as formulated by Pater that serves as the crucial precursor to his own dichotomy of hot

⁸⁸ Kerouac, ‘Origins of the Beat Generation’, pp. 40, 42.

⁸⁹ Walter Pater, ‘Preface to *The Renaissance*’, rpt in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, V: *Victorian Prose and Poetry* (Oxford, 1973), p. 319.

⁹⁰ Walter Pater, ‘Romanticism’, ‘Preface to *The Renaissance*’, rpt in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, V: *Victorian Prose and Poetry* (Oxford, 1973), p. 323.

and cool. The elegant formal perfection of classicism, as described by Pater, resonates with Kerouac's bodily type of the cool, while the restlessness and indefatigable energy of romanticism corresponds to the masculine 'rawness' of Kerouac's hot type.

Moreover, while manifesting as passionate excitement and the need for powerful experience unmediated by intellectual constraint, Kerouac's romanticism finds its more strenuous articulation in the desire for apocalypse – the romantic dictum of personal transformation through revelatory experience. This manifests in the early Kerouac in the form of the 'quest': the desire to locate and express the inexpressible or to articulate the ineffable that looms unspoken behind experience. This questing manifests physically and performatively in the frenetic motion of *On the Road*, in which the characters race from experience to experience with an inexhaustible appetite, but also as a literary quest for the location and expression through language of an epistemic 'center'. Questing dominates much of Kerouac's first novel *The Town and the City* (1950). Behind the ordinary events the child perceives 'something in that invisible brooding landscape surrounding the town [that, if accessed might] tell him a different story'.⁹¹ Discovering this mysterious something is, it has been argued,⁹² the distinguishing refrain of Kerouac's early fiction, running as it does through both *The Town and the City* and *Doctor Sax* (1959), where the ineffable is personified as the eponymous Doctor, an elusive and protean trickster figure.⁹³

The Subterraneans articulates a form of despair toward the quest at its heart, as Leo (and presumably Kerouac himself) struggles between devotion to this artistic calling and happiness with Mardou. Leo's 'hotness', his desire for ever more experiences and

⁹¹ Jack Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (New York, 1950), p.2.

⁹² For example, Matt Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac* (Columbia SC, 2000), pp.42ff.

his frenetic personal energy, cause him to make the ‘fatal mistakes’ of repeatedly abandoning Mardou late at night to go partying with famous writers. This is the ultimate cause of the disintegration of their relationship. Similarly, Leo is unable to find contentment with Mardou because he is distracted by his romantic ‘quest’. ‘Men are so crazy’, Mardou tells Leo, ‘they want the essence, the woman is the essence, there it is right in their hands but they rush off erecting big abstract constructions’, and Leo concedes that ‘having had the essence of her love now I erect big word constructions and thereby betray it really – telling tales’. (Sub 16-17) At the novel’s end, the theme of essences recurs, with Leo comparing himself to Finnegan of *Finnegans Wake*: ‘and the man has it [the essence] in his hand but rushes off to build big constructions [...] Finnegan is always putting up “building supra building supra building” on the banks of the Liffey – dung!’ (Sub 110) Though Leo is alone and unhappy at the conclusion of the novel, there is consolation in his artistic calling. He ends the novel with the lines: ‘And I go home having lost her love. And write this book’. (Sub 111) The quest may interfere with his ability to find happiness, or even preclude it altogether, but it offers redress in the form of artistic endeavour. Though deeply uncertain of his ability to express the center or the essential, or even the possibility of doing so at all, Leo is granted a measure of comfort in his own personal revelation: ‘I GOT MY OWN LITTLE BANGTAIL ESSENCE AND THAT IS MIND RECOGNITION’. (Sub 48)

1.4.2. Kerouac’s ‘Cooling’.

The major turn in Kerouac’s writing, and his attitude towards cool, comes in the later winter of 1953, only months after writing *The Subterraneans*, with his ‘discovery’ of Zen Buddhism. Six years later he would write of himself that ‘It was a

hot hipster like myself who finally cooled it in Buddhist meditation’.⁹⁴ Although the ‘hot’ still predominates in his disposition in 1953, Kerouac has discovered, and adopted, a positive coolness that he sees and values in himself. This ‘cooling’ effect can be seen to grow out of the themes of *The Subterraneans*. Theado argues that the anguish that marks the conclusion of that novel leads to recognition of the first principle of Buddhist doctrine – namely that all life is suffering.⁹⁵

The influence of Zen on Kerouac’s fiction is well-documented – for example the content shifts to include more religious imagery, a mix of Zen and the Catholicism of his boyhood, while the pace and physical situation shift somewhat, as the frenetic forward motion of *On the Road* gives way to mountaintop meditations, and his insatiable appetite for drugs, alcohol, and sex gives way to bouts of abstinence.⁹⁶ This new preponderance of natural religiosity and the stillness of his pilgrimages, however, confirmed by the loose ‘sequel’ to *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums* (1958) demonstrates, I believe, a deeper perception of the futility of his ‘hot’ romanticism, especially his quest for ‘essences’, concerns with which made up so much of the core of *The Subterraneans*. The ‘cooled’ later Kerouac never rehabilitates the worst excesses of subterranean cool – the nastiness and the over-intellectualization, nor does he abandon the spontaneity he had previously exclusively associated with the ‘hot’. While he remains, by his own admission, a hot hipster at heart, he finds a reconciliation between elements he previously regarded as opposed in the hot/cool dichotomy, and finds through Zen a positive coolness that allows for ‘spontaneous

⁹⁴ Jack Kerouac, ‘Origins of the Beat Generation’, p. 42.

⁹⁵ Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, p.124.

⁹⁶ Especially Sharin N. Elkholy, *The Philosophy of the Beats* (Lexington KY, 2012); and Carole Tonkinson, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (New York, 1995).

mind reflection' whilst avoiding the pitfalls of over intellectualization and the stifling constrictions of form.

Desolation Angels, the second novel written after his 'cooling', sets up a fruitful point of comparison with the difficulties of romantic 'hotness' that informed *The Subterraneans*. Kerouac, writing as his recurring persona Jack Dulouze, takes a job as a fire-watcher on Desolation Peak in order to meditate and achieve satori, or Zen enlightenment. Initially, he speaks about his project in terms of another 'quest', an effort to access revealed knowledge, even an 'essence' – he wants to 'find out for once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence', and thus attain 'the Great Knowing [...] the Awakening'. (DA 4-5) As his sojourn on the mountain goes on, he comes to realize that the substance of satori is that there is no satori at all, that 'there are no awakeners and no meanings', and that he must 'be void still' in ignorance 'like a happy child lost in a sudden dream'. (DA 29; 50; 46) True enlightenment means making 'no comments, complaints, criticisms, appraisals, avowals, sayings, shooting stars of thought, just *flow, flow*, be you all, be you what it is'. (DA 5) The fullest moment of satori comes up when Kerouac gives up on coherent information altogether: 'there's nothing to write about, everything is nothing, there's everything to write about [...] I run out of words', he says, before embarking on pages of apparent nonsense prose, words linked only by homophony in playful sequences that give way to triangular pictographs and snatches of nonsensical verse, until the occasion to describe the moon once again stabilizes the narrative. (DA 51-54)

This reverie of verbal playfulness and the abandonment of traditional meanings concentrate in a verse section that adopts the dream-language of *Finnegans Wake*.

Allusions to the *Wake* recur throughout the mountaintop section of the novel as the narration slips occasionally in and out of late Joycean prose in a way that serves to illuminate the substance of Kerouac's satori. Kerouac's youthful affair with Maggie Cassidy, which formed the heart of his novel *Maggie Cassidy* (written in 1953 and published in 1958), the companion piece to *The Subterraneans*, comes to his mind on the mountain, prompting him to slip into the dream language. In this passage he lampoons his self-mythologizing and quest for essences as he imagines himself as Finnegan and Cassidy as A.L.P. Maggie's vagina, a locus of the 'essential', is referred to as her 'mine of a thing, her emerald dark and *hero* thing', and the whole episode is referred to as his 'Maggie Adventure'. (DA 29-32; my italics) Kerouac's new perspective on life as an 'inconsequential epic' in which no conclusiveness is possible gives the lie to his characterization of the Joycean mythic method, which seeks to construct a-temporal mythopoetic parallelisms out of lived experience. (DA 12) The profundity of the 'Maggie Adventure' fades into the abyss of time and mortality, as Kerouac concludes 'no new poets will bring laurels like honey to my milk'. The Joycean dream language reappears only two pages later, in an episode occasioned by the appearance of a caterpillar in Dulouz' lookout hut. He sees the caterpillar as a fellow traveler whose own experience 'upside down and clinging to his sphere', 'overtopped [...] by infinity' is no less valid than his own, prompting the observation 'we're all mad here' before once again adopting the dream language for an imagined travel itinerary once his time on the mountain is up.

The evocation of the caterpillar from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* serves two purposes. First, it calls up themes of change and transformation, particularly the changes Kerouac is himself undergoing as a result of his mountaintop pilgrimage, as

he attempts to attain satori by contemplating the vastness of the mountain and his own smallness, thus altering, like Alice, his relative 'size'. Secondly, its appearance alongside the Joycean dream language refers to a chain of influence that moves back from Kerouac to Joyce (whom he greatly admired) and thence to Carroll, himself an influence on the *Wake* of sufficient magnitude to merit multiple allusive appearances within the text. Through following this chain of influence Kerouac effectively collapses the heroic-constructive apparatus of Joyce's method into the nonsense language of Carroll's poetry and phonic wordplay, its playful nonsense more consonant with his own moment of satori. Like Alice's nonsensical rendition of 'You are old, Father William' for the caterpillar, language itself takes on the characteristics of a kōan, or Zen riddle the initiate must meditate upon not for the extraction of conclusive meaning, but rather to reach a state where he or she will be disassociated enough from the expectation of conclusivity to attain true enlightenment. Kerouac effectively substitutes Joycean constructions with the advice of the Cheshire cat to adopt a form of negative capability - to accept the mystery all around him without any reaching after fact and reason, essence, construction, or mythopoetic parallelism. While he associates the mythic-heroic language of Joyce with the 'fallen' world below him through his travelogue, he situates the nonsense of Carroll as being of the experience of the mountaintop, and true enlightenment.⁹⁷

Kerouac executes a twofold retreat from the romantic principle of apocalypticism – twofold in that his rejection pertains to both senses in which the word is used: *apocalypse* and *revelatio*. He anticipated, in *On the Road* and elsewhere, a romantic *apocalypse* - human nature transformed in a world made new; a millenarian

⁹⁷ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), ed. Gwynedd Hudson (London, 1992), pp.44-56.

refashioning of mankind with the ‘fellaheen’ and Beat Generation as its prototypes and heralds. Likewise he trumpeted the artistic and experiential quest for personal *revelatio* through ever-newer experiences. *Desolation Angels* marks the moment of his turning away from this. On Desolation Peak he considers the mountain – Edmund Burke’s example of encounter with the romantic sublime – and like Burke he contemplates ‘infinity’ – the vast scale of the mountain and the enormous length of time between its formation and ultimate destruction. Shelley’s encounter with Mont Blanc granted him revelation in the form of discernable information: the mountain has a ‘voice’, which ‘the wise, and great, and good’ - the visionary artist - can ‘Interpret’ and make known, and thereby renew the world (repealing the ‘vast codes of fraud and woe’ of religious and secular law).⁹⁸ Kerouac’s contemplation of this wellspring of romantic revelation grants him something very different. He could ‘bounce down the mountain’ in ‘perfect ignorance’, the ignorance itself being the fruit of a successful encounter. (DA 33) No new knowledge is granted to the pilgrim, and conclusiveness based on either revealed information or mental construction is rejected. If Dulouze, and Kerouac, take anything down the mountain with them it is a new willingness to accept the world as it is. ‘This is the Great Knowing,’ he tells us: ‘shut up, live travel, adventure, bless and don’t be sorry’. (DA 5) He is ‘cool with it’, in the sense of ‘accepting’ but tinged with Kerouac’s older association of cool with silence: ‘shut up’; ‘I run out of words’.

The second section of the novel ‘Desolation in the World’, deals with Dulouze/Kerouac’s difficulties preserving his enlightened calm in the frantic world outside his mountain isolation. His newfound, twofold coolness – a rejection of

⁹⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni (1816-1817)’, rpt in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, IV: *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 410-414, lines 80-84.

conclusivity and a gentle acceptance of things-as-they-are - are tested by his encounters. Neal Cassady [appearing as 'Cody'] provokes Dulouze's ire by insisting that 'god is knowable through words', i.e. through revelation, rather than, as Dulouze insists, being 'beyond words'. (DA 154-156) Soon, too, we find Dulouze imagining a world remade, in which there is 'no killing' and factories powered by atomic energy 'plop out loaves of bread and unbearably delicious chemical chops' and 'our clothes last forever, perfect plastic', and 'perfect medicine' carries us through 'anything short of death'. Kerouac's somewhat ironic tone undercuts this vision of utopia. He says of it 'it's not the golden earth that hurts us [...] it's only the golden eternity of blissful safety'. He is at once doubly wary of millennial anticipations, and, despite his best intentions, wary still of the deadening effects of cool passivity. (DA 198)

1.4.3. Zen and Cool.

Kerouac's 'cooling' through Zen meditation, though a powerful influence on him, did not retain the pitch of intensity evident in the first section of *Desolation Angels*. It presented him with a number of problems. By his own admission at the end of his notebooks on his 'Desolation Adventure' as he was tentatively calling it, he found that kind of nonlinear expression 'unsuitable' for him as a writer.⁹⁹ Secondly, he never, by his own admission, lost his 'hot' tendencies. Passionate intensity would continue to come naturally to him both in his personal habits (as he discusses in his 1959 piece for *Playboy*) and in his writing. Likewise his affinity for apocalyptic imagery continued, and the saintly figures of his 'Dharma Bums' took over many of the millenarian expectations he previously held for his 'fellaheen' as prototypical of a new humanity in the Age of Aquarius.

⁹⁹ Qtd. in Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, p.149.

Alan Watts, the maven of American Zen, would also single out Kerouac, and *Desolation Angels* in particular, as an example of a failure to attain a full understanding of Zen. True Zen, according to Watts's 1958 article 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', is characterized by 'playing it cool'. Having recognized and fully understood his own society and its limitations, the initiate 'continues to play his social role without being taken by it. He does not precipitately adopt a new role, or play the role of having no role. He plays it cool'. What Watts calls 'Beat Zen' on the other hand, is characterized by an excess of aggressiveness and rebelliousness. The 'Beat' initiate uses Zen as a prop or a pretext for 'nonparticipation in the American way of life' and/or 'caprice in art'. Kerouac's 'uneven' Zen is a prime example for Watts. With a quote from *Desolation Angels* as his smoking gun, Watts writes:

when Kerouac gives his philosophical final statement, "I don't know. I don't care. And it doesn't make any difference"-the cat is out of the bag, for there is a hostility in these words which clangs with self-defense. But just because Zen truly surpasses convention and its values, it has no need to say "To hell with it," nor to underline with violence the fact that anything goes.

On these stringent criteria, Kerouac has failed to attain the perfect cool that 'true' Zen entails. He is too committed to rebellion and nonconformity for his cool to be more than an imperfect simulacrum.¹⁰⁰

The cool that Kerouac initially ranges himself against, and, after 1953, tries, however imperfectly, to attain, represents a radical break with coolness as it had been formulated up to that point. Though he first encountered it through the African-

¹⁰⁰ Alan Watts, 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', *Chicago Review* xii.ii (1958), 3-11.

American world of cool jazz, he appears to have remained ignorant of, or unconcerned with, its history and what it might mean for his African American contemporaries. Kerouac's ideas of coolness remain firmly in the white, Anglo-American development of Romanticism and Classicism, with East-Asian influences constituting the only outside factor of any significance. Kerouac never directly conceives of his black characters' experiences of cool being in any way different from his white characters'. If anything, he is more likely, in his pre-1953 period at least, to ascribe to black characters the 'hot' characteristics of being 'vital and alive'.

This misreading, or creation *ex-nihilo* of a definition of cool and coolness, marks a departure from African American accounts, but nonetheless remains consonant with them in certain ways. Kerouac at times recognizes something in the cool attitude that equates to the cool-as-survival-mechanism. Kerouacian cool serves as emotional armour, as when he tells us that 'there is no way to put a subterranean down', and that cool hipsters are 'the most unputdownable in this world and new culture'. (*Sub* 77) It also serves as a form of emotional self-sufficiency, a veneer that Mardou uses to hide her emotional turmoil and present strength. (*Sub* 16; 29) Cool can also occasionally be seen as a possible way to sidestep systems of dominance, both before and after Kerouac's Zen turn. He anticipates this to an extent in *The Subterraneans*, with a few scattered hints. Social violence, Leo muses, could be mitigated by 'serene understanding of just what there is'. 'Hasseling [*sic*] over social problems' could be mitigated by 'willingness to live and go along'. (*Sub* 33-34)

Kerouac explores the self-protective dimension of cool more fully after his Zen turn. In *Desolation Angels* he writes that 'The Negro people will be the salvation of

America', noting how they have moved into the Cellar, a jazz bar, displacing the 'surly whites waiting [...] to start a fight', and 'Now everything is too cool for a fight'. (DA 123) On the mountain Kerouac draws a direct line of continuity between low-level bar violence and 'totalitarian cruelty', hinting that cool may represent an antidote to systems of dominance, rather than, as in the African-American model, a personal strategy for avoiding it. (DA 20) Again, this is evidence of his persistent romanticism, positioning coolness as that which, if disseminated to all, might radically change the world.

1.5. Norman Mailer, 'White Negroes' and Racial Mixing.

In his early years, as the zoot-suited 'Detroit Red', drug dealing, stealing and pimping in Harlem between 1943 and his arrest in 1946, the man who would go on to be known as Malcolm X certainly cut a cool figure. In his posthumously published *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) he writes that, during those years, he would hear how

these children threw around swear words I'd never heard before, even, and slang expressions that were just as new to me, such as "stud" and "cat" and "chick" and "cool" and "hip." Every night as I lay in bed I turned these new words over in my mind.¹⁰¹

He recalls being 'drawn by the sight of the cool-looking "cats" who 'conked' their hair, that is, who had their hair painfully straightened with pure corrosive lye to make it look more like the un-kinked hair of white people. Cool, for X, meant, in those early days, the conventional 'staying beneath the radar of the dominant culture', and applied to those hip youths who tried to make themselves appear more white. The

¹⁰¹ Malcolm X, with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, 1965), p.44.

‘cool cats’ were those who aspired to the adoption of the exterior trappings of whiteness, to dating white women, to appropriating whiteness.

This specifically racial aspect of coolness, we can infer, is one of the features of black urban culture Malcolm X would roundly reject as inimical to African-American dignity and autonomy, underwritten as it is by an aspiration to the passé trappings of whiteness and a denigration of black identity. Although it runs very much counter to Amiri Baraka’s construction of coolness and the cool jazz scene, which he takes as a space of black expression set apart from the demands of the white marketplace and white aesthetic standards. Malcolm X’s *Autobiography* touches upon a recurring feature of the racial negotiations that center around cool – the concept of racial mixing.

Cool deportment, and the early exclusivity that characterized the ‘insider’ use of the term, casts the user in a certain relation to society, and in a certain relationship to other cognoscenti. The adoption by the early white hipsters and Beats of cool (both the term and the deportment it implied) bespeaks an asserted commonality, an affinity, and even sympathy based upon comparable social positioning (whether or not we, the reader, accept the comparison). This claimed affinity is consistently undercut by the imbalance between its black and white users – an imbalance both of social status and of expectation - what one group wants from identification with the other. The imbalance is exacerbated by the implications of the racial rhetoric that has surrounded cool since its first adoption by the white hipsters.

Kerouac suggests, in *The Subterraneans*, that cool Beatdom represents a blurring of racial boundaries. In performing coolness-as-intellectual detachment, it is Mardou who is crossing the lines of racial expectations and appearing to Leo to possess 'white' characteristics of emotional distance and a preference for 'intellectual types'. (Sub 7) Kerouac consistently portrays the African-American Mardou Fox as a special locus of coolness. The coolness she represents adheres to her as a result of the attributes she possesses that most identify her as a 'white' black. Her coolness manifests as 'distaste for involvement', and a detached, intellectual attitude he likens to that of a 'Viennese philosopher'. (Sub 10; 50) She is 'part Berkeley', 'part Negro highclass', 'a mixture of *langue* and style of talking and use of words I'd never heard before except in certain girls and of course *white*'. (Sub 7) Her 'mixed' deportment puts her at odds with Kerouac's own habitual conception of blackness – 'vital, alive like a Negro', engaging in 'the great JOY of being' rather than intellectual 'cause-and-effect analysis'. (Sub 70; 58) This crossing of racial boundaries from the 'joyful' and 'enthusiastic' black to the self-contained and intellectual white is seen as a peculiar symptom of the younger 'bop generation' ('bop' being a shortened form of 'bebop').

Kerouac's treatment of Mardou's apparent 'whiteness' marks a significant reversal of contemporary white views on hipsterism, namely that it represented, among white hipsters, the taking on of black characteristics, a view perhaps best (and most objectionably) most expressed by Norman Mailer's 1957 essay in *Dissent*, 'The White Negro'. '[T]his particular part of a generation was attracted to what the Negro had to offer', Mailer tells us, 'In such places as Greenwich Village ... the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster was a

fact in American life'. (WN 285) In this meeting, the white hipster, according to Mailer, receives two distinct boons in the form of a readymade model of nonconformity; a way of avoiding the 'slow death' of creativity in the 'square cell' of mainstream American life.

Mailer is in agreement with Holmes' and others' contentions that white hipsterism came about as a reaction to the fallout from the Second World War, and that it found in 'the negro' a ready-made model for social disengagement and scepticism of authority. 'The Negro' Mailer writes, has been 'living on the margin between democracy and totalitarianism for two centuries', and the defining feature of that experience was constant vigilance and the constant threat of force. He tells us that the negro 'could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization', and so had maintained for survival 'the art of the primitive,' living in the enormous present, 'for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body'. (WN 285-286) These 'kicks' are the second boon that the white hipster receives – a model of existence, as Mailer formulates it, which defines immediate and powerful experience as the highest good. Mailer, in this way, expresses a similar view of African Americans as Kerouac would in *On the Road*, published a few months after Mailer's essay:

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. (*OtR* 105)

Mailer's and Kerouac's prose intersects in a number of ways. Mailer also refers to this frame of mind as a 'burning consciousness of the present, [an] incandescent

consciousness', and holds this 'burning' to be the ultimate aim of both hipster and Negro. (WN 287) Mailer's depiction of African-American 'nature' also focuses on the pursuit of immediate pleasure, but (unlike Kerouac) proceeds to construct the essential nature of African-Americans as a form of 'psychopathy', sharing with the psychopath an inability to delay gratification, even, he suggests, to the point of rape. (WN 288-289)

Recurring throughout Mailer's essay is the image of this cultural-racial exchange as a sexual union, referred to as it is, variously as a '*ménage à trois*' and a 'marriage'. (WN 285-286) Likewise, the 'kicks' that make up the ultimate aim of both black and white Negroes, find their ultimate expression in the orgasm. Both Mailer's Negro¹⁰² and Mailer's essay are preoccupied with the achievement of orgasm: 'Jazz is orgasm' and the ultimate aim of the pleasure-seeker is 'an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one that preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy'. (WN 285; 291-292) Like Reich's 'orgone' (which itself merits a mention in 'The White Negro'), kicks-as-orgasm form the basis of the sexual energy that informs the hipster's revolt (ultimately, a 'sexual revolt') as it does the Negro's way of life. The power of sexual revolt is also, in Mailer's model, encoded into the language use of African Americans and hipsters. The jive argot is held to stand for and describe a system of energy conservation and expenditure by which both groups operate, with the expenditure of energy on kicks being the highest good, motion always preferable to inaction, and the conservation of energy between kicks a carefully controlled necessity, as Negroes do 'not have the protection of a position or a class to rely on when they have overexerted themselves'. (WN 293-294)

¹⁰² In what follows I shall use the term 'Negro' to refer to Mailer's construction, his phantasm of essentialized black masculinity. I use the term 'African-American' to refer, conversely, to actual people.

Mailer's account of the hip lexicon as a system pertaining almost exclusively to degrees of success or failure in the ratio of energy expended to psychosexual (or merely sexual) gratification attained stumbles somewhat in his explanation for the prevalence of 'cool' within that argot. Sparsely mentioned throughout the essay, a sudden concentration of incidental mentions ('hipster' glossed as 'cool cat') apparently forces Mailer to attempt to integrate cool into his theory in an unconvincing aside, in which to be cool is defined as being 'in control of a situation because you have swung where the square has not, or because you have allowed to come to consciousness a pain, a guilt, a shame or a desire which the other has not had the courage to face'. (WN 296)

The emphasis on deadened affect rather works against Mailer's thesis of hipsters (and, by extension, black people) as simple, enthusiastic celebrants of the orgiastic. His highly idiosyncratic formulation of coolness as the product of hard-won knowledge of uncomfortable inner truths seems to have little to do with his own theory of hip-speak as energy expenditure metaphor, a fact mitigated only by his caveat that hip language is born of contradiction to such a high degree that it can never be fully explained, so bound up is it in immediate subjectivity as to be 'unteachable'. (WN 297) While Mailer's 'cool' does have some congruency with Baraka's model of coolness-as-survival-strategy – an emotional flatness resulting from the acceptance of uncomfortable truths (Mailer's consciousness of pain or guilt substituting for Baraka's 'horror' at an uncaring society), and an awareness of individual self-sufficiency and an absence of societal help, it remains a somewhat awkward addition to Mailer's putative hip dictionary. 'Cool' is little more than an addendum, just as

coolness as a stance, with its heavy connotations of self-control, fits uncomfortably with his conception of the Negro as a primitive entity driven by intensely urgent and seldom restrained desires. It sits uncomfortably in opposition to Baraka's assertion that the perseverance of cool is explained by the fact that, given his position at the bottom of society, no African-American had any need, ever, to 'hurry'. (BP 213)

At the bedrock of Mailer's conception of the Negro is the idea of his essential nature (and it is, invariably, to Mailer's mind, *his*) as a sexual, even hypersexual being. James Baldwin, upon meeting Mailer in Paris in 1957, observed with dismay that Mailer accepted 'the myth of the sexuality of Negroes'.¹⁰³ Indeed, this myth runs through much of Mailer's writing on racial matters. In an article earlier that same year, he states that, while, whites have white political supremacy, blacks have 'sexual supremacy'.¹⁰⁴ Black sexual pre-eminence is construed as a consequence of their primitivism, and in contrast to white sexual impotency, which arises from the repressive effects of the civilizing process. (WN 284) While Mailer attempts to justify his apparent salaciousness by grounding his claims in Marxist critique, contending that monogamy, the very thing which the negro way of life threatens, forms the basis for property and inheritance, his characterization of black masculinity as sexual psychopathy remains, in and of itself, the racist foundation of much of his argument. (WN 306) This racism places Mailer in the same argumentative territory as contemporary anti-integrationists who held that the fear of miscegenation was the ultimate argument against the desegregation of Southern U.S. society. Mailer contests that 'they are right', but he pursues the same argument, i.e. that the real issue 'is not

¹⁰³ Qtd. in Michael J. Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (London, 2013), p.209.

¹⁰⁴ Norman Mailer, Introduction 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster', *Advertisements for Myself* (London, 1961), p.278.

desegregation but miscegenation', holding that he supports the 'absolute human right of the Negro to mate with the white'. (WN 301)

The sexual language Mailer employs is significant, too, in that it participates in the ongoing subtext of racial mixing that underlies discussions of cool in this period. In keeping with Mailer's preoccupation with miscegenation, the hipster is the product of just such a sexual encounter. Throughout 'The White Negro', the mixing of black and white culture is a 'marriage', the hipster is the 'child' that results from this 'sexual union'. The title itself carries overtones of race-mixing and its pursuant moral panic. 'White Negro' is a phrase with its origins in the antebellum Southern U.S. states. The so-called 'one drop rule', a legal principal of racial classification, disqualified anyone from the privileged category of whiteness for having any single discoverable black ancestor. A 'white negro' was one who may outwardly appear white, but was nonetheless thought to be 'corrupted' with hidden black ancestry.

Mailer, in expressing views rooted in the same essentialist moralizing as the most alarmist writers of his day about racial mixing, sees the rise of the white hipster as a form of cultural miscegenation, clothing it as he does in the language of marriage and sexual union.

1.5.1. Mailer, Hemingway, and Essentialism.

More or less immediately after its publication, 'The White Negro' attracted criticism. Ned Polsky noted, in an exchange with Mailer in *Dissent* shortly afterward, that Mailer has treated African Americans not as full and complete human beings, but rather as messiahs. 'Even in the world of the hipster', he laments,

the Negro remains essentially what Ralph Ellison called him – an invisible man.

The White Negro accepts the real Negro not as a human being [...] but as the bringer of a highly specified and restricted ‘cultural dowry’, to use Mailer’s phrase. In doing so he creates an inverted form of keeping the nigger in his place.¹⁰⁵

More recent critics have continued this line of interrogation, arguing that, for all it says about the motivations of white hipsters, ‘The White Negro’ grossly essentializes blackness and black masculinity. As indeed it does. Mailer’s essentialized Black Negro, associated as he is with the libidinal and living for the moment, disbelieving in the single mate and familial responsibility, is constructed against the disciplined white male of the middle class. Douglas Taylor observes that ‘The essentialized Negro that serves as the model for this [Mailer’s] mimetic white masculinity is clearly a phantasm, the projection of those desires that cannot be encompassed within the boundaries of white-maleness, and therefore get repressed’.¹⁰⁶ ‘The White Negro’, he writes, ‘tells us more about the repressed fantasies of white men than it does about what it means to be black’.¹⁰⁷

While Mailer illustrates to white men the positive possibilities for redemption from inauthenticity inherent (so he thought) in blackness, it is a one-sided redemption serving white and not black Americans.¹⁰⁸ It was offered by Mailer at a time of vast expansion of white-collar employment; the bourgeoisification of the U.S. working class. The new positions, overwhelmingly occupied by white people, brought their

¹⁰⁵ Norman Mailer, Jean Malquais and Ned Polsky, ‘Reflections on Hip’, *Advertisements for Myself* (London, 1961), p.313.

¹⁰⁶ Douglas Taylor, ‘Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors: James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Eldridge Cleaver on Race and Masculinity’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* lii.i (2010), 70-101. (76).

¹⁰⁷ Taylor, ‘Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors’, p.70.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor, ‘Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors’, p.71.

occupants into the middle class. This entailed an imagined casting-off and denigration of those attributes, dirt, physicality, labour, spontaneity and sexuality, which they believed to indicate their low origins, and attendant loss of authenticity that led Mailer to turn to negritude as a means of restoring vitality.¹⁰⁹ The cultural ‘marriage’ if we can call it such, of whiteness and negritude can also be seen to be the site of a more complex interchange. For instance, like the peculiar ‘whiteness’ Leo Percepied sees in Mardou, Baraka holds that one of the features of black coolness is the appropriation of white, sophisticated elements of dress, specifically the trappings of continental intellectualism (goatees, horn-rim glasses, berets) as a move to gain ‘cultural fluency with some of the canons of Western conformity’, a tradition dating back to the Zoot suit of the 1930s and 40s, itself a willful flouting of wartime austerity and a denial of the deprivation African-Americans were socialized to expect. (BP 210)

As well as promoting the sexual myth, Mailer can be seen to be forcing the African-American, and his hipster imitator, into another frame of reference, one he takes from his great influence, Hemingway. Hemingway exerted tremendous influence over Mailer not only stylistically but in his philosophy. This philosophy permeates ‘The White Negro’. ‘The viable philosophy of Hemingway’, Mailer tells us, ‘fits most of their [hipsters’] facts’:

in a bad world there is no love nor mercy, nor charity nor justice unless a man can keep his courage, and this indeed fitted some of the facts. What fitted the need of the adventurer [Beatnik] even more precisely was Hemingway’s categorical imperative that what made him feel good came therefore The Good. (WN 284)

¹⁰⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (Boston MA, 1991); and Taylor, ‘Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors’, p.72

Hemingway's egoistic existentialism constructed an opposition between overcrowded, industrialized America and the 'primitive' traditional cultures of Europe in which bravery, courage, and honour still had significant meaning for the individual. Both courage and *aficion*, or passion, became central themes in Hemingway's myth of the bullfighter, which found its fullest exploration in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) in which he portrays the enactment of a primitive character lost to America, and who can only flourish under the threat, and acceptance, of imminent death, thus producing a vitality of spirit. Mailer's negritude is, above all, a transposition of these virtues from the matador to the African American living in the shadow of a hostile and all-powerful society, and who can thus experience what pleasures he has access to only in the knowledge of his proximity to death. What has been called Hemingway's 'philosophy of life in the lap of death', or his 'code' of concentration upon individual experience, mixes, in Mailer's essay, with an anticipation of Kerouac's prose. A celebration of the 'burning' beat 'saint' mingles with Hemingway's idealized 'code heroes' as Mailer compares the American outsider, whether black or white hipster, to 'the existentialist. And the psychopath. And the saint and the bullfighter and the lover. The common denominator for them is their burning consciousness of the present, exactly that incandescent consciousness which the possibilities within death has opened for them'.¹¹⁰

Certainly, the Kerouac of *On the Road* is in agreement with much of what Mailer sees in the hipster. Kerouac sees in African-Americans a primitive form of experience rooted in a physicality he admires in himself. But this imagined redemption offered

¹¹⁰ J'amie L. Sanders, *The Art of Existentialism: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer and the American Existential Tradition*, University of South Florida, Graduate Thesis, 2007. online: scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3349&context=etd, pp.165-69; and Mailer, 'The White Negro', p.287.

by black masculinity to the white hipster through ‘dirt, physicality, and labour’, takes no regard of the often contradictory aims of black coolness – intellectuality, sophistication and expropriation of the trappings of a society that denies them entry; all the things Leo finds ‘white’ about Mardou in *The Subterraneans*. Unlike Mailer’s Hemingway-inspired vision of African Americans, the White Negro does not by necessity live under the threat of death. The white hipster, as Baraka is quick to point out, is fundamentally distinct from the black in that he may reintegrate with white society at any given time, thus only adopting coolness as a performance and not a necessity. (BP 188) By this criterion, too, the black hipster or cool cat would fail the test Alan Watts lays out to assess ‘true’ cool – the African American cannot ‘fully integrate with society’ in that he is barred from much of it. He cannot ‘make peace’ with a social situation that is intrinsically hostile to him, and his cool is predicated on a marginal and unstable position in contrast to Watts’s position of stability.

1.6. ‘An Outsider among Outsiders’ – Baraka on Misappropriated Coolness.

In answer to the repeated misappropriations of cool by white authors, Amiri Baraka addresses the white Beats directly in two poems - ‘One Night Stand’ which is addressed to Allen Ginsberg, and in ‘Way Out West’, addressed to Gary Snyder, both appearing in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961). ‘One Night Stand’ begins with the high fervour of the Beat vanguard: ‘We entered the city at noon! High bells. The radio on’, recalling the passionate burning of Kerouac as much as it does the ecstasies of Ginsberg in its tone and mood.¹¹¹ It proceeds from there in tercets of approximately the same line length corresponding to Ginsberg’s breath units, with the

¹¹¹ A. Robert Lee, *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics* (New York, 2010), p.30, and Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones), ‘One Night Stand’, *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* (New York, 1961), pp.21-22.

line-ends acting as ‘breathing points’ – the end of a sentence or clause falling at the end or midpoint of a line.¹¹² This puts the poem firmly in the mode of the Beats, and makes it all the more significant, when it breaks down at its end:

We [the new poets] *are* foreign seeming persons. Hats flopped so the sun
can’t scald our beards; odd shoes, bags of books & chicken.

We have come a long way, & are uncertain which of the masks

is cool.

The new poets, these ‘foreign seeming persons’, self-made outsiders, are naïve, mere actors, ‘tilting their hat to avoid the sun and gingerly missing/ the dried branch I had put there yesterday’.¹¹³ When the breath lengths shortens dramatically with the final line, ‘is cool’ is left exposed, alone and bare, highlighting the ultimate emptiness of what these mildly risible people are searching for. The poet, Baraka is saying, is still evolving, as what ‘is cool’ is no more fulfilling to Baraka’s narrator than the images of “Bessie Smith” and “Nat Cole” in ‘Way Out West’.¹¹⁴

The twin motifs of artifice and cultural displacement run through the poems, Baraka distancing and contrasting indigenous African American poetry to images of white Beat luxury with ‘olives and green buds’ against ‘Twisted albion-horns’ of the ‘black bond servants dazed and out of their wool heads.’¹¹⁵ As Marlon B. Ross has written, Baraka ‘as a lower-class black man among upscale, slumming white beatniks’ could only identify with Beats ‘to a point’, after which he feels compelled to express a

¹¹² Sara deFord and Clarinda Harriss Lott, *Forms of Verse* (New York, 1971), p.300

¹¹³ Maurice A. Lee, *The Aesthetics of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka: The Rebel Poet*, (Valencia, 2004), p.55.

¹¹⁴ Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones), ‘Way Out West’, *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* (New York, 1961), pp.24-25.

¹¹⁵ Stephanie S. Morgan, ‘Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note’ *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature* ed. Kurt Hemmer, (New York, 2007), pp.264-296.

tension between the two, a point he reaches with these poems. That tension marks out the pursuit of cool as decadent and ultimately ineffectual, leading to the spiritual decay which concludes 'Way Out West': 'no use for beauty/ collapsed and mouldy breath/ done in. Insidious weight/ of cankered dreams. Tiresias'/ wethered cock'.¹¹⁶ The one night stand of the title evokes the impermanence of what Mailer hailed as a 'marriage' between black and white bohemians, identifying it instead as a brief union that, while it may be pleasurable, is not the basis for a firm and lasting relationship.

Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note confirmed Baraka's shift away from the Beats, begun a year previously when he lambasted 'the rebels among us,' who, he says 'have become merely people like myself who grow beards and [do] not participate in politics'.¹¹⁷ His early enthusiasm for the Beats manifested as an enthusiasm for generational self-identification, but his broad identification as a 'Beat' writer, which, as he recalls in his 1983 *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, he regarded as a provisional alliance borne out of critical convenience. As a black man among self-made 'stomptdown bohemians', he was, 'as Wright's novel asserted an *outsider* (To some extent, even in those "outsider" circles)'.¹¹⁸

1.7. The Existential Connection.

Along with 'the white negro', Mailer bestows another title on the hipster. He calls him 'the American existentialist'. (WN 2) In *The Subterraneans*, Jack Kerouac can speak of the coolness of the Subterraneans themselves as 'American cool existentialism'. (Sub 29) Although its pedigree belongs primarily to European philosophy of the nineteenth century, existentialism was popularized under the aegis

¹¹⁶ Marlon B. Ross, 'Camping the Dirty Dozens', *Callaloo* xxiii.i (2000), p.296.

¹¹⁷ Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones), 'Cuba Libre', *Evergreen Review*, iv.xv (1960), 346-353.

¹¹⁸ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago, 1983), p.230.

of Sartre after the Second World War among the educated students and artists of America as much as Paris. I argue that the connections between the Harlem Hipsters and Left-Bank Bohemians led to a somewhat unconvincing conflation of the cool attitude, and its stance toward authority, with existential commitment. In this way, misreadings of African-American cool, and awkward attempts to square it away with Eurocentric literary and philosophical frameworks can be seen to extend to both sides of the Atlantic.

Paris and New York enjoyed a rich intellectual exchange in the years following the Second World War. And, as so often in the early history of cool, jazz provided the catalyst. The French actor and singer, Juliette Greco, a member of the circle of artists and intellectuals surrounding Sartre, would later recall of the French attitude towards jazz in the postwar years:

Like every young person of my generation, I immersed myself in jazz. I met the greatest musicians - Charlie Parker, the Modern Jazz Quartet, most often at the Club Saint-Germain with Sacha Distel, and Dizzy Gillespie when he came to Tabou. All that happened over the space of two or three years, a mythical period that today feels as though it lasted 20 years. They arrived after the war, we welcomed them, we listened to them fervently, we loved them, and in a way they transformed our ideas about what jazz was - what we already knew, we'd picked up almost by accident. During the Occupation, if you tried to listen to jazz, you risked punishment. So we listened to The Lambeth Walk - for us, the ultimate trip.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Juliette Greco, 'Sartre asked Miles Davis why we weren't married. He said he loved me too much to make me unhappy', *The Guardian* 25 May 2006. www.theguardian.com/music/2006/may/25/jazz. Last accessed: 15 March 2015.

Greco and Miles Davis were to have a long and passionate love affair. The fact that French intellectuals paid serious attention to American jazz before the mainstream of American media did was something approaching a matter of national pride in some French intellectual circles. Hughes Parnassie wrote the first serious history of Jazz in 1934, and the popular journal *Jazz Hot* published its first issues in Paris a year later. The inaugural issue of the magazine published after the end of the war declared that: 'Everyone knows that jazz was born in the U.S. But its right to distinction was recognized in Europe. Long before the Yankees realized its interest, intellectuals of the Old Continent became interested in this new music'.¹²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre's journal *Les Temps Modernes* also published frequent articles on jazz. Simone de Beauvoir travelled in America in 1947, and wrote in *L'Amerique au jour le jour* (1948) that: 'It is quite clear that white Americans understand jazz less and less. They do not make it their daily fodder as I thought'. Recalling her visit to a New Orleans jazz club, Beauvoir observes of the spectators that 'They toy with jazz and scorn it from the height of their white man's dignity where they are well-established financially and morally. Great lords of the past trifled with clowns and historians with a similar arrogance'.¹²¹

The popularity of jazz among intellectuals of the French postwar left may have been more than purely aesthetic. David Strauss, writing in the *American Quarterly* in 1965, and Nina Kressner Cobb in a 1979 article in *Phylon* both make the case that the affinity felt by the French for jazz and jazz musicians was political in origin.¹²²

'Despite the apolitical nature of the music', writes Strauss, 'there is much evidence to

¹²⁰ *Jazz Hot*, Oct. 1945, p.2

¹²¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *L'Amerique au jour le jour* (Paris, 1954), p.223.

¹²² Nina Kressner Cobb, 'Richard Wright: Exile and Existentialism', *Phylon* xl.iv (1979), 362-374; and David Strauss, 'French Critics and American Jazz', *American Quarterly* xvii.iii (1965), 582-587.

suggest that interest in the music is simply one manifestation of concern with the Negro problem', while Kressner Cobb argues that:

French fascination with Negroes had its roots in the early twentieth century; but after World War II, it took on political significance. Resurgent interest in Negro Americans was part of a growing anti-Americanism that accompanied the expansion of American hegemony. America's growing cultural influence in France aroused fears of Americanization [...] The Negro problem in the United States was also powerful ammunition for the French Left in its battle against America's political influence in France. The Existentialists centered around Sartre's influential journal *Les Temps Modernes* were a case in point.¹²³

Jazz Hot justified publishing a review of *Black Bourgeoise* by Franklin Frazier (1957) on the grounds that 'Although the book does not deal with negro music (to which it makes allusion from time to time) it is worth the attention of all those who have become interested in conditions of Negro life through the music'.¹²⁴ It is not altogether surprising that a second review of the same book appears in *Les Temps Modernes*. Also, in another article from *Jazz Hot*, February 1959, entitled 'From existentialism on 1948 to Hard Bop in 1959, the St. Germain-des-Pres Club is always in the avant-garde,' the reporter contends that jazz was simply the latest and most intense among left-wing fads.¹²⁵ Kressner Cobb sees this as evidence that:

The same crowd which adopted Sartre's philosophy had simply moved on to embrace jazz as a left-wing movement. Granting the truth of this observation, it seems strange that a simple, non-political music should exert such a systematic power of attraction on a highly sophisticated left-wing group in a foreign country [...] For many French jazz fans, then, the music is inevitably but an

¹²³ Kressner Cobb, 'Richard Wright', p.363.

¹²⁴ *Jazz Hot*, Feb.1956, p.42

¹²⁵ *Jazz Hot*, Feb. 1959, p.32.

aspect of larger questions of a political and social nature. Jazz is defined as Negro-American music, and as such is an instrument for left-wing denunciation of poverty, race prejudice and exploitation by the ruling class [...] In contrast, he [the French Jazz critic] provides his own audience, generally of left-wing sentiments, with assurance of their virtue in upholding good music, the poor and the exploited – all neglected in America. In this sense, the jazz critic is less a student of Negro-American music than an agent for promoting French nationalism of the left.¹²⁶

The novelists Richard Wright and Chester Himes (author of, among others, *The Real Cool Killers* in 1958) were among the émigrés from Harlem who settled in Paris and found friends and collaborators in existentialist circles. Wright and Sartre worked together on several political ventures. In 1947, Wright joined Sartre, Camus, André Gide, Emmanuel Mounier, Leopold Senghor, and several others to help Alioune Diop found the journal *Présence Africaine*, which provided a platform for ideas regarding Black Nationalism, though Wright would later withdraw over personal objections to the overtly militant stance. Sartre also championed Wright in his 1947 essay ‘What is Literature?’ where he holds Wright up as an example of a committed writer.¹²⁷

So, clearly, there was a cultural exchange, and a deep sense of affinity between the Parisian existentialist and the Harlem cool sets. And in their political and cultural solidarity with African American subculture, Sartre and his circle might be classed, according to Mailer’s classification, as White Negroes. But can Mailer’s American

¹²⁶ Kressner Cobb, ‘Richard Wright’, p.587.

¹²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘What is Literature?’ “*What is Literature*” and *Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), pp.21-247.

White Negroes be classed as existentialists? And, if so, what form did their existentialism take?

Mailer is not the only commentator to posit an existentialist dimension to the hipsters. Eugene Burdick, writing in *The Western Political Quarterly* in June 1959, observes that the hipster ethos is ‘remarkably consonant with the main stream of existentialism’.¹²⁸ Burdick outlines two points of commonality:

First, [the] suspicion that science or pure rationality or logical structure does not exhaust the whole range of reality or meaningful experience. The hipster points out, often with glee, that the scientist manages to say things in language which is impeccable but which violates common sense. Like Maritain, the hipster believes that reason can become a form of totalitarianism as well as a form of obscurantism.¹²⁹

The second point of connection, according to Burdick, is the ‘concern with anxiety’. Anxiety, or German *Angst*, is a specialized term within existentialism that comes to us through Heidegger. While this word has generally been translated as ‘anxiety’ in the post-Freudian psychoanalytic literature, it appears as ‘dread’ in translations of Kierkegaard and in a number of discussions of Heidegger. In some ways ‘uneasiness’ or ‘malaise’ would be more appropriate still.¹³⁰ Burdick writes that, when talking of anxiety, hipsters are likely

to quote Nietzsche, who, they argue, had an awful prescience about the rottenness of Western civilization. This rottenness consists of the dehumanization of modern man by the inhuman growth of institutions, the

¹²⁸ Eugene Burdick ‘The Politics of the Beat Generation’, *The Western Political Quarterly* xii.ii (1959), 554-556, (554).

¹²⁹ Burdick ‘Politics of the Beat Generation’, p.554.

¹³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans: John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, 1962), p.227, footnote.1.

pressures for external conformity and a collective refusal to examine the self.

The hipster believes that the organization and institutions of our society have, beneath their confection-like façade, killing and senseless muscles. With unfailing precision these institutions ask an identical price for admission: the self. Modern man, dimly aware of the price he has paid, is racked with anxiety, but seldom has the courage to do what is necessary.¹³¹

The Hipster answer is to ‘disaffiliate’ from these institutions.

This means that he withdraws from the senseless organizations of orthodox society, whether these be social parties or corporations. He is convinced that all such institutions are dominated by the same mentality, whether the person on the top be labeled a commissar or vice-president. The hipster is determined to live on the safe margins of society, taking whatever jobs he can, making no firm commitment to any organization.¹³²

In this disaffiliation can be seen the claim of the cool stance to affinity with existentialism. Burdick points out that ‘For the serious hipster, disaffiliation is first a protective gesture, but it also leads to a second phase. This is the cultivation of self. Distrusting all ‘translations of experience’ and all administered experience, the hipster plays it cool and digs only those things which interest him personally’.¹³³ The existential core of hipster cool, then, is authenticity.

Authenticity has long been a weighty philosophical concept whose early serious theorists were Rousseau and the Romantics. But it holds a place of special significance, as well as a specialized formulation, within the existential tradition. It differs from the more common usage of the word in the tradition of, for example,

¹³¹ Burdick ‘Politics of the Beat Generation’, p.554.

¹³² Burdick ‘Politics of the Beat Generation’, p.554.

¹³³ Burdick, ‘Politics of the Beat Generation’, p.554.

Trilling, who takes it to stand for a collapsing, or annihilation, of any discrepancy between inner state and outward show. In these terms, cool, as stifled rage, is inherently inauthentic. But in the existential lexicon, ‘authenticity’ can be taken to refer to a more purely interior state that cleaves to the realization of the individual’s own uniqueness and freedom.

For Kierkegaard, the authentic self was the personally *chosen* self, as opposed to public or ‘herd’ identity. This opposition of the genuine individual to the public or ‘the herd’ was taken up by Nietzsche fifty years later, and both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche influenced Martin Heidegger, whose concept of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) came to dominate contemporary and later existentialist thought. Sartre used what Theodor Adorno later scathingly called ‘the jargon of authenticity’ in his conception of ‘bad faith’ (*mauvaise foi*), which was based on Heidegger’s notion of inauthenticity. In all these versions, authenticity has at its core the idea of personal freedom. Heidegger’s authentic person is one who faces his own mortality, and in doing so rises from the concerns of the moment to the inner realization of his personhood. Contrasted with the authentic mode of existence for Heidegger is *Verfallen*, or fallen existence, where, through constantly dwelling in everyday quotidian concerns, the freedom of the individual becomes dissipated in what Heidegger calls *das Man*, or the ‘they’, which is the anonymous mass of society and received convention. For Sartre, meanwhile, authenticity is achieved not in facing death so much as in facing the meaningless ground of its own transcendence, or the realization that the values that govern the self depend not on divine fiat or metaphysical necessity but on oneself alone.

As with Heidegger's *Verfallen*, Sartre's *mauvaise foi* is the enslavement of the self to what it perceives as an objective truth. The anxiety that has been ascribed to the hipster is a product of the struggle, in which one can succeed or fail, to achieve authenticity. It is anxiety which provides the motivation, and impels the action, in the great classics of cool hipster literature, driving the disengagement of a Holden Caulfield from the institutions of *das Man*, or of Kerouac's characters from the society of the city, or of Burroughs' protagonists in pursuit of ever more the perilously extreme flirtations with their own mortality. Sartre's championing of Wright can perhaps be better understood if viewed through this lens. Passages from *The Outsider* can be seen as a wholesale examination of existential concepts in action:

Others took their lives for granted; he, he would have to mold his with a conscious aim. Why not? Was he not free to do so? That all men were free was the fondest and deepest conviction of his life. And this acting upon this wild plan would be but an expression of his perfect freedom. (*Out* 87)

Cross here embodies the Sartrean principle of the existentially free man, self determining, his existence preceding his essence. His shedding of the ties of family, friends, religion, morality and the power of the past represent a shedding of all ties to the Heideggerian *das Man*, and, thus freed, he will embark on a project of self-actualization detached from the constraints of received truth. He says he knew he

had to discover good and evil through his own actions, which were more exciting than the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have. For there was no grace or mercy if he failed. (*Out* 123)

This identifies one of the most important and historically consistent elements to cool: detachment, or suspicion. In a later academic jargon this aspect of cool deportment might be called ‘hostility towards metanarratives’. It involves an aloofness and a suspicion directed towards all institutions, politics and conventional or totalizing modes of life. In New York, Cross came across the American communist party. The communists fascinated him, but he observed them in a cynical, detached fashion. The essence of the Communist Party, as Cross saw it, was open lawlessness; its humanitarian rhetoric was nothing more than a cloak, disguising a brutal power struggle. Power was more than a political concept when the communists employed it; it was psychological, ‘widely directed upon the lives and bodies of others through the use of fear’. (*Out* 199)

Wright came to see communism in the same light as fascism, though he had long believed that both ideologies answered similar psychological needs. (*Out* 364) Wright wrote that both ideologies fulfilled ‘a wild and intense longing [...] to belong, or to be identified to feel that they were alive as other people were, to be caught up forgetfully and exultingly, by the swing of events...’¹³⁴ ‘Nonetheless, the result was the same’, Wright wrote to Dorothy Norman: ‘suppression of the individual, the devastation of the personality, and preachments against what they call ‘subjectivity’...’.¹³⁵ Wright has Cross reject both the extreme left and the extreme right. Burdick observes: ‘A number of the hipsters either began as self-conscious anarchists or have evolved in that direction. *There is a great suspicion of formal institutions and of government*’.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Richard Wright, Introduction, *Native Son* (New York, 1966), p.xiv.

¹³⁵ Richard Wright: ‘Two letters to Dorothy Norman’, *Art and Action, A Book of Literature, the Arts, and Civil Liberties* ed. Dorothy Norman, (New York, 1948), p.70. (Letter dated 9 March 1948).

¹³⁶ Burdick, ‘Politics of the Beat Generation’, p.555. (my italics).

And in the years following the Second World War, Mailer argues, with the imagination battered by the twin assaults of the death camps and the atomic bomb, there was no shortage of reasons to be suspicious. Mailer explicitly and illuminatingly draws a connection between the traumas of the war on the collective psyche of humanity and the emergence of the hipster. 'The Second World War', he wrote in 'The White Negro', 'presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it. For him the hipster was 'the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war [...] or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled'. (WN 277) This is Mailer's answer as to why white, middle class youths adopted the African American as their model: because 'if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature? In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his own body where he could'. (WN 278)

This was to be the hipster's model of existence because African Americans had been forced by necessity to live as far as possible the kind of authentic existence the white middle classes now saw as desirable, necessary and moral, that of the outsider, the one who, through his distanced perspective, could see through the illusions and snares of society, as if in answer to the wonderings of Cross: 'Weren't there somewhere in this world rebels with whom one could feel at home, men who were outsiders not because they had been born black and poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusions?' (*Out* 28) Or, as Mailer put it: 'A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure

of nerve. The only courage, with rare exceptions, that we have been witness to, has been the isolated courage of isolated people'. (WN 281)

In all these ways, by virtue of its suspicion of 'pure rationality', its unease, its disaffiliation from institutions, its preoccupation with authenticity, cool can be seen as an existential stance. But with one important caveat: its existentialism only extends to the position of disengagement. In the existential tradition, particularly in Heidegger and the Camus of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), there is a next stage to the process of becoming authentic that comes after anxiety and disengagement, and this stage is *care*. Care, for Heidegger, is the state of commitment that results most intimately from anxiety. 'Anxiety discloses an insignificance of the world; and this insignificance reveals the nullity of that with which one can concern oneself', he writes.¹³⁷ The revelation of this possibility throws one into a state of 'uncanniness', that is, alertness to the horrifying contingency of one's own existence. But it is through this state that the individual realizes 'the possibility of an authentic potentiality-for-Being – a potentiality which must, in repeating, come back to its thrown "there", but come back as something future which comes towards [zukünftiges]'.¹³⁸ This form of anxiety 'individualizes' the self as something 'that understands, projects itself essentially upon possibilities. Therefore, with that which it is anxious about, anxiety discloses Dasein as *being possible*'.¹³⁹

For Heidegger, anxiety has a positive outcome – care and commitment, an orientation of oneself outwards, positively to the world, rather than exclusively inwardly in the navel-gazing contemplation of one's own uncanniness. Camus re-defined this care as

¹³⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp.393-394; H343.

¹³⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp.393-394; H343.

¹³⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.232; H187-187-188.

the ‘revolt’ and ‘love’ with which we fill the emptiness of the universe in the face of its meaninglessness.¹⁴⁰ Care represents the power and commitment necessary to reshape society, once sufficient self-knowledge is gained. The literary hipster characters of the ‘long nineteen fifties’ seem to fail to make it to the stage of care. The closest approximation is the Invisible Man, who, at the climax of the novel, intervenes, killing Ras, symbolically closing his mouth with a spear to stop him preaching totalizing political visions of violence. And yet, after that he does no more than withdraw to his subterranean hideout to live a seemingly uneventful life of anonymity and seclusion. His violent act precludes the possibility of social change and engagement (since it forces him underground). And so, perhaps we can reach a satisfactory definition of the existential content of cool as adapted by white American hipsters: cool is an existential position, but a partial one, or a stunted one. It goes as far as anxiety and disengagement but fails to incorporate the second stage, care and commitment.

1.8. The Proliferation of The Cool.

In an article in *Playboy* in February 1958 Literary critic Herbert Gold wrote of the ‘flight from emotional reaction’ underway among the young. The hipster, he wrote, ‘stands guard over his soul, dreaming of cool nothing, beautiful beat nothing, while his feet go ratatat and he strokes a switchblade’. In his rejection of society he believed himself to be ‘exemplary because he has no wife, children, responsibilities, politics, work’.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York, 1955), p.124.

¹⁴¹ Herbert Gold, ‘Beat Playmate’, *Playboy* (July 1959), p.47.

Gold's was one of a growing number of books and articles introducing 'cool' and the phenomena it denoted to the mainstream of American life. The works of the Beat Generation had been the vanguard in which much of the term was formulated and discussed in depth. But 'cool' had begun to percolate much more deeply into the popular imagination by the closing years of the decade. In September 1957, *West Side Story* opened at the Winter Garden Theater in New York, where it received numerous awards before going on tour. During the show, the Jets gang, eager to fight their rivals, the Sharks, are enjoined to hold off by gang member 'Riff', who sings:

Boy, boy, crazy boy,
Get cool, boy!
Got a rocket in your pocket,
Keep coolly cool, boy!
Don't get hot,
'Cause man, you got
Some high times ahead. [...]
Just play it cool, boy,
Real cool!¹⁴²

By the end of the nineteen fifties, 'cool' was well on its way into the common language.

Writing at the end of the decade, the political philosopher Daniel Bell would famously call the nineteen fifties 'The End of Ideology', in a collection of essays of the same title. He outlined what he saw as the overriding trend in political life in the West: the 'exhaustion of political ideas' and 'the exhaustion of utopia'. According to Bell, the hopeful ideologies that had been spun so profusely throughout the nineteenth century, and much of the early twentieth in the form of socialism, had now lost their credibility in the eyes of those who had lived through the forties and fifties, and watched as both fascism and communism had failed to deliver on their promises for a

¹⁴² Stephen Sondheim, 'Cool', (lyrics) from *West Side Story*, 1957.

better world. Those who before had been ‘intense, hortatory, naïve, simplistic and passionate’, he writes, after the Moscow Trials and the Nazi-Soviet pact became ‘disenchanted, reflective; and from them we have inherited the key terms which dominate discourse today: irony, paradox, ambiguity and complexity’.¹⁴³ ‘Non conformity’, he observed, ‘has become the key to social importance’, and ‘for the younger generation’ – in which he includes ‘the Beatnik’ – ‘there is an impasse. It is part of the time which has seen the end of ideology’.¹⁴⁴ Those who had seen playing out in the daily news the horror of total war, the revelation of industrialized racial extermination and the lighting of nuclear fire on civilian populations, and who felt alienated by this and by all of society, sought a way through that impasse. *The Birth of The Cool* accompanies, and perhaps helps to construct, *The End of Ideology*.

At the end of the nineteen fifties, these stunted existentialists appeared to many likely to be no more than a fascinating footnote in cultural history: cool would end with them. Burdick observed, in 1959 that ‘In a society such as ours it would be mischievous to argue that the hipster philosophy is likely to be a significant movement’.¹⁴⁵ In the decade that was about to begin, however, that prospect, and the concept of cool, would change. Mailer was open to the possibility:

Hip may erupt as a psychically armed rebellion whose sexual impetus may rebound against the anti-sexual foundation of every organized power in America, and bring into the air such animosities, antipathies, and new conflicts of interest that the mean empty hypocrisies of mass conformity will no longer

¹⁴³ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge MA, 2001), p.300.

¹⁴⁴ Bell, *The End of Ideology*, pp.35 and 301.

¹⁴⁵ Burdick ‘The Politics of the Beat Generation’, p.555.

work. A time of violence, new hysteria, confusion and rebellion will then be likely to replace the time of conformity. (WN 283)

The decade that followed would see ‘cool’ becoming a totemic word among the rebellious young, even as they worked to square its truncated existentialism with the full-fledged commitment and care that came to betoken the youth movements of the nineteen sixties. That is the ground of my next chapter.

Pynchon, The Counterculture, and Commitment**2.1. Between Subculture and Counterculture.**

As the 1960s radicals recognized a new, positive role for animation qua political activism, the discourse surrounding cool shifted, in countercultural circles, to become preoccupied with questions of discursive strategies, authenticity, and irony. Thomas Pynchon's fiction recognises and responds to that change in the cultural politics of cool, albeit from a critical remove that falls short of full-throated agreement with the student radicals.

This chapter will explore how Pynchon's belatedness with regard to the Beats allowed him to establish a critical distance between himself and his immediate and powerful influence, Kerouac, that lead him to a literary and strategic rejection of the redemptive Beat strategies both of 'hot' and 'cool'. This allows Pynchon to reformulate coolness in his own idiom, and in the terms of his own literary project. There follows a discussion of Pynchon's so-called 'golden mean', the maxim 'keep cool but care', the problematic ambiguity of which will open up a consideration of wider cultural conflicts that Pynchon's deployment of the term cool allows him to navigate. This discussion entails the establishment of a distinction between the increasingly commonplace usage of cool as a slang lexeme, and the specialized and highly oppositional manner in which it came to be employed in countercultural circles. The radicals' specialized usage of cool, deployed in opposition to what they saw as an increasingly dominant procedural liberalism, will not only shed light on the affective tenor of the counterculture's 'politics of feeling', but will offer insight into Pynchon's

engagement with countercultural modes, and the importance of this construction of coolness to the design of *V* (1963). An understanding of these specialized usages, on the parts of both Pynchon and the student radicals, will show how the term became the site of negotiations around commitment, disengagement, and the role of emotion in activism of the period.

In his repositioning of coolness, Pynchon is re-creates, via the character of McClintic Sphere, *V*'s African-American Jazz musician, many of the racial shortcomings of white writing that alienated Afro-American commentators on coolness from the white Beats. In a decade when black activism were reorienting their stance toward politicized affect, Pynchon's coolness remains both a racializing marker of affect, and an addendum to white countercultural concerns. These racial-political shortcomings, I argue, ultimately undermine the positive aspirations of coming together and overcoming boundaries that Pynchon codes in his countercultural engagement.

2.2. 'Objects in Motion or Inanimate Objects?' - Pynchon's Relationship with The Beats.

Despite Pynchon's celebration, in the retrospective introduction to *Slow Learner* (1984) of the Beats' influence on him as 'exciting, liberating, strongly positive', a 'freeing' influence that positioned him, in his own words, as a Beat inheritor or 'post-Beat', there is much in Pynchon that Kerouac, especially the early Kerouac, would have deemed 'cool' in the negative valuation he attached of the word.¹⁴⁶ With his meticulously researched, ideas-driven subject matter, unrepentant intellectualism, his love of parody and absurdism, and strong telegraphing of the

¹⁴⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner* (London, 1984), p.9.

fictional – even metafictional – quality of his literary enterprise, Pynchon seems leagues away from the ‘hot’, rough spontaneity that characterized, and was valued by, Kerouac. Although Pynchon acknowledges his debt to literary Beat-dom in very strong terms in *Slow Learner* (1984), stating that although ‘the parade had gone by and we were already getting everything secondhand’, ‘adopting Beat postures’ and the ‘Beat sensibility’ represented an ‘expansion of possibilities’, he is ultimately circumspect about his debt to Beat modes and philosophies. In describing himself as a ‘post-Beat’, he sums up his literary moment as ‘the same but different’, part of a sixties ‘revival’ of fifties models, both literary and social, yet distinct, ‘playing alto sax riffs on electric guitar’. (SL 7-9) Frenetic and demotic, Pynchon’s writing displays a clear family resemblance to Beat literature, though perhaps more to Burroughs’s flights of fantasy than to Kerouac, despite his singling out of *On the Road* as ‘one of the great American novels’ and a ‘centrifugal lure’. (SL 7) By contrast he maintains a conspicuous silence regarding Burroughs. But just as the social relationship between Beatnik and counterculture is a complex mix of gratitude and rejection, so, too, is the relationship between Pynchon and his forebears, in which stylistic and contextual indebtedness belies explicit philosophical rejection, and even political readjustment.

1963’s *V*, set almost a decade earlier in 1955, contains Pynchon’s most overt nod toward the Beats. Its opening, in which shiftless Benny Profane (associated, as his name suggests, with the Kerouacian virtues of roughness, earthliness and lowliness) comes ‘home’ from the merchant navy to the social and artistic anarchy of Beat New York, could be situationally straight from the pages of any of Kerouac’s ‘true life stories’. Nonetheless, throughout the novel, Pynchon meticulously and carefully

distances himself from the redemptive strategies of the early, 'hot' Kerouac, as well as those of his later 'cool' period.

The central dilemma of the novel's world is of a kind with the perceived malaise that motivates a Jack Dulolz or a Dean Moriarty. What for Kerouac was the deadening conformity of postwar America, and, for Mailer, was the 'collective failure of nerve' that characterized the postwar years, and for which both, in their own ways, proposed the expenditure of energy as the solution, Pynchon formulates as 'a world running ever more afoul of the inanimate'. (V 290) This inanimation has both a spiritual dimension (the degradation of the *anima* or 'soul') and a physical one (the figurative and even literal dismemberment of the characters). It refers variously to an absence of feeling, a mechanistic view of human or social interactions and forces, as well as a literal disassembly into inert component parts. These 'hostile objects' become quite literally grafted onto the human form, in the novel's many, detailed, and clinical descriptions of surgery and the application of prostheses, from Esther Haravitz's nose job, to the 'inert substances' grafted onto Evan Godolphin's face, and, finally, the extended augmentation of V herself, the object of the novel's quest, her story beginning in the late nineteenth century as she moves through various, increasingly mechanistic incarnations, before being finally, clinically, disassembled, 'picked apart' by Maltese children. (V 445)

Much critical ink has been fruitfully spent on accounting for the source of this preoccupation with physical and psychical inanimation in the contemporaneous Marcusean paradigm of the 'one-dimensional man', as well as other quintessentially sixties social tracts such as *The Organization Man* (1956) and *The Man in the Grey*

Flannel Suit (1955). In a world in which, as Marcuse states, ‘domination [...] is transfigured into administration’ the ‘new technological work-world’ of midcentury becomes the site of the administrative mechanization of the human subject in the name of what Adorno and Horkheimer would call the ‘unity of the manipulated collective’.¹⁴⁷ The city of San Narciso in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) provides a good example of this kind of vacuous, corporate-mediatised universe, in which we meet Stanley Koteck, ‘ground into anonymity’ by the demands of Yoyodyne, the corporation for which he works and to which he is reduced to the status of ancillary component. When his livelihood falls victim to their ‘streamlining policy’ and he is replaced with an inanimate object – in this case a computer – he finds his agency so diminished that he is unable even to commit to suicide ‘without first hearing the ideas of a committee’.¹⁴⁸

But in *V* we find ourselves at a remove from the ‘technological work-world’, as, in true Beat fashion, the characters bum around from one casual job to another in search of the usual ‘kicks’. The Marcusean paradigm, or any critique of technocratic-administrative capitalism can thus only partially explain the preoccupation with disintegration and inanimation. Pynchon offers what we might call the pressure of history as the other effective cause of this condition, as the novel’s historical chapters take the reader through a veritable litany of forms of domination, sectarian massacre and imperialist excess, a sequence that, of course, represents a prelude to the World Wars that ended only eight years prior to the novel’s setting, and passage through which transforms the eponymous *V* from the ‘green’ schoolgirl Victoria Wren to the

¹⁴⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, pp.29-30; and Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford CA, 2002). For a summary of the Marxist criticism of Pynchon and capitalism see, especially Samuel Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political* (New York, 2007).

¹⁴⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London, 1966), pp.59-65.

diabolical ‘bad priest’. The World Wars, though themselves not present in the novel’s narrative time, nonetheless loom large, featuring appearances from V-2 designer Kurt Mondaugen and then-lieutenant Weissman, who, as Dominus Blicero, goes on to become the main antagonist of Pynchon’s sprawling World War II narrative, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). The psychic fallout from the experience of total war, as much as, if not more than conformity, is given as the cause for anxieties about inanimation. These two fears are combined in the character (if it can be called a character) of SHROUD – a humanoid armature or crash-test-dummy created by the Yoyodyne corporation to test the extremes of human tolerance for radioactive fallout, the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to in the post-atomic age. Profane, having secured temporary work as a night watchman in Yoyodyne’s laboratories, conducts imaginary conversations with SHROUD, who, with a grinning skull-faceplate, assures Profane that he is ‘what you and everybody will be someday [...] none of you have very far to go’. (V 286) As well as embodying Profane’s personal fear of becoming inanimate, SHROUD lays out in bald terms the human status as object in the era of technological mass-death, the ‘new death’ that preoccupies much of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Profane and SHROUD discuss whether, when SHROUD ‘dies’, he should be buried like a human or junked like a car:

‘Look at you, masquerading as a human being. You ought to be junked. Not burned or cremated’. [Said Profane]

Of course. Like a human being. Now remember, right after the war, the Nuremburg war trials? Remember the photographs of Auschwitz? Thousands of Jewish corpses, stacked up like those poor car-bodies. Schlemihl: It’s already started.

‘Hitler did that he was crazy’.

Hitler, Eichmann, Mengele. Fifteen years ago. Has it occurred to you there may be no more standards for crazy or sane, now that it's started?

‘What, for Christ sake?’ (V 295)

The Nazi genocide is held to have irreversibly catalyzed or accelerated the process of inanimation and the drive towards technocratic death. The new dispensation casts Profane, and innumerable others, in the role of Schlemihl – the Yiddish word suggesting a particularly Jewish dimension to the suffering and hapless bystander. V, herself, as the ‘all-electric woman’, (V 361) increasingly deadened to the world as she becomes, part by part, more artificial than human, represents the historical trajectory of technocratic violence that reduces humanity to an inanimate condition. As Robert Golden says, she becomes ‘finally a symbol of pure inanimateness, of the nothingness of death. Her desire for death and nothingness is a desire which Pynchon sees as the hidden urge of modern history’.¹⁴⁹

Pynchon distances himself from his Beat forebears most sharply in his treatment of possible solutions to the problem of a loss of animation. Mailer’s expenditure of energy could be seen to take on two forms in Kerouac, that of the ‘quest’ typified by the relentless search for ‘IT’, or the ineffable, that dominates *On the Road*, and that of the more aimless travel that characterized later works such as *Dharma Bums*. Pynchon takes aim at both. Questing is ruthlessly parodied both in *The Crying of Lot 49* and in V, where Herbert Stencil’s search for ‘the Big One, the century’s master cabal [...] the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name’ uncovers only the ‘bad priest’ and grants no real conclusion, catharsis, or deeper understanding. (V 226) Furthermore, travel-for-

¹⁴⁹ Robert E. Golden, ‘Mass Man and Modernism: Violence in Pynchon’s V’, *Critique* xiv.ii (1975), 5-17, (11).

travel's-sake, the characteristically Beat fellaheen shiftlessness, is explored through Benny Profane, and shown, by Pynchon, to terminate in inanimation. Introduced as a 'human yo-yo', Profane lives a life of travel punctuated by odd jobs, described as 'yo-yoing'. When we meet him, we learn that 'when there wasn't work [there was] just traveling, up and down the east coast like a yo-yo; and this had been going on for maybe a year and a half'. (V 10) Rather than representing freedom, this stereotypically Kerouacian experience erodes his agency and spurs on a process of disintegration into inanimate components, culminating in his 'nightmare' of fragmentation:

To Profane, alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine. It was always at this point that the fear started: here that it would turn into a nightmare. Because now, if he kept going down the street, not only his ass but also his arms, legs, sponge brain and clock of a heart must be left behind to litter the pavement, be scattered among manhole covers. (V 40)

This yo-yoing, failing as it does to bring Profane into contact with any greater meaning in life, becomes what Joseph Slade calls 'motion without meaning, or decadence'.¹⁵⁰ Just as 'Yoyodyne' stands for the paralyzing corporate-technocratic apparatus, the yo-yo motion of the Beat outsider, travel without thought of destination, far from asserting his own essential autonomy, makes him suspect he is in the grip of large, deterministic forces. 'If you only look at the side of the planet', Profane tells us, 'swinging around in its orbit, split the sun and imagine a string, it all looks like a yo-yo'. (V 5)

¹⁵⁰ Joseph W. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York, 1990), p.73.

The soft hedonism of the Beat lifestyle can be seen to reduce Profane to a deterministic set of appetites located in the mechanical operations of his ‘inanimate’ parts. His ‘inanimate cock’, that is, his sexual appetite, interferes with his ability to form a human connection with Rachel Owlglass, while, in a similar vein, he reflects that the streets ‘had taught him nothing: he couldn’t work a transit crane, payload, couldn’t lay bricks [...] He walked; walked, he thought sometimes, the aisles of a bright, gigantic supermarket, his only function to want’. (V 36-7) This deterministic and directionless ‘wanting’ reduces Profane’s self-image of personhood to inanimate objecthood. Drunkenly ‘pissing at the rising sun’ after a night of drinking, his conception of self vacillates between object and person as he loses the distinction between mechanical function and human intention: ‘Inanimate objects could do what they wanted. Not what they wanted because things do not want; only men. But things do what they do, and this is why Profane was pissing at the sun’. (V 26)

If ‘pissing at the sun’ (or, we could say, into the wind, as Profane’s efforts to attain freedom only entrap him further), is Pynchon’s final estimation of the Beat ethos of travel, a condition none too far from being subsumed into the corporate-managerial mass that Beat-dom detested, with freewheeling yo-yoing and corporate Yoyodyne terminating in the same erosion of agency, *V* is equally scathing when it comes to the redemptive potential of the Beat ideal of Zen. As Joanna Freer (2014) points out, the novel’s only direct allusion to Zen comes from Esther, undergoing rhinoplasty, as she lies on the operating table and begins to drift into unconsciousness under the influence of anesthetic. She describes herself ‘drifting down, this delicious loss of Estherhood, becoming more and more a blob, with no worries, traumas, nothing only Being’, likening this experience to the attainment of satori, ‘the highest condition’ in ‘one of

the Eastern' religions, that of becoming 'an object – a rock'. (V 106) Derisive bloblike imagery and tone aside, the episode is damning of this ethos of passivity via a thematic link with the 'bad priest', the final, corrupted form of V, so enamored with inanimation from undergoing the 'physically and spiritually broken' passage through history that she advises her flock, the men of Malta, to be 'like a crystal: beautiful and soulless'. (V 340) The image of the stone, or rock, again appears at the end of the bad priest's story when, trapped by rubble following a bombing, he is picked apart by curious children and left to die as Fausto watches on 'passively', imbued with the 'characteristic stillness, perhaps, of a rock'. (V 445)

In this way Pynchon distances himself from the redemptive potential of both the 'hot' Beat strategy of travel and brute experience, and the 'cool' strategy of Zen passivity. Both offer to revalue the negative, depersonalized condition that hangs gloomily over the novel's world and characters. In refusing to endorse either, Pynchon in effect contracts the distance between the Kerouacian poles of hot and cool, not only by illustrating them as both terminating in the same condition, but by bringing them under the umbrella of a pre-existing objection to Romantic subjectivity - namely that it posits an extreme subjectivism that finally erodes the subject's agency. Pynchon, who explicitly names the Beat experience 'Romanticism in its furthest decadence' (V 56) articulates this end in passivity in a manner that is redolent of the Hegelian critique of Schlegel's Romantic irony. Hegel saw in the Romantic character a propensity to treat a thing not 'in and for itself and as valuable in itself, but only as produced by the subjectivity of the ego'.¹⁵¹ This position diminished the ego's capacity to consider itself as an empirical agent, thus culminating in 'a form of

¹⁵¹ G. W. F. Hegel, T.M. Knox (ed.), *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975), I; 64.

paralysis that masqueraded as freedom', and that finds artistic expression in the experience of the Romantic sublime. Overexposure to the sublime, understood as the encounter with an infinity of possibilities, diminishes the individual's ability to act in the world.¹⁵²

Although Profane's self-image is in many ways the opposite of Romantic subjectivism, oscillating between an illusory personhood of mechanistic drives and a disintegration into outright object-hood, it is clear that Pynchon intends for him a greater self-awareness on this matter than the stereotypical member of the Beat movement, for whom the mantra of 'shut up, live, travel, adventure, bless and don't be sorry', whether in its 'hot' Romantic or 'cool' Zen version, is sufficient, and who is thus led unawares into a state where agency and personhood are eroded. (DA 5)

2.3. Keep Cool, but Care': Pynchon's 'Golden Mean'.

In a retreat from, or readjustment of, Beat philosophy, Pynchon offers us, in *V*, his oft-quoted mantra 'keep cool, but care' – placing it in the mouth of Jazz musician McClintic Sphere. Epigrammatic and metrically balanced, this maxim has attracted a great deal of critical attention. W.T. Lhamon describes it as the 'creed' that Pynchon teaches his readers, whilst Robert Golden considers this 'ethic of temperance' to be 'the only golden mean found in *V*'.¹⁵³ Andrew Dinn similarly defines this 'sustainable advice' as the solution to the mental 'diseases' that afflict virtually every major character in the novel:

¹⁵² David Dwan, 'The Problem of Romanticism in Wyndham Lewis', *Essays in Criticism* lxxv.ii (2015) 136-186.

¹⁵³ W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Cambridge MA, 2002), p.237; and Robert E. Golden, 'Mass Man and Modernism: Violence in Pynchon's *V*.', *Critique* xiv.ii (1975), 5-17.

Stencil needs some cool to stop the random Brownian motions induced in his mind by paranoia. Profane needs some cool as a damper [...] In both cases what they need most of all is to care about what is going on around them – not ignore or fight against the forces which perturb them but watch them, sidestep them, route around them carefully and purposefully and attentively in order to achieve something.¹⁵⁴

Despite such wide identification of ‘keep cool but care’ as a Pynchonian panacea, other critics, such as Raymond Olderman, are more circumspect, describing Sphere’s remark as ‘simple but affirmative’, while nonetheless pointing out that his advice is immediately followed by the news that someone has killed a skunk, providing something of a deflation in tone.¹⁵⁵

McClintic Sphere, a jazz musician in New York, is, according to W.T. Lhamon, a composite image of various legendary jazz musicians, especially Ornette Coleman.¹⁵⁶ His perspective on the white hipsters that make up his audience telegraphs a recognition that his ruminations on cool are at a remove from those of the white Beats, and a self-conscious effort on Pynchon’s part to reverse their racial gaze. He is disdainful of the white youths who come to his jazz club, the V-Note, ‘going through the old Northern Liberal routine: look at me, I’ll sit with anybody’. He feels himself to be verging on comical deference when they ask him to play ‘Night Train’, imagining himself as a racist pantomime, ‘Yazzuh, boss. Dis darkey, ‘ol Uncle McClintic, he play you de finest Night Train you evah did hear. An’ aftah dat set he gwine take dis ‘ol alto and shove it up yo’ white Ivy League ass’. (V 280-1)

¹⁵⁴ Qtd. in: Kerry J. Grant, *A Companion to V* (Athens GA, 2001), pp.166-167.

¹⁵⁵ Raymond Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the 1960s* (New Haven CT, 1972), p.134.

¹⁵⁶ Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed*, pp.229-30.

Sphere finds himself doubly threatened – both by the deadening inanimation that pervades the world of *V*, and by the infantilizing affective excess that accompanies animatedness. The nonwhite subject is characterized as ‘animated’, that is, possessed of childish energy - loudness, exuberance, and exaggerated cartoonish physicality, even as he is subject to the inanimation that threatens his entire generation.¹⁵⁷ This construction of African-American emotionality renders the subject elastic, essentially pliable to manipulation by the mechanisms of power. Hence Sphere’s fantasy of resistance: ‘take dis ‘ol alto and shove it up yo’ white Ivy League ass’. Whereas the affectively deadening process of inanimation renders the subject amenable to the machinery of power, a process terminating in the personification of SHROUD, which exists only so lethal technological forces can act upon it, the perceived affective excess operates upon the black subject in a similar fashion. At the center of *V*’s narrative, the ‘Mondaugen Story’ details the genocide of the Herero people in German Southwest Africa under the colonial authority of Lothar Von Trotha, who said of his extermination of the native peoples that ‘no war may be conducted humanely against non-humans’. The othering and infantilizing of black subjectivity is evoked in full nightmarish detail by Pynchon, as the bodies of the Hereros become like the ‘junked cars’ described by SHROUD.

Sphere’s, and Pynchon’s, antonym for cool, is ‘crazy’, rather than ‘hot’, thus setting coolness up in a very specific psychological context. Sphere, like so many others, diagnoses the coolness of his historical moment as a postwar condition of low affect and stifled interpersonal relationships, ‘[W]hat happened after the war?’ he muses

¹⁵⁷ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp.89-126.

aloud to a woman whom he believes to be the prostitute Ruby, but who is really the lost Paola. ‘That war, the world flipped. But come ’45, and they flopped. Here in Harlem they flopped. Everything got cool – no love, no hate, no worries, no excitement. Every once in a while, though, somebody flips back. Back to where he can love...’ (V 293) The ‘flip/flop’ and ‘cool/crazy’ terminology comes, by way of Pynchonian extended simile, from electronics. McClintic Sphere, fond of talking electronics with the audio technicians during recording sessions, becomes interested in a two-triode ‘flipflop circuit’, a circuit that can run one of two ways when turned on depending on which tube is conducting and which is cut off, ‘set or reset, flip or flop’. The technician explains that the current can be used in the burgeoning field of computing, that the flip or flop of the circuit ‘can be yes or no, or one or zero. And that is what you might call one of the basic units, or specialized ‘cells’ in a big ‘electronic brain’’. Sphere uses this as the germ of a song called ‘Set/Reset’, where the lyrics read:

Flop, flip, once I was hip,
 Flip, flop, now you’re on top,
 Set-REset, why are we BEset

With crazy and cool in the same molecule... (V 292-3)

‘Flop’ stands for cool, ‘flip’ for ‘crazy’. Sphere is distinctly wary of flop coolness, seeing it as potentially detrimental, having learned to distrust those who look ‘too cool. Too unemotional’. (V 292) He has seen the assumed lack of affect cover impending breakdowns, disasters in romance, and psychological dismantling by narcotics. For him, ‘crazy’ implies a healthful emotionality, including the ability to love, as well as a dangerous, destructive overabundance of explosive action.

Two chapters after these musings, “Ruby” confesses her true identity to Sphere in a moment of tenderness, and tells him about her difficult life. At this point Sphere apparently resolves the dichotomy between coolness and caring by means of his maxim:

then came to McClintic something it was time he got round to seeing: that the only way clear of the cool/crazy flipflop was obviously slow, frustrating and hard work. Love with your mouth shut, help without breaking your ass or publicizing it: keep cool, but care. (V 365-6)

Sphere’s maxim is presented as revealed knowledge. It ‘came to him’ fully formed and complete. Deepening and problematizing the apparent conclusiveness of Sphere’s ‘revelation’, however, is the repetition of the ‘golden mean’ from a very different source: the avatar of the inanimate itself, SHROUD, the radiation-permeable cellulose acetate butyrate mannequin.

From the start, Profane’s ‘conversations’ with SHROUD are tied to McClintic Sphere and his exploration of cool. Only a few pages after Sphere’s establishment of the crazy/cool dichotomy, SHROUD offers a frightening exploration of ‘crazy’, the opposing term against which ‘cool’ is defined, what it has been and what it may yet become. ‘Hitler, Eichmann and Mengele’ were ‘crazy’, he claims, and their mechanistic extermination of Jews ‘set a new standard’ for craziness. (V 295) As well as holding the propensity to produce cool’s benign opposites, ‘love’ and ‘help’, ‘crazy’ expands to cover mass extermination. When Benny is leaving his job, he has one final ‘talk’ with SHROUD, during which the mannequin offers the parting advice ‘Keep cool. Keep cool but care. It’s a watchword, Profane, for your side of the morning. There, I’ve told you too much as it is’. Profane responds: ‘I’ll bet under that

cynical butyrate hide is a slob. A sentimentalist'. To which SHROUD replies 'There's nothing under here. Who are we kidding?' (V 369)

The strongest case that can be made for the special status of the 'golden mean' in V is that it represents the resolution of a struggle between cool and crazy, in which both terminate in a stagnation of agency – crazy entailing the loss of empathy to a degree that allows for the mass killing of human beings with the same regard given to the victims as that given to old, junked cars; cool entailing the erection of emotional barriers against the horrors of recent history. With his mantra, Sphere aspires to rise above this condition. In support of this claim is the fact that the maxim is prompted by Sphere's warm, human connection with Paola, who, more than any other character, represents an escape from the instrumental world of the inanimate. Her broken English expresses a deeply humane worldview in which there are only 'proper nouns. Persons, places, no things'. (V 51)

At this point, however, a nod must be made in the direction of the critical tradition of Schaub (1981) and others for whom ambiguity is the principal Pynchonian watchword. From the unclear ending of *The Crying of Lot 49* onward, Pynchon announces himself as a writer for whom an open-ended, 'anti-dialectical approach'¹⁵⁸ 'prevents opposition declining into false division'.¹⁵⁹ As a writer known for avoiding unproblematic final judgments, Pynchon, characteristically, casts aspersions on his own golden mean. Its restatement by the SHROUD dummy is enough to cause

¹⁵⁸ Joanna Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (Cambridge, 2014), p.7.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas H. Schaub, *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* (Urbana IL, 1981), p.152.

Lhamon to suggest that Pynchon is ‘burlesquing’ himself, though he earlier concedes that burlesque is too broad a term for what Pynchon is attempting to achieve.¹⁶⁰

The heart of the problem with SHROUD’s reiteration of the maxim lies in its reference to an earlier episode in *V*, at the end of chapter nine, immediately before Sphere embarks on his musings on cool. This is one of the novel’s historical chapters, set in 1922 in Southwest Africa. Kurt Mondaugen, a German engineer and later father of the V-2, is studying radio frequencies called ‘sferics’ in a German colony under siege from the black ‘natives’. The random oscillations and irregularities in the static on these frequencies have lead some in the settlement to believe they may be receiving coded messages. At the end of the chapter Mondaugen is woken in the middle of the night by Lt. Weissmann, a visiting German army officer who, by converting the ‘transmissions’ into letters by removing every third letter and then rearranging them, believes he has broken the code and correctly interpreted the message. Weissmann excitedly informs Mondaugen that, in addition to spelling Mondaugen’s own name, the message reads:

DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST. (V 278)

Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist, or ‘The world is everything that is the case’, the first proposition of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

Weissmann, literally ‘White Man’, given only a glorified cameo in *V*, is the closest thing Pynchon offers us to a villain. He reappears in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a Captain, who has taken his S.S. callsign Dominus Blicero as his name following the collapse of the Third Reich, when, in the legal and political void of immediately post-war

¹⁶⁰ Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed*, p.207.

Germany, he either goes feral or assumes his true form (depending on your perspective) as a naked tyrant in pursuit of power, purity and mystical mastery of death. He shares with V an ethic that reduces human beings, ultimately, to objects upon which power is exercised. He is presented to us in this passage as a classic Pynchon paranoid, having discovered the Wittgensteinian formulation in the random noise of a machine and claiming the cognitive capacity to see patterns and reduce to formulae where no such coherence may exist (physicists call this ‘listening to washing machines’). Just as Weissmann receives his formula from a machine in the quotably epigrammatic High German of the *Tractatus*, Profane receives ‘keep cool, but care’ from another, and one that warned him about the excesses committed by the very likes of Weissmann/Blicero during the war in the name of such systems.

In addition to the significant proximity of these episodes within the novel’s structure, it is the consistent and insistent imagery of the inanimate and mechanical that most problematizes Sphere’s ‘revelation’. Profane’s questioning of SHROUD’s apparent cognizance connects it to the ‘electronic brain’ that Sphere imagines when first hearing of the flipflop circuit. Though inert, SHROUD is described as an advancement of the technology of eighteenth-century automata, its ability to display realistically the traumas of death, decay and injury, ironically held up as a twisted notion of progress. (V 284) A link is drawn, through the characteristically Pynchonian significance of names, between the ‘sferic’ frequencies that, given enough time, generate a Wittgensteinian proposition, and the mind of Sphere, which ‘receives’ the maxim. This reliance on the Brownian motion of probability seems to undercut any human agency we would like to find in the so-called ‘golden mean’, and to locate its

origins firmly in the realm of the mechanical and inanimate, that which it purportedly overcomes.

Where, then, does this leave the status of the golden mean? Are we forced to make do with the notion that Pynchon is burlesquing it (and perhaps himself) simply for fun? Within the internal logic of the novel, Pynchon appears to grant the maxim no special status, no exceptionalism to the threat of the animate. We must look instead to the wider social context within which the novel was written, and to the socio-political ramifications of ambiguity as it relates to coolness in the nineteen sixties, in order to come to a fuller understanding of the possible meanings of ‘keep cool but care’.

2.4. Cool as Basic Slang.

A popular desire to draw direct links of continuity between the nineteen fifties subcultural usage of ‘cool’ and that of the counterculture in the decade that followed obscures, I believe, the re-orientation of the term by an increasingly radical and engaged counterculture positioned at the intersection of student radicalism, racial emancipation movements, and anti-war groups. This relocation of the term is the background against which Pynchon creates his cool/care and cool/crazy dichotomy and an exploration of its relation to the cultural politics of coolness that played out in radical circles at that time. Discerning the increasingly commonplace usage of the term as a ‘basic slang lexeme’ from the radicals’ specialized and oppositional meaning will allow us to explore the counterculture’s ‘politics of feeling’ in relation to the double-consciousness of establishment liberalism, and thus allow for a deeper understanding of cool’s importance for Pynchon’s project. Exploration of the

ephemera of the counterculture, as well as theoretical approaches to its engagement with coolness will aid in this understanding.

The somewhat awkward attempts to reconcile the cool detachment of the Beatniks with the social and political engagement that typified the sixties counterculture can be best illustrated by the work of Pountain and Robins, who assert that ‘That’s Cool, too, man...’ is the quintessential hippy aphorism. In the sixties, they observe, ‘the counterculture wrought a striking transformation on the nature of Cool by grafting onto its rebellious individualism a broader desire for social change’: ‘Cool had switched from a passive to active attitude’.¹⁶¹ They are forced to argue that the sixties mark a special, even unique, exception in the history of cool, when it attempted to become ‘Warm and Wet’, to become ‘what it is not, by proselytizing, converting and embracing, rather than excluding and mocking’.¹⁶² Commentators of the time, indeed, dwelt on the contrast between this warmth (or wetness) and the ‘mind-your-own-business’ ethos of Beat cool that preceded it.

The poet Kenneth Rexroth certainly thought that a change of this kind was happening. In a 1965 article on the contemporary culture of San Francisco. ‘Beat San Francisco’, he wrote that

The present, younger generation may be even more whiskery but its behavior is the opposite of the beatnik. Sit-ins, lie-ins, City Hall riots, Free Speech Movements *are not cool behavior*. These are the distinguishing characteristics of both the students and the younger artists, writers, musicians and actors. This new generation of Northern California culture-bearers is in a very uncool,

¹⁶¹ Pountain and Robins *Cool Rules*, p.73.

¹⁶² Pountain and Robins *Cool Rules*, p.80.

unbeat revolt against all the values of our predatory civilization. They are through with The Bomb, racial discrimination, war, poverty and – more important than poverty – the rotting affluence of the world about them.¹⁶³

The reason Pountain and Robins describe a purported period of exceptionalism for cool, when it temporarily ‘became what it is not’, is, I believe, because to the prevailing imagination of the present time, the ‘hippies’ of the nineteen sixties were coequal to the Beats and the Harlem jazz pioneers as founding archetypes of coolness. Through figures like The Dude from the Coen Brothers’ 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*, a shambolic, pot-smoking veteran of the Port Huron SDS years who constantly describes things as being cool, or chides his friends to remain cool (he is the only character in the film to use the word), the term has become bound up with our retrospective perceptions of the decade in general, and with the activist and hippie movements in particular.¹⁶⁴ It is my contention that this conflation is owed to the proliferation of the term through popular discourse, its accession into the linguistic mainstream, which weakens the earlier highly oppositional and specialized connotations of the term both in countercultural circles, and among those, like Pynchon, who were concerned with, and critical observers of, the counterculture. Distinguishing these two usages historically will allow us to differentiate between cool in its increasingly ‘popular’ meaning, as a basic slang lexeme, from the mid 1960s and the older more specialized connotative context in which Pynchon deploys it.

¹⁶³ Kenneth Rexroth, ‘Thar’s Culture in Them Thar Hills’, *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 7 February 1965, 28-29, 78-80. (my italics).

¹⁶⁴ *The Big Lebowski*. Dir. Joel Cohen and Ethan Cohen. Perf. Jeff Bridges, John Goodman, Steve Buscemi, Julianne Moore. Polygram, 1998. DVD.

By 1964, cool takes on the characteristics not so much of subcultural speech, the possession of a specifically located small group, as of what Robert L. Moore calls 'basic slang'. Basic' slang is an argot used as much in mainstream society as in any subculture.¹⁶⁵ According to Moore, a basic slang most commonly emerges when 'a young generation or cohort takes on a set of values starkly opposed to the values of its elders and begins to use a positive slang expression that is semantically linked to its new value orientation'.¹⁶⁶ This is what Flexner calls a 'counterword', an expression whose meaning expands to a broader or more general applicability than that of the term's original referent.¹⁶⁷

Dumas and Lighter define slang as expressions that (among other things) may lower the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing, and that are tabooed in ordinary discourse with persons of higher social status. Recourse to this slang implies the user's familiarity with the lower-status group of people who have special familiarity with the term, and decision to use the term in place of a well-known conventional synonym.¹⁶⁸ The process of basic slang, according to Moore, is that the deviant or rebellious nature of the term causes a generation, especially the young, to widely adopt it. Moore, Dumas and Lighter (1978), Labov (1992) and Eble (1996) all hold that the nineteen sixties see just such an adoption of 'cool', while Moore, in particular, contends that, although it had its origins in the fifties jazz and Beat subcultures, it was the major generational fissure of the 1960s that caused cool to enter the common lexicon, and in so doing it came to displace, and subsequently

¹⁶⁵ Robert L. Moore, 'We're Cool, Mom and Dad are Swell: Basic Slang and Generational Shifts in Values', *American Speech* lxxix.i (2004), 58-86, p. 61.

¹⁶⁶ Moore, 'We're Cool, Mom and Dad are Swell', p.68.

¹⁶⁷ Stuart Flexner, Preface to Harold Wentworth and Stuart Flexner (eds.) *Dictionary of American Slang*, (New York, 1975), vi-xv.

¹⁶⁸ Bethany Dumas, and Jonathan Lighter, 'Is *slang* a Word for Linguists?' *American Speech* liii (1978), 5-17.

occupy, the position of its nearest predecessor, ‘swell’, which came to prominence in the 1920s as a result of the generational rift following World War I.¹⁶⁹

By 1964, cool had replaced ‘swell’ in informal speech, especially among the young, and among discursive communities far removed from the Beat or jazz subcultures.¹⁷⁰

By this time it was a regular part of adolescent discourse’ and was being ‘used in some contexts much as swell had been used earlier’.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, cool does not simply replace swell as a new signifier for the old familiar concept (swell being a term adopted by the young middle class of the postwar 1920s as a reaction to

Victorian prudery, according to Moore). Moore holds that:

a crucial difference in the core referents is that cool, unlike swell, implies a quality of knowingness that is not only leery of conventional prudery but regards it and other conventional values as phony and hypocritical. [...].¹⁷²

He holds that both ‘cool’ and ‘swell’ imply distrust towards authority figures, but that ‘cool’ is the more forceful term, and one that retains aspects of its anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian character after coming into use as a basic slang term.

If 1964 is the year cool enters basic slang, by 1968 it has entered the public lexicon in areas such as journalism, art criticism, and even political discourse with an ease that implies widespread familiarity with the term in its slang context. In deploying it, a

¹⁶⁹ Moore, ‘We’re Cool, Mom and Dad are Swell’, pp.64-65.

¹⁷⁰ Studying Student Signatures in High-School Yearbooks during the years 1962-1968, Moore identifies the point at which ‘cool’ first appears and ‘swell’ sharply declines as 1964. Typical phrases include the following samples:

It certainly has been swell having you in my English class [1964]

Best of luck to a swell copy editor [1965]^[17]

We’ve got some cool times ahead! [1964]

^[17]Best of wishes to a real cool guy. [1964]

Always remember the cool times we had with Mr. Wukovitz. [1965]

To a real neat and nice, cool, great, average good girl. [1969] (p.76)

¹⁷¹ Moore, ‘We’re Cool, Mom and Dad are Swell’, p.71.

¹⁷² Moore, ‘We’re Cool, Mom and Dad are Swell’, p.77.

generation embraced youthfulness, rebelliousness, knowingness, and sought to balance coarseness with suavity. In 1968, Mailer, who eleven years earlier had located 'cool' as a 'queer jargon word' in a subcultural argot he said was neither learnable nor teachable, uses it casually in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, and is in turn accused of being 'uncool' by Renata Adler in no less mainstream a publication than the *New York Times* for the forced and overcompensating use of swearing in his film *Wild 90*.¹⁷³

The broad adoption of cool by the mainstream, a phenomenon predicated upon generational self-identification, eclipses the highly oppositional manner in which it came to be used in revolutionary circles. Among the young radicals it remained closer to the preceding connotations of stifled emotion and minimal, (or merely outward) compliance with systems of power, whilst relocating these aspects to the emergent conflict between radicalized groups and the institutions they came into conflict with. This new valence of the term in the nineteen sixties, as it comes to occupy the flashpoint between revolutionary activism and establishment liberalism, will provide greater insight into the importance of coolness for Pynchon in the historical moment of *V*'s composition.

2.5. 'If You Have To Be Cool, You're Not Free' - Authenticity and the 'Politics of Feeling'.

The increasing mainstreaming of the term runs in parallel with its increasing association, by radicals, with what Trask (2013) calls the 'dominant postwar

¹⁷³ Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (New York, 1968), p.119; Renata Adler, 'The Screen: Norman Mailer's Mailer', *New York Times*, 8 January 1968, p.33.

institutional mode' of instrumental pragmatism.¹⁷⁴ The pragmatism of John Dewey grants a 'flexible' take on reality, owing to the fundamentally creative role of interpretive abduction in the construction of conceptual 'world-systems' (to apply the idiom of Nelson Goodman). Drawing on William James' contention (1907) that 'all our theories are instrumental, are mental modes of adaptation to reality', and his call for a 'stylistics' of political/institutional behaviour in which 'manners are as various and flexible' as those of pragmatism itself, Dewey's 1948 essay 'How to Anchor Liberalism' counter-suggestively enjoins its reader to leave behind all anchors, even the theoretical liberal anchor of the individual, as ultimately illusory and entrapping.¹⁷⁵ This school of instrumental liberalism gives the institution or bureaucracy the benefit of the doubt so long as its outcomes may be favorable and its conditions relatively serviceable, but avoids conscription among the 'true believers'.

Because post-World War II liberalism, and liberal pragmatists, as Trask says, 'did not identify themselves with their beliefs, they imagined themselves as capable of donning and shedding beliefs as needed in order to work toward the best outcomes.'¹⁷⁶ Thus simultaneously within and without, in nominal compliance with institutional culture whilst being disengaged from its (or indeed any) core beliefs, the maximally flexible and anti-ideological character of the postwar liberal attracted criticisms from within the liberal academy itself. The antifoundational temperament was characterized as a 'disingenuous' feigning of loyalty to avoid 'entrapment' by doctrinal belief. F. W. Coker in 'Some Present-Day Critics of Liberalism' (1953)

¹⁷⁴ Michael Trask *Camp Sites: Sex, Politics, and Academic Style in Postwar America* (Palo Alto CA, 2013).

¹⁷⁵ William James, Bruce Kuklick (ed.), *Writings 1902-1910* (New York, 1987), p. 571, and John Dewey 'How to Anchor Liberalism' *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol.15 (Carbondale IL, 1989), p.250.

¹⁷⁶ Trask, *Camp Sites*, p.5.

observed the propensity of instrumentalism's detractors to characterize it as a lack of 'strong moral convictions' whilst granting that, should such a comportment become habitual, it carries the risk of degenerating into 'indifference and irresponsibility'.¹⁷⁷

The most vociferous and sustained attacks on liberal pragmatism, however, came from the young radicals of the emergent counterculture. The sixties campus radicals, according to Trask, 'treated the postwar humanist's prizing of ambivalence as a denial of real-world certitudes' and sought to emphasize instead a linguistic and discursive style that privileged authenticity, the absence of any discrepancy between speech and intention, as the antidote to the inauthentic and deadening function of power and its bureaucratic operators.¹⁷⁸ In accordance with the Port Huron Statement's goal of 'making values explicit', the discursive style of countercultural activism and communication defined itself in opposition to that of the dominant institutional liberalism.¹⁷⁹ 'The language of the establishment is mutilated by hypocrisy' Tom Hayden said following the trial of the Chicago Eight. 'Perhaps our language would be acceptable if it were divorced from practice'.¹⁸⁰ Mark Rudd praised 'our own language' as 'much more expressive than the repressed language of Grayson Kirk'.¹⁸¹ 'Expressive' in this context must be understood as a form of declarative integrity, an annihilation of any discrepancy or distance between speech and action, as well as a denial of irony and other forms of ambiguating meaning. What Trask calls the countercultural style of 'resolute overemphasis' can be seen in the declarative

¹⁷⁷ F.W. Coker, 'Some Present-Day Critics of Liberalism', *American Political Science Review* xlviii.i (1953), 1-27, (24-25). The significance of this way of characterizing liberalism has been influentially explored, much more recently, in Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago, 2016).

¹⁷⁸ Trask, *Camp Sites*, p.86.

¹⁷⁹ Tom Hayden, *The Port Huron Statement: The Visionary Call of the 1960s Revolution* (New York, 2005), p.49.

¹⁸⁰ Tom Hayden, 'The Trial' in Alexander Bloom (ed.) *Takin' it to the Streets: A Sixties Reader* (New York, 1995), p. 444.

¹⁸¹ Mark Rudd, 'Symbols of Revolution', *Up against the Ivy Wall: A History of the Columbia Crisis* ed. Jerry Avorn and Andrew Crane (New York, 1969), p.297.

transparency of the opening of 'Prairie Fire', the 1974 statement of purpose of the Weather Underground: 'Our intention is to disrupt the empire [...] Our intention is to engage the enemy [...] Our intention is to encourage the people'.¹⁸² This ethos can also be seen in Theodore Roszak's attack on the 'counterfeiters' who have risen above 'ideology' and whose 'clever falsifications' obscure the ways in which words like 'education, democracy, and pluralism' no longer mean that which they were expected to represent.¹⁸³ The student radicals' insistence upon testimonial and 'meaningful' speech, which they held to be the antidote to the 'lieutenancy of counterfeiters', was made explicit by the authors of 'We Want a University', which stridently announced 'we must insist upon meaning', which can only come from 'a community of furiously talking, furiously feeling, and thinking human beings'.¹⁸⁴ Here, significantly, 'feeling' is given primacy over 'thinking', as emotion ('fury') is pledged to sincerity. Speech is deemed authentic inasmuch as it is underwritten by emotion and backed up by action, with no attempts made to obfuscate one's true feelings on a matter.

Emotional commitment becomes linked to both political efficacy and discursive sincerity, in phrases such as Michael Nelken's 'we must speak man to man, without waiting for committees to meet' against the 'repressed' language of a Grayson Kirk and the bureaucracy he represents.¹⁸⁵ A robust and masculine transparency of feeling is deployed by the counterculture as a corrective to the obscure, bureaucratic double-consciousness that allows for individual agency to become dispersed into 'the system'.

¹⁸² Bernardine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, and Jeff Jones (eds.), *Sing a Battle Song: The Revolutionary Poetry, Statements, and Communiqués of the Weather Underground, 1970-1974* (New York, 2006), p.239.

¹⁸³ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter-Culture* (Berkeley CA, 1995), pp.15- 21.

¹⁸⁴ Free Speech Movement, *We Want a University* (Berkeley CA, 1965), pp.6-9.

¹⁸⁵ Michael Nelken 'My Mind is not Property', *Berkeley Graduate Student Journal* iv (Berkeley CA, 1965), 30-33.

Critiques of campus radicalism from within the institutions themselves also hint at its fundamentally emotional dimension. John Searle, writing in ‘The Campus War’ (1972), very much in his habitual mode, assesses the discourse of the student agitators in terms of Wittgensteinian speech-acts: ‘One never sees tenses or particles [in the discourse of the New Left] [...] only the imperative’. He draws a sharp distinction between the university’s (and, presumably, his own) ‘politics of reason’ and the students’ ‘politics of feeling’.¹⁸⁶ Rossman, too, dismisses the counterculture and New Left’s discursive style as a form of emotive primitivism: ‘the simple, naïve and stubborn cry distinguishes the new radicals: “This is *wrong*, it must stop!”’¹⁸⁷

In countercultural and New Left talk, as well as that of the black liberation movements, ‘cool’ becomes a locus of the negative social forces against which their own positive agenda is constructed. It comes to represent the antithesis of revolutionary action, linguistic integrity, and the positive emotional continence that informs and enables both. The stance that ‘cool’ encodes, that of default compliance with institutional or social norms among those who may privately feel otherwise, becomes joined with its particular quality of low affect – either in terms of the affective ‘dishonesty’ they see in their institutionalized antagonists, or as a condition of ‘cooled’ compliance that precludes ‘hot’ (or ‘crazy’) revolutionary activity. A leaflet entitled ‘Fight to Win – Defeat US Imperialism’ signed by the Progressive Labor Party (April 7th, 1970) urged demonstrators to abandon ‘cool’ pacifism: ‘The violent and ruthless rulers of this country [...] always tell us to cool it, that violence breeds violence – while they proceed to murder and exploit millions of people around

¹⁸⁶ John Searle, *The Campus War: A Sympathetic Look at the Campus in Agony* (New York, 1972), pp. 57 and 83.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Rossman, *The Wedding within the War* (Garden City NY, 1971), p.80.

the world'.¹⁸⁸ Another Progressive Labor Party missive wrote that 'The Civilian Patrols, in areas where they have been tried, have turned into organizations that act essentially like Police Community Relations Units: trying to "cool it" in the ghetto, and keep people from fighting back'.¹⁸⁹ 'No Choice in '68', an article in *aardvark*, a weekly published by the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), argues that

War on Poverty, Peace Corps, Vista all are especially designed to co-opt idealistic students and to redirect their energies away from active and effective dissent. In the ghettos of this country OEC money is used not to help the people but to misguide and bribe militants, to build up phony "leaders" to cool people's struggles.¹⁹⁰

A one-page leaflet with the header 'Fight to Win – Circulate this Leaflet – Pass it on to a Friend' (a handwritten note on the archive copy identifies it as 'SDS bullshit, Wed. 21st, N. 69') similarly charges, in relation to the free speech protests at Berkeley University, that:

They [the University authorities] are using every law enforcement agency to intimidate us in order to maintain [sic] their interests [...] in spite of the shootings and the killing, the administration wants "business as usual". To "cool it" and wait for a deal is exactly what they want. And that is why we must shut down the university by mass militant action.

¹⁸⁸ Progressive Labor Party, 'Fight to Win: Resist U.S. Imperialism' (April 7th, 1970) Popular Culture in Britain and America, 1950-1975. Database entry. www.amdigital.co.uk. Last accessed: 23 January 2017.

¹⁸⁹ Progressive Labor Party, 'Fight Police Terror, Smash racism' (1965-1973), Popular Culture in Britain and America, 1950-1975. Database entry. www.amdigital.co.uk. Last accessed: 23 January 2017, p.12.

¹⁹⁰ Arli Dann, 'No Choice in '68', *aardvark*, SDS-VDC, Westwood/Los Angeles, California, (15 May 1968), p.4. Popular Culture in Britain and America, 1950-1975. Database entry. www.amdigital.co.uk. Last accessed: 23 January 2017.

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Elsewhere the underground press was urging demonstrators to use coolness as a valid strategy, touting the benefits of keeping cool, and keeping others cool during protests and marches, but much of the underground literature speaks of cool as something that authority wanted from them, even something imposed by authority itself from without, directly. ‘An Introduction to the Black Panther Party’, written by the John Brown Society and published and distributed in Berkeley, California, in May 1968 says of the radical author and Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver, that

The parole authorities have tried consistently to limit Cleaver’s political freedom [...] When [Eldridge] Cleaver spoke at the April 15, 1967 rally at Kezar Stadium in opposition to the United States’ role in the war in Vietnam he was told by the parole authorities to “cool it” or he would lose his parole. Cleaver decided not to heed such warnings but to continue his role in the struggle for black liberation.¹⁹²

Similarly, a pamphlet entitled ‘Listen, Brother!’ by Robert F. Williams, speaks of cool as an almost traitorous stance in the struggle for black liberation, an internalization of the authority of the status quo:

“Uncle Sam,” now ain’t that a thing and a trick. How the hell is white Sam to be looked on as a black man’s uncle? Brother, being a black man in the racist white man’s world is a hurting thing. To live with yourself, to keep cool, you have to

¹⁹¹ Anonymous, ‘Fight to Win – Circulate this Leaflet – Pass it on to a Friend’, (21 November 1969). Popular Culture in Britain and America, 1950-1975. Database entry. www.amdigital.co.uk. Last accessed: 23 January 2017.

¹⁹² John Brown Society, ‘An Introduction to the Black Panther Party’, Berkeley, California, May, 1969, Popular Culture in Britain and America, 1950-1975. Database entry. www.amdigital.co.uk. Last accessed: 23 January 2017, p.7.

alibi the man to your own heart and the more you alibi for him against your own best interest, the more he is convinced that you are a natural brainless fool.¹⁹³

The Black Panther newspaper regularly illustrated this split usage of the term ‘cool’. While it often praised a particular party member for ‘keeping cool’ in a small-scale struggle, e.g. an individual conflict or during a police confrontation, it also decried cool on a larger scale, as stifling violence and bringing the black community in line with what the authorities want. It can, in 1970, speak of a politician addressing black crowds as ‘another bootlicker who was only there to keep us cool’ (i.e. whose aim it was to stifle demonstrations and outcry), while in 1969 it compares ‘being cool’ to Chamberlain’s strategy of appeasement: utterly ineffectual in dealing with violent state systems, such as the one they perceived to be in operation against them in the United States. When the Nazis were rising to power, it opines, the liberal establishment thought ‘if they played it cool and didn’t get into bed with the Nazis, then maybe the Nazis would leave them alone if they came to power. So that’s what they did, they played it “cool”, and they aided the Nazis’ coming to power’.¹⁹⁴

The Phoenix was an underground newspaper published out of Nashville, Tennessee by the Southern Student Organizing Committee - an anti-war, anti-racism, non-violent protest group. In 1968, the organization distributed a pamphlet authored by former SDS president Tom Hayden explicitly decrying cool as stifling rebellion: being cool meant submitting, at least partly, to authority against your better judgment and highest aspirations. It is a position strongly redolent of the more general critique of

¹⁹³ Robert F. Williams, *Listen, Brother* (New York, 1968), p.15.

¹⁹⁴ Bert, ‘The Powells: Tools in the Hands of the Fascists’, *The Black Panther* xiii.x (28 June 1969), p.11.

instrumentalism, or (to invoke a more recent critic of liberalism) the stance of Charles Taylor's 'buffered' person within the institutional world.¹⁹⁵

As the perimeter of personal vision becomes closer, several terrible things happen. A sense of powerlessness evolves, powerlessness with regard to changing the state of affairs evoked by the ideology of 'complexity,' a powerlessness that is often hidden by joviality and complacency. [...] To the extent that these powerless participate in public affairs, they participate with impotency, adapting themselves to the myriad of rules, initiated and imposed from without, that constitute the University game (after all, who wants to be a martyr over dress regulations?). They seek to conform their actions to what the Top People like, they just try and get by, feeling pretty content most of the time, enjoying the university's benevolent laxity about drinking regulations, building up their exam files, 'playing it cool'.¹⁹⁶

Similarly, a 1967 pamphlet distributed in Berkeley at the time of the Stop the Draft rally by the Communication Company, part of the Underground Press, devoted most of a page to the maxim:

DON'T DROP HALF OUT.

If you have to be cool, you're not free.

It isn't easy to be free in America, but it's possible. Do it.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Charles Taylor (much more committed to religion than Dewey) advocates for a Piercean instrumental behavior for the ideologically 'secular' age – what he terms a 'buffered person', at once able and willing to function within a given institution whilst simultaneously being 'disengaged', whose deportment is founded on a code of 'minimal conformity' to the code of the prevailing institution. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 310 and 487.

¹⁹⁶ Tom Hayden, 'Student Social Action', Southern Student Organizing Committee, Nashville, Tennessee, 1968, Popular Culture in Britain and America, 1950-1975. Database entry. www.amdigital.co.uk. Last accessed Jan 23rd, 2017.

¹⁹⁷ Communication Company, *Untitled Pamphlet*, San Francisco, (1967), Popular Culture in Britain and America, 1950-1975. Database entry. www.amdigital.co.uk. Last accessed Jan 23rd, 2017.

The reevaluation of coolness from its redemptive potential in the eyes of the Beats to the buffered pragmatism the later radicals saw in it bespeaks, in part, the consequences of the therapeutic culture of the nineteen sixties. With its twin emphases on the use of consciousness-altering drugs and the need to reconnect with one's 'primitive' or 'essential' nature as a feeling being, the discourse surrounding cool began to emphasize repression. The 'Merry Pranksters', ventriloquized by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test* (1968) repeatedly cast their experiments with LSD as an effort to test and to break down their 'cool'. '[E]veryone's cool was to be tested,' the narrator, Wolfe, says, 'and to shout No, no matter what happened, was to fail'.¹⁹⁸ Coolness is indicative of repression, associated with the 'straits' who find the Pranksters' antics perturbing and annoying.¹⁹⁹ In a particularly revealing passage, coolness is racialized as a negative quality adhering in particular to African-Americans, one that distances them from the 'scene':

All of a sudden the Negroes are out of the hip scene, except for a couple of pushers like Superspade and a couple of characters like Gaylord and Heavy. The explanation around Haight-Ashbury is that Negroes don't take to LSD. The big thing with spades on the hip scene has always been the quality known as *cool*. And LSD freaking well blows that whole lead shield known as *cool*, like it brings you right out front, hang-ups and all.²⁰⁰

In *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka conceived of cool, in the form arising from cool jazz and its associated deportment, as a reaction to the 'Steppin-Fetchit' characterization of African-Americans as overemotional, and thus childlike beings (anticipating Ngai's racialized affective marker of animatedness). Whilst Baraka positions coolness as a self-consciously dignified denial of this racialization, fascinatingly, in *The*

¹⁹⁸ Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test* (New York, 1968), p.45.

¹⁹⁹ Wolfe, *Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test*, p.56.

²⁰⁰ Wolfe, *Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test*, p.190.

Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test, coolness becomes yet another racialized marker, identifying African Americans, as unsuited to the no-holds-barred millenarian world of Kesey and company.

In this vein, an attempt to reassess African-Americans' relationship with cool is made by Marvin X in his play 'Flowers for the Trashman' (1965). Wes and Joe, two young black men, have been arrested. We meet them in a holding cell. Wes is dressed 'hip-style' while Joe attends a college, attempting to work his way up through the liberal mainstream. We get three uses of the word 'cool' early on: Joe enjoins Wes to 'be cool', that is, to contain himself and not to enrage the (white) authority figure, in this case, the prison guard. And it is Joe, the college student, who is called cool by the jazz-loving hipster Wes.²⁰¹ Cool, understood, to paraphrase Baraka, as a choking of one's rage in the face of authority, is seen directly in action. What is interesting is what happens when Joe 'loses his cool'. Fearing that his father isn't coming to bail him out of prison, he breaks into a diatribe:

WES (*laughing*): Cool it, Joe.

JOE: Cool it! Cool it, my motherfuckin' ass. That's all niggers do is be cool, be cool. Motherfuck a "be cool." I gotta be cool 'cause some dizzy-ass white man's standing over, looking like a goddamn fool?

WES: Joe, light'n up. That man ain't done nothin' to you.

WHITE MAN (*attempting to communicate*): Yes, yes, that's right, son, I haven't done anything to you.

JOE (*enraged, he rushes toward the WHITE MAN*): What the fuck's wrong wit you, you blue-eyed devil? You done everythin' to me, man. Every goddam

²⁰¹ Marvin X, 'Flowers for the Trashman', *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* ed. Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal (New York, 1968), pp. 542-546.

thing in the books: slavery, murder, castration, starvation, frustration, humiliation – everything - you (*points finger in man's face*) – you done to me. Don't talk that bullshit 'bout you ain't done nothin' to me. Standin' in that corner like you innocent. You guilty, motherfucker! You hipped ta that – you guilty – just as guilty as my black ass is gonna be when I see the judge. Standin' in that corner ain't gonna help ya one damn bit. (WES *forces* JOE *to sit down*) [...]

WES: Cool it, Joe. Cool it, baby.

JOE (*slumping against wall*): Fuck a “be cool,” fuck a “be cool.”²⁰²

Losing his cool, Joe accuses the white establishment, for which the prison guard is made representative, openly, perhaps for the first time, of everything they have done. Wes, the hip one of the pair, is the one trying to quell Joe's anger. His entreaties to ‘be cool’ are like a local anesthetic for the pain of oppression and injustice; an anesthetic Joe has clearly had enough of. Hiding below the radar of the dominant culture has become an insufficient response to racism, one that precludes the possibility of effecting a real change in the circumstances of the large minority to which he belongs.

It is significant that Baraka chose to anthologize ‘Flowers for the Trashman’ in his highly influential 1968 anthology of African-American writing, *Black Fire*.

Beginning with his visit to Cuba in 1960, he had increasingly distanced himself from the Beats throughout the early and middle sixties on the grounds that Beat nonparticipation represented a dead-end with regard to committed political activism. In 1963, he published his definition of cool in *Blues People*, which is no doubt

²⁰² Marvin X, ‘Flowers for the Trashman’, pp. 5521-553.

informed by this stance: cool is the stance of one who is ‘unimpressed by what horror the world might daily propose’, a deadened reaction to this horror. (BP 213) By 1968, cool, for Baraka, was clearly no longer a valid strategy of resistance, as he chose to include Marvin X’s scathing attack on coolness alongside the revolutionary consciousness of writers like Sun-Ra, whose positive identity-construction along pan-Africanist lines marks a clear distancing from the implications of repression, concealment and internalized impotence Joe’s outburst implies. ‘Flowers for the Trashman’ combines the radical’s disdain for coolness as tantamount to complicity with the prevailing systems of oppression, with an articulation of a specific African-American concern that coolness, which the Baraka of 1963 regarded as a “legitimate reaction” to the realities of life in segregated America, had become, in effect, yet another racialized deportment (imposed from within, as much as from without, as much as by Wes’s choices as by the actions of the white man) that marked out African American subjects as compliant with the wills of those who dominate them. The rejection of coolness in ‘Trashman’ marks a reclamation by the nineteen sixties’ angry young radicals of positive animatedness as a means to liberation, along the lines of a ‘politics of feeling’, or what could be called, more specifically, a politics of vehement sincerity.

2.6. V as Navigation of the Countercultural Debates.

To attempt to locate Pynchon in the shifting territory of these strategic and linguistic debates shaping the discourse of coolness among the radicals of the sixties, we must return to the mysterious and oracular specter of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as it appears in *V*.

The significance of Wittgenstein's first proposition appearing out of the apparently random machine-noise of the sferics in chapter nine of *V* has divided critical opinion. Interpretations range from Melvyn New's (1979) assertion that it implies the possibility of an ultimate meaning to, or within, the novel, luring the reader with the promise of a similar message coming through the chaotic pages of *V*, Bramann (1985), Cain (1985) and others see in it the tacit implication that no such epistemic centre is to be found and that it reflects a cosmic randomness and even indifference.²⁰³ This split opinion leads Tony Tanner to conclude that the receipt, by Weissman, of the *Tractatus*'s first proposition is the ultimate dud-prize, 'the supreme irony, like discovering that the secret is that there is no secret, the assertion that the world is everything that is the case repudiates the very notion of plots'.²⁰⁴

The countercultural debate that I have outlined, which pits coolness against commitment, and polarizes its participants' perception of discursive/linguistic strategies, may serve as a partial interpretive key. It allows us to position Pynchon's 'keep cool, but care' in relation to the split opened up in the counterculture by questions of coolness and its strategic legitimacy. It also tells us something about the role Wittgenstein's language plays in *V*, and the rhetorical strategies Pynchon works into the designs of his text in opposition to this language.

The philosophical implications of the *Tractatus*'s appearance in *V*, arguably matter less than the socio-political significance Pynchon grants it. The three principal occurrences of Wittgenstein in *V* all fall under the proximal shadow of inanimation –

²⁰³ Melvyn New, 'Profaned and Stenciled Texts: In Search of Pynchon's *V*', *Georgia Review* xxxiii (1979), 395-412; and Jorn K. Bramann, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus and the Modern Arts* (Rochester, NY, 1985); and Jimmie E. Cain, Jr., 'The Clock as Metaphor in 'Mondaugen's Story'', *Pynchon Notes* xvii (1985), 73-77.

²⁰⁴ Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political*, p.85.

from Rachel Owlglass, who is ‘in love’ with the inanimate, in the form of her MG, to the organized mass-death of German imperialism, and, finally, the parodic ‘Tractatus Song’. Wittgenstein is thus clearly constellated beneath the sign of the inanimate. The significance of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as delineating a distinct discursive style makes it, I believe, a benchmark for establishing Pynchon’s own discursive strategy, defined in opposition to it.

The language of the *Tractatus* is that of the function-predicate, or Wittgensteinian speech-act that establishes a direct relation between the utterance and the performance of the action it represents as unambiguously and transparently as possible. This early hostility to linguistic untidiness suggests a link between Wittgenstein’s name and the ‘authentic’ and strongly imperative discursive style we have seen to be associated with the increasingly militant counterculture, the young radicals seeking to collapse the distance between the call to action and the act itself, with their ‘man to man’ communicative style abolishing the semantic distance between pledge and performance. The strategic deployment of Wittgenstein throughout *V* establishes, more darkly, a shared strain of linguistic DNA between the language of the death camps and that of the student radicals in their abnegation of ambiguity and irony, and their vaunting of a transparent, functional model of speech.

The third appearance of Wittgenstein in *V* is the humorous ‘Tractatus Song’, sung by Charisma and Mafia to a dejected Profane:

To be quoted Thesis 1.7

Every time I make an advance;

If the world is all that the case is

That's a pretty discouraging basis

On which to pursue

Any sort of romance.

I've got a proposition for you;

Logical, positive and brief.

At least it could serve as a kind of comic relief (V 289)

This heavily telegraphed 'comic relief' comes once again under the shadow of the inanimate, in this instance the double shadow of appearances of Rachel, and of SHOCK and SHROUD, the avatars of inanimation. The song condenses Pynchon's position on the Wittgensteinian discursive style into a comic ditty. It is 'no basis' for pursuing romance, for finding genuine love. And it comes hot on the heels of Profane's own rejection of what he calls 'heroic love', a form of love typified by actor Randolph Scott, whose macho, romanticized, Western roles typify the heroic questers, spies, colonists, and gentleman aviators, of the novel's historical episodes. Scott 'could handle a six-gun, horses reins, lariat. Master of the inanimate', and his 'heroic love' has as its end-goal to 'take, penetrate and ravish' (read: 'objectify' and 'exploit'). (V 288) Set side by side, the 'heroic love' of a Randolph Scott, like the heroic impulses of Lothar Von Trotha's young troops, is made possible by that mode of speech and thought that reduces the world, as the song says, to 'the hard and tangible things I can measure', rendering 'R', in the song's mock-calculus 'a lifetime of love', a 'meaningless concept'. (V 289) But the 'Tractatus song' has a further significance. In reducing a core tenet of his argument to a jaunty ditty, Pynchon foregrounds one of the major features of his own style that is in opposition to that of the *Tractatus*, as he sees it. Throughout Pynchon's entire oeuvre, profundity emerges from music-hall tunes, dirty limericks, graffiti, and comic books. Moreover, the

irreverent and jocose tenor of much of Pynchon's fiction, its absurdities, its comic gusto, and the deep irreverence which allows for the bawdy and the silly to sit alongside the horrific, evidences fundamental resistance to reductivism of the kind he associates with early Wittgenstein.

2.6.1. Pynchon and Activism.

An understanding of Pynchon-as-jokester can come from an exploration of his engagement (or, rather, what can be divined of his engagement) with the counterculture. Freer, in her study of Pynchon's interaction with the ideas of the American counterculture argues that, despite a paucity of 'direct' or unequivocal statements from Pynchon, we can be relatively certain that his sympathies lay with at least certain aspects of the counterculture and its politics. Take, for example, his endorsement of Kirkpatrick Sale's 1973 *SDS: Ten Years toward a Revolution*, a study of the radical student movement, which he praises as 'the first great history of the American prerevolution', and 'a source of clarity, energy and sanity for anyone trying to survive the Nixonian reaction [...] one book that was there when we needed it the most'.²⁰⁵ There is a clear affinity between the themes of animation/inanimation and the redemptive power of love that Pynchon sets up throughout *V* and the founding statements of the SDS itself, which announce that '[l]oneliness, estrangement, [and] isolation' could only be banished 'when the love of man overcomes the idolatrous worship of *things* by man'. The SDS calls for a social revolution to 'replace power and personal uniqueness and possession, privilege, or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason and creativity'.²⁰⁶ The difference set

²⁰⁵ Quoted in Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture*, p.41.

²⁰⁶ Tom Hayden and Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement: The Visionary Call of the 1960s Revolution* (New York, 2005); and SNCC, 'SNCC, 'SNCC: Founding Statement', *The*

up here between love of things and genuine or redemptive love is the same as the gulf that separates Rachel, who loves her MG to such a degree that she is merging with it, from the human, loving, Paola. In the manifestoes of the SDS and the SNCC, as in *V*, love is held up as the ultimate redemptive power; the means by which individuals can overcome the depersonalizing effects of the systems of power in which they have become enmeshed. This redemptive power afforded to ‘love as a political ideal’ by Pynchon and the early counterculture alike, according to Freer, can be taken as the basis for their shared aims and means up to roughly the years 1965-1966.

In Freer’s account, as the community-based activism and free-speech rallies of the counterculture’s early years gave way to a more militant New Left which began to support violence as a legitimate means to effect social and political change, Pynchon began to distance himself from the strategies of the counterculture. As the Vietnam war and opposition to the draft became the focus of resistance and activism, the Weather Underground and the Black Panther Party divided the New Left by their embrace of violence. The central authorities of the student movement eventually fell in line, with the SNCC dropping the term ‘nonviolent’ from its acronym to become the ‘student national coordinating committee’ in 1969, and SDS similarly renouncing its earlier pledge to nonviolence. An intensification of FBI scrutiny accompanied these realignments, culminating in the ‘Chicago Eight’ trials, which precipitated the dissolution of the SDS at its 1969 convention, as old-guard and pro-violence factions failed to reach a consensus, and split the organization apart from within.

This trend would continue, in similar fashion, through other organizations affiliated with the New Left, until, by the early 1970s, irreconcilable internal disputes, FBI actions, and public backlash had in essence killed the radical left. Freer argues that 1973's *Gravity's Rainbow* represents a resolution of Pynchon's shifting, sometimes vacillating attitudes towards the counterculture. From initial enthusiasm, Pynchon can be seen to move toward a more nuanced stance in his 1965 piece for the *New York Times Magazine*, 'A Journey into the Mind of Watts'. Here, Pynchon reports from the aftermath of the Watts district riots, in Southern Los Angeles, offering his perspectives on the situation and the various responses to it, in a rare and apparently unequivocal instance of direct reportage in the first person. His critiques are, in the main, directed towards the 'L.A. scene', the affluent and well-to-do population of the city whom he views as being at a terrible remove from the realities of the situation. The proverbial 'Man', or authority figure, even in his relatively benign form of governmental and other social aid programs, and the proponents of President Lyndon Johnson's 'War on Poverty', are likewise singled out for criticism. Their failure, as Pynchon sees it, comes from the feebleness of their 'inspirational mottoes', and their 'smiling themselves out of any meaningful communication with the poor'.²⁰⁷ The goal, for Pynchon, ought to be one of meaningful interpersonal understanding and cross-class solidarity. Efforts at crossing social lines are praised elsewhere, as he says in his introduction to *Slow Learner* that the 'successes of the "new left" later in the '60's was to be limited by the failure of college kids and blue-collar workers to get together politically'. (SL 7) But his attitude towards violence in 'Journey into the Mind of Watts' is ambiguous. He speaks of the movement as an emergent, leaderless and organic phenomenon and likens it to music and dance:

²⁰⁷ Thomas Pynchon, 'A Journey into the Mind of Watts', *New York Times Magazine*, 12 June 1966, pp.34-4, 78, 80-82, 84, (78).

Some talk now of a balletic quality to it, a coordinated and graceful drawing of cops away from the center of the action, a scattering of The Man's power, either with real incidents or false alarms.

Others remember it in terms of music; through much of the rioting seemed to run, they say, a remarkable empathy, or whatever it is that jazz musicians feel on certain nights: everybody knowing what to do and when to do it without needing a word or a signal: "You could go up to anybody, the cats could be in the middle of burning down a store or something, but they'd tell you, explain very calm, just what they were doing, what they were going to do next. And that's what they'd do; man, nobody had to give orders."²⁰⁸

This is violence reconfigured as jazz, empathy, and a leaderless, non-hierarchical model of benignly motivated anarchism, all broadly positive signs in the Pynchonian lexicon. It is described almost in positive terms as a breaking down of barriers, both literal and figurative, as well as interpersonal. Frederick Ashe finds a sympathetically shared heartbeat shared between this passage and the description of the 'perfect anarchist organization' as represented by jazz in *Against the Day*, in which the character Wolfe Tone O'Rooney describes jazz, and the forms of cognition it encourages, as giving rise to 'the most amazing social coherence, as if you all shared the same brain'.²⁰⁹

It is Freer's belief that this marks the high-point of Pynchon's positive identification with the impulse toward political violence. The bayoneting to death of a street-rioter as witnessed by Victoria Wren in *V* paints a much more negative picture, and the

²⁰⁸ Pynchon, 'Journey into the Mind of Watts', p. 84.

²⁰⁹ Frederick Ashe, 'Anachronism Intended: *Gravity's Rainbow* in the Sociopolitical Sixties', *Pynchon Notes* xxviii-xxix (1991), 59-75, (66); and Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (London, 2007), p.417.

experience is positioned as yet another step in her journey towards the inhuman cyborg of the novel's end. (V 209) The mysterious graffiti that appears throughout The Zone in the postwar hell of *Gravity's Rainbow*- 'AN ARMY OF LOVERS CAN BE BEATEN, is a reversal of the widely-used countercultural slogan 'an army of lovers *cannot* be beaten'. It marks, for Freer, the moment when Pynchon parts company definitively from any endorsement of political violence, associating the outbursts of revolutionary violence throughout the zone with 'failure and futility' and bringing them under the category of 'pornographies of killing', one of 'the War's diversionary tactics', which, according to the communist Vanya, works to 'sublimate sexuality into its own [i.e. the War's] service'. (GR 155-8) The putative idea of benign violence in 'Journey into the Mind of Watts' where 'lovers' organically band together in a common breaking-down of boundaries and organic moment of empathy is portrayed in *Gravity's Rainbow* as merely another corruption, a warping, or twisting of love.

Freer, along with Molly Hite (2010) and Leo Bersani (1989), holds that Pynchon keeps a firm grip on at least one strain of countercultural thought despite distancing himself from the increasingly militant and violent New Left mainline – that of the Yippie movement. The radicalism of Hoffman and Rubin consisted of elaborate pranks and relentless subversion of the 'seriousness' they saw as underlying and fundamentally enabling all forms of authority. Throughout the sixties they, like other groups from the SDS to the Weather Underground, sought to disrupt mainstream society, but did so by means of pranks, such as throwing paper dollars from the visitors' gallery of the New York stock exchange and watching with delight as the traders fought one another to get to them, or inviting several thousand youths to a

party in Grand Central Station in March 1968 ‘for no reason at all’. Hoffman entitled his 1968 book, *Revolution for the Hell of It*, and his colleague in the Yippie! movement, Jerry Rubin, when asked what the movement’s ideology and program were, responded ‘Yippie! is just an excuse to rebel’.²¹⁰

For Hite, the affinity between Rubin’s outlandish pranks and Pynchon’s fiction is made evident by the sheer persistence of comic and downright silly moments throughout his works, of which the frequent comedic songs are a prominent example, undercutting the expectation of ‘seriousness’ and ‘gravity’ from a ‘great author’.²¹¹ Bersani, meanwhile, maintains that Pynchon found in the Yippie philosophy a ‘more complex mode of nonoppositional resistance’ that replaced the ‘head-on assault’ upon authority with ‘a kind of aggressively seductive *subversion* of the seriousness with which networks of power conduct their business’.²¹²

This is right, but Pynchon’s adaptation of Yippie zaniness and slapstick does not only represent a nonviolent form of counterculturalism which he may have found appealing; on a deeper level, Yippie principles may be seen to feed into the antistructural impulse of his fictional project. By ‘antistructural’ I refer to the aspect of Pynchon’s work that defies, and even mocks, expectations of conclusivity. V, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, all stage a process of constant reinterpretation and continuous integration of new perspectives as questing characters in the role of anti-hero and anti-detective attempt to find the epistemic heart of some mystery or

²¹⁰ Qtd. in: Gary Cross, *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (New York, 2008), p.131.

²¹¹ Molly Hite, ‘“Fun Actually was Becoming Quite Subversive”: Herbert Marcuse, the Yippies, and the Value System of *Gravity’s Rainbow*’, *Contemporary Literature* li.iv (2010), 677-702.

²¹² Leo Bersani, ‘Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature’, *Representations* xxv (1989), 99-118.

conspiracy.²¹³ This would-be systemizing intelligence takes potentially explanatory data from the ferocious quantity of information, plots, and characters occupying Pynchon's novels and assembles them into coherent systems only to tear them down again. It promises a resolution to Stencil's 'master plot of the century' whilst mocking the futility of such an 'heroic' quest. Profane's final summation of his experience, a desultory 'I haven't learned a goddamn thing', after nearly five hundred pages of plots, clues, and allusions, deliberately leaves the reader with a feeling of thwartedness and inconclusiveness, as Stencil rushes off to follow up on yet another lead, heading to Stockholm, the place of his father's death in pursuit of 'another clue'. (V 487) As the novel closes, we are left with the distinct impression that Stencil will spend the remainder of his life in pursuit of such clues and leads, without ever reaching a more satisfying catharsis or revelation than Profane's snort of defeat.

Pynchon thus not only takes aim at the seriousness with which authorities conduct their business, but also at the presumption of availability and manageability of knowledge that underlies more conventional novel forms. 'It is the modern fantasy', Klepper (1993) writes, 'of totalizing knowledge' that drives Stencil in his 'quest'.²¹⁴ The systemization of knowledge and its associated discursive style, for which Pynchon takes Wittgenstein as a philosophical spokesperson, is a representation of everything Pynchon ranges himself and his project against. The ultimate epistemological failure of *V* dramatizes Pynchon's disdain for totalizing claims and those who would act on them.

²¹³ Katrin Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer* (Leiden, 2008), p.89; and Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political*, pp.66ff.

²¹⁴ Martin Klepper, 'Die Moderne entlässt ihre Kinder: Pynchons V. und die Probleme des postmodernen Wissens', *Amerikastudien/American Studies* xxxviii.iv (1993), 601-623.

The affinity between Pynchon's textual design and the nonoppositional and ultimately elusive nature of Yippie-inspired pranksterism aligns him with a countercultural strain that valued irony and ambiguity over earnestness and semantic transparency. In this way, Pynchon can be seen to be aligned more with a countercultural impulse that retained some use for the flexible and ironical aspects of cool. In addition to the coolness of his linguistic/discursive strategy, Pynchon can be seen to model a flexibly cool affect in his prose.

Whilst Yippie-inspired humour informs, to a large extent, Pynchon's work, with bawdiness and levity sitting alongside matters of great gravity, comment on the overall affective tenor of Pynchon's oeuvre has tended often toward the negative. Samuel Thomas is in line with most early critics of Pynchon in characterizing him as 'a dispassionate (or indeed frivolous) chronicler of entropy and apocalypse'.²¹⁵ The 'generalized principle of indifference' Thomas identifies as a strain in the work, is evidenced in *V* by the almost flip manner in which Pynchon describes surgeries, massacres, and tragedies, moving the narratorial voice into a register that is either detached or willing to mix grotesque humour with ghastly spectacle.²¹⁶ 'Allowing for natural causes during those natural years,' we are told baldly during the Herero massacre that forms the darkest episode of *V*, 'Von Trotha, who stayed for only one of them, is reckoned to have done away with about 60,000 people. This is only 1 percent of 6 million, but still pretty good'. (*V* 230) Hite (1983) is taken aback by the 'unexpectedly flip sarcasm of this remark', while Cooley (1993) comments that 'this arresting shift in tone extracts from readers a disturbing admission – that our willingness to read about atrocities in the 'objective' language of history implicates us

²¹⁵ Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political*, p.73.

²¹⁶ Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political*, p.85.

in those very atrocities'.²¹⁷ Pynchon challenges his readers directly, shifting the perspective to second person and deliberately flattening the affect as 'you' examine the Herero dead:

And so, as you moved among them, you were forced to look at them as a collection: knowing from statistics that twelve to fifteen of them died per day, but eventually unable to wonder which twelve to fifteen: in the dark they differed only in size, and that made it easier not to care as you once had'. (V 268)

In these and similar passages, Pynchon employs the pressure of the historical record to dramatize the process by which affect is flattened. Pynchon shows us the erosion of care as an historical process, working both on the reader through Pynchon's design, and on Victoria Wren as she descends to objecthood as V.

It is in this context that Pynchon offers us his 'solution' 'keep cool, but care', illustrating coolness paradoxically not only as historical symptom, but as possible appropriate strategy. The text of V can be seen to express this dictum in its own narrative process: dramatizing and ventriloquizing a deadened, flip affect whilst simultaneously undermining and problematizing what he sees as its root cause - the stifling of human life and the potential for care by an overvaluation of knowledge and the institutional systems that give it priority. He creates a distance between his own style and that of, for instance, Hayden, who saw the 'ideology of complexity' as the enemy of transparent, sincere activism.

²¹⁷ Ronald W. Cooley, 'The Hothouse or the Street: Imperialism and Narrative in Pynchon's V', *Modern Fiction Studies* xxxix (1993), 307-325; and Molly Hite, *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus OH, 1983).

2.7. Sphere, SHROUD, and Simulacra - Problems of Racialized Coolness in V.

V attains a limited success in re-orienting coolness away from the categories that had defined it in Kerouac and the Beats, and locating it instead in the debates about authenticity and engagement that dominated countercultural circles during the 1960s. But for all this novel represents an attempt at departure, Pynchon nonetheless retained a good deal of the Beats' influence in terms of the manner in which he dealt with cool, not only by reiterating their position that cool was a reaction to the World War, but also in his thinking about race, politics, and affect. What Curtin (1995) calls racial 'anxieties' in Pynchon are less-gently described as shortcomings by Herman and Krafft (2011), who dismiss his handling of V's African-American jazz musician, McClintic Sphere, 'a hodgepodge of beat-inspired clichés, garden-variety liberal sentiment and limited personal experience'.²¹⁸

It is through Sphere that we are given almost the entirety of Pynchon's reflections on coolness, and the characterization of coolness is thus inextricably linked to Pynchonian concerns about race. In response to a letter from his editor, Corlies ("Cork") Smith, on February 23rd, 1962, Pynchon agreed to dramatically cut down Sphere's role in V. Responding to Smith's hope that he was not intending to write a 'protest novel', Pynchon agreed to reduce the character of Sphere so that V would not 'read a little like a proletarian play or a WPA post office mural and I will try to make it a little less doctrinaire liberal than it was actually meant to be'.²¹⁹ Far from repeating the muscular and transgressive engagement with racial issues that

²¹⁸ Maureen F. Curtin, *Out of Touch: Skin Tropes and Identities in Woolf, Ellison, Pynchon, and Acker* (London, 2003); and Luc Herman, and John M. Krafft, 'Race in Early Pynchon: Rewriting Sphere in V', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* lii.i (2011), 17-29, (18).

²¹⁹ Corlies M. Smith, 'Letter to Thomas Pynchon. 23 Feb. 1962', and Thomas Pynchon, 'Letter to Corlies M. Smith. 13 Mar. 1962', qtd. in Herman, and Krafft, 'Race in Early Pynchon', p.18.

characterized much of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the truncated racial-political engagement of V, I will argue, fails in its attempt to reverse the racial gaze that defines African-American coolness in the work of white authors, with the result that the Pynchonian discussion of coolness occupies the same role it held for Mailer and Kerouac – that of an addendum to, or model for, white radicalism(s). And in failing to move beyond that, Pynchon's cool remains a fundamentally racialized marker of affect that relies heavily on the Beat formulations that it sought to sidestep.

The 'twin antonyms' Pynchon offers us for 'cool' – 'crazy' and 'care', as opposed to the more conventional 'hot' of the decades that preceded, and the less-specific 'uncool' of those that followed – function on a continuum in the Pynchonian imagination. The 'outbreaks of crazy' which Sphere typifies both as random incidents of violence undertaken by isolated individuals, as well as the World War, in his initial reflections on coolness, are initially positioned in contrast with the softer, or more benign, antonym, 'care'. (V 292-3) 'Every once in a while', Sphere muses aloud to Paola, still in her persona as the prostitute 'Ruby', 'somebody flips back, back to where he can love [...] But you take a whole bunch of people flip at the same time and you've got a war. Now war is not loving, is it?' (V 293) Seventy pages later, when Sphere coins his 'keep cool, but care' maxim, he has apparently dropped his concerns about 'care' leading into 'craziness', indicating, perhaps, a softening of his attitudes towards 'care' and a loss of the apparent 'fear' of the 'crazy' that keeps him strategically aligned to coolness. (V 365) The crazy/care continuum may provide for, but does not guarantee, ameliorative 'other-directedness', a-la Riesman, Glazer and Denny (1950), whose models of 'other-directedness' fed into the early counterculture's critiques of conformity.

It is important to note that *both* cool, and its opposite, crazy/care, lie, for Pynchon, on the spectrum of the 'inanimate'. While 'Hitler, Eichmann, Mengele' are offered as avatars of the 'crazy', the 'cool', too, falls under the heading of inanimation due to its perceived deadening of interpersonal relations. (V 295) Sphere, who is introduced as never having been fully on board with 'the "cool" outlook that had developed in the postwar years', displays his uncool propensities via a willingness to listen to, and connect with, the personal problems of others. (V 292) The fact of cool's being, as Sphere puts it, an effect of the war that precludes the ability to love locates it in the same realm as the animation-sapping systems of techno-corporate power.

Furthermore, the very oscillation between the two poles of cool and crazy/care, is itself a function of inanimation. Pynchon frames this oscillation in terms of environmental, as well as a social determinism. The chapters that predominantly deal with cool (chapters ten and twelve) are framed by a persistent commentary on the weather, the 'dog days' beginning as 'the Dog Star moved into conjunction with the sun' heralds the world running 'more afoul of the inanimate'. (V 290) A litany of natural disasters and 'mass deaths' prefaces Sphere's initial hot/cool ruminations with the fatalistic observation 'The business is transacted month after month after month'. (V 291) The mechanical, deterministic effect of the weather is held accountable for the 'flop' of the characters for whom the sweltering heat of New York causes them to variously argue, bicker, break up, or attempt suicide – the 'crazy' pole of behavior. The 'flipflop' between the poles of cool and its other is portrayed as a form of passive oscillation akin to the recurring motif of the yo-yo as the characters' subjectivity is reduced to the binary operation of the 'flipflop circuit' from which Sphere takes his metaphor, the wiring of an 'electronic brain'. (V 293)

Sphere's initial reflections on cool, which take place at the V-Note jazz club focus on a 'terrifyingly' emotionless figure who becomes the avatar not only of coolness but also of the opposite which coolness is seen to entail and conceal but in some way conjure up – a deep violence beneath its surface: ‘

He had seen the look before: a bass player he'd known in Fort Worth who never changed expression, [...] who'd flipped one night and they took him away to the hospital at Lexington or someplace. McClintic would never know. [...] What was there inside for deep summer in Nueva York to melt? What would happen when it did?’ (V 292)

The narration immediately cuts to the novel's 'present', in which Sphere, talking with 'Ruby'/Paola, goes on to posit cool as an effect of the war: 'The war, the world flipped. But come '45, and they flopped. Here in Harlem they flopped. Everything got cool – no love, no hate, no worries, no excitement'. (V 293) These passages highlight a direct influence coming from the Beats evident in the close textual kinship they share with John Clellon Holmes's *Go* (1952), written only a year away from the date of V's fictional setting. Holmes's narrator similarly observes an eponymously 'cool man' who stands in as an archetype of the cool 'condition' in an episode set in the 'Go Hole' jazz club. He is described as looking like a 'pretty hood', '[...] his dark, oily face was an expressionless mask. He moved with a huge exhaustion, as though sleep walking and his lethargy was so consummate that it seemed to accelerate the universe around him'. He 'became particularly immobile during the hottest music, as though it was a personal challenge to his somnambulism on the part of the musicians. His passionless trance denied their very existence'.²²⁰ What 'the cool man' represents,

²²⁰ John Clellon Holmes, *Go* (London, 2006), pp.209-210.

or might come to represent, terrifies the narrator, Hobbes, who describes the ‘complete passivity’ as ‘oblivion’. Again, the man, this ‘pretty hood’, becomes a personification not only of cool but also of a threat and uncontrolled violence lurking just beneath its surface. The coolness of the man, here, as in *V*, itself works to summon up this danger.

if there was viciousness or depravity in his heart it could not penetrate through the thick torpor. Everything had dragged him so much that he no longer dug anything at all. One imagined that if a waiter had come up and requested him to remove the hat, he might have slowly, with weary irritation, reached to the holster under his arm and fingered a chilly automatic. Some night, in this very spot, when he had sunken to the abysses of his droopy lassitude, he might have pulled out his rod and sullenly shot up the place out of sheer ennui.²²¹

Like Sphere in *V*, the white narrator of *Go* is moved by his observations of the ‘cool man to position coolness as an effect of war-trauma. Immediately after the encounter in the ‘Go Hole’, Hobbes explains to Estelle, in a similar vein to Sphere’s explanation to ‘Ruby’:

He talked steadily, gravely, about the war and how it had wounded everyone emotionally, using the “cool” man as an example. He spoke of Hart [Neal Cassady] and Stofsky [Ginsberg] and Pasternak [Kerouac] and Agatson [Burroughs], of their faithlessness and his recognition of a similar discontent inside himself.²²²

This passage from *Go* anticipates, to an extent, the ways in which ‘cool’, where it is seen as adhering to, and/or a characteristic of, African-Americans, becomes, itself, a

²²¹ Holmes, *Go*, p.210.

²²² Holmes, *Go*, p.211.

racializing marker of affect before and during the 1960s. What had been a liberating stance, an attempt to affirm dignity in a rejection of the ‘animated’ or over-emotional stereotype foisted upon blackness, becomes here an entrapping stereotype, de-animating blackness and black affect (in Pynchon’s case, to the status of deterministic reaction-formation, i.e., to the war; to the weather), and (in Holmes’s case) tying black coolness to notions of black ‘savagery’ by positioning it as a closely-related opposite of, or public screen for, an out-of-control violence lurking just below a veneer of metropolitan sophistication and social acceptability.

Holmes’s white observation of black coolness is counterpointed by Pynchon’s self-conscious reversal of the racial gaze. We are first introduced to Sphere as he scrutinizes, and gives his impressions of, the wealthy, white college students who come to the V-Note to watch him play – ‘kids with money who used him for background music’, eager to show off their ‘northern liberal tolerance’. (V 280-1) Sphere is aware that their ‘northern liberal routine’ does nothing but stereotype him in reducing him to an object upon which to exercise their toleration, much as his music is reduced to pleasant background noise. Imagining himself transformed by their attentions into the racist stereotype ‘Dis darkey, ol’ Uncle McClintic’, Sphere deliberately telegraphs the fact of his re-creation by the privileged white gaze. (V 281)

Anxieties about the white, male production (or re-production) of blackness are, according to Maureen Curtin (2003) a career-long concern for Pynchon. *V*, although not itself included in Curtin’s study, both participates in, and addresses, these anxieties via McClintic Sphere and his relationship with Paola/’Ruby’ and the reflections on coolness it occasions. Sphere desires to take ‘Ruby’ away from the

‘heat of the city’: ‘There is a little girl I have to get away from this town before she flips from the heat. Or whatever it is’. (V 348) The implication is that ‘Ruby’ is liable to ‘flip’. This suggests that, to Sphere, at least, the racialized characteristics of the ‘flipflop’ between cool and crazy are particularly applicable to her. A mere two pages later, we are given an extraordinary revelation about the relationship between Sphere and ‘Ruby’, when Rooney, addressing her by her true name of Paola, asks her ‘How do you do it?’

“Burnt cork,” she told him. “Like a minstrel show.”

“No,” he started across the room away from her. “You didn’t use anything.

Didn’t have to. No makeup. Mafia, you know, thinks you’re German. I thought you were Puerto Rican before Rachel told me. Is that what you are, something we can look at and see whatever we want? Protective coloration?”

Paola, who neither reiterates nor denies that she uses blackface, assigns her shifting racial presentation to the fact of her Maltese heritage:

“[...] nobody knows what a Maltese is. The Maltese think they’re a pure race and the Europeans think they’re Semitic, Hamitic, crossbred with North Africans, Turks and God knows what all. But for McClintic, for anybody else round here I am a Negro girl named Ruby [...] and don’t tell them, him, please man.” (V 350)

Lying in the center of the Mediterranean, at the vertex of the intersecting plots that form the v-shaped trajectory of the novel, Malta occupies a median and transitory space in the world of *V*. Nonetheless, Paola’s changing colour recalls several prominent instances of artificial blackness, either created or induced, throughout Pynchon’s body of work.

The nearest case is that of Gavin Trefoil in *Gravity's Rainbow*, whose 'autochromatism' allows him to alter the 'color of his own skin from most ghastly albino up through a smooth spectrum to very deep, purplish black'. The mechanism by which the melanocytes in his skin accomplish this is described by The White Visitation's Rollo Groast as 'some surviving cell-memory that will, retrocolonial, still respond to messages from the metropolitan brain'. (GR 147) Groast, together with Von Goll, put Gavin Trefoil's chameleon quality to use in faking footage of the Schwarzkommando – Herero rocket-troops – for use in psychological warfare against the Germans. Their film, planted in rubble in Germany and accompanied by a series of radio broadcasts, will, they hope, sow panic among the white German population, spreading the fear of out-of-control former subjects in 'their stepfather's house', describing how 'he [the Herero] stays up past curfew and watches his stepfather while he sleeps, invisible, protected by the night which is his own color'.²²³

In a similar vein, the precocious boy-genius of Pynchon's early story 'The Secret Integration' experiment with blackface: even the shopkeeper who sells it to them condemns their plan as regressive, teasing them that they want to bring minstrelsy back.²²⁴ The boys create their simulacrum of black youth from the mechanical parts they find in a junkyard. Their motivations are, at least ostensibly, progressive: they are seeking to test the reasons for, and the limits of, their parents' resistance to racial integration. Though Curtin makes the case that the 'integration' of skin onto the simulacrum, 'Carl', exonerates him from the damning category of the inanimate, I see the two cases as sharing with that of Paola, a marked artificiality: these are less psychological 'characters' than ancillary components in an experiment. Gavin

²²³ Curtin, *Out of Touch*, and Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, pp.74-75.

²²⁴ Thomas Pynchon, 'The Secret Integration', *Slow Learner* (London, 1984), pp.40-41.

Trefoil's skin responds 'retrocolonially' to the 'metropolitan brain', as he responds to his superiors' instruction to simulate blackness. Carl is created from mechanical parts, directed by the children's imagination. Paola's simulated blackness, by contrast, is both a result of, and a response to, Sphere's attention. She is a 'negro girl' 'for McClintic'. When Sphere asks 'Ruby' why she does not leave New York to see her father, she responds by locating herself in and defining herself by her role in Sphere's life: 'what business does a whore have going anywhere? A whore isn't human'. (V 291) These colour-changing figures are extensions of another's desire to render them inanimate. They are at the whim of another's authority, a brain, whether electronic or metropolitan, which claims to perform their thinking for them, rendering them merely as a body.

When Paola finally tells Sphere who she really is, dropping, we presume, the assumed blackface, Sphere comes up with his 'keep cool, but care' formula as a 'way clear of the cool/crazy flipflop'. (V 365) He sees a way out of the deterministic oscillation characteristic of black affect only when Paola's simulation, her artificial blackness is put aside. The fact remains, however, that Sphere's, and thus Pynchon's, reflections on cool are occasioned by a simulacrum of blackness in a strikingly similar way to Holmes's account of black cool as a construction brought about by the white gaze. This proximity takes us beyond an account of Pynchon that would limit itself to a statement of anxieties about the creation and ventriloquism of blackness and touches upon the political/social ramifications of his positioning of cool within the broader countercultural context.

2.7.1. Sphere, Paola, and the Performativity of Race.

Tellingly, the excised sections of Sphere's narrative from the early drafts of *V* are the ones that grant him the greatest awareness of Paola's performative raciality, and, by extension, the embodiment of racialized experience in general. Rather than being wholly taken in by Paola's simulated blackness, the Sphere of the early typescript contemplated the fundamentally acted-out nature of her racial qualities:

Times, she [Ruby] acted white. Now white can show up anywhere: McClintic had seen enough of it to recognize its symptoms. White was snapping your fingers on one and three; sometimes it was even snapping your fingers at all. White was a certain kind of suit and a certain kind of car and McClintic himself wasn't immune to that. Maybe, he figured, there is a little white in everybody.²²⁵

The 'whiteness' Sphere lays out is both performative, composed as it is of behaviours and material possessions, and conspicuously shallow. While 'snapping your fingers' is in keeping with Sphere's unsentimental appraisal of the shallowness of the white, (presumably) Beat-inclined jazz-enthusiasts he sees in the 'V-Note', the overall implication is that Sphere considers race as a gradation not an impermeable boundary, and as a construction not an intrinsic property.

Similarly, Sphere's friendship with Rooney Winsome, from a 'Jim Crow Town' both celebrates the 'liberal' tolerance Pynchon claimed he was not interested in evangelizing, and demonstrates early Sphere's greater understanding of Paola's motivations: 'Winsome wasn't a stereotype any more than McClintic was, and the only people they knew were trying to be were the women each cared about: Mafia and

²²⁵ Thomas Pynchon, *Untitled typescript of V*. (1961) Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, p.459, qtd in Herman, and Krafft, 'Race in Early Pynchon', p.23.

Ruby. So they'd become friends'.²²⁶ This friendship was to include an episode in which Sphere takes Rooney to a sermon by a militant black preacher in Harlem, a 'tall, full-bearded [...] patriarch' who damns white as the colour of 'evil' and anticipated the day when the black antichrist will bring about the 'fall of New York' in a destructive apocalypse.²²⁷ Sphere's intention in showing this to Rooney is to illustrate that 'It's just as bad on the other side. [of the racial divide] Just as much off the deep end'.²²⁸ Taken together, these instances portray the early manuscript's proto-Sphere as having a greater awareness of race as a cultural formation, and a radical recognition of, and resistance to, the hardening polarities of cultural self-presentation attached both to blackness, and to the racialized markers of cool and non-cool.

Pynchon's impulse to trim down Sphere's role, and with it his self-awareness, which Herman and Krafft interpret as a desire to avoid 'unhip' didacticism, effectively relegates Sphere's blackness, and his relationship to cool, to the status of experiment.²²⁹ This is ironic considering the negative connotations of experimentation throughout *V*. Sphere's experimental status is brought more fully to light via the reiteration of the 'keep cool, but care' formula by the inanimate automaton SHROUD. Although critics have been puzzled by this utterance, it can perhaps be understood in light of the racial problems that underlie Pynchon's simulated blackness, as well as the racialized marker 'cool's' function in the contemporary cultural context. SHROUD and Sphere share two important characteristics: their status as simulacra or quasi-simulacra (SHROUD's personhood is emphasized by his appeals to Profane's

²²⁶ Pynchon, *Untitled typescript of V*, pp.459-60, qtd in Herman, and Krafft, 'Race in Early Pynchon', p.24.

²²⁷ Pynchon, *Untitled typescript of V*, pp.461, qtd in Herman, and Krafft, 'Race in Early Pynchon', p.24.

²²⁸ Pynchon, *Untitled typescript of V*, pp.460, qtd in Herman, and Krafft, 'Race in Early Pynchon', p.25.

²²⁹ Herman, and Krafft, 'Race in Early Pynchon', p.23.

sympathies, while Sphere's is cast into doubt through his 'flipflopping' electronic brain) as well as their inferior or subservient social standing. SHROUD, who knows "his" ultimate fate is to be 'junked' like the cars stacked in scrapheaps, shares with Sphere a special vulnerability, in the world of V, to the dangerous effects of history. These statements occur in the narrative after lengthy lingering on the images of stacked blacked bodies in the Sudwestafrika of the 'Mondaugen's Story' episode.

This context is critical to Sphere and SHROUD's shared preoccupation with cool. Pynchon's eliding of blackness with simulacra, of Sphere and Paola with SHROUD, illustrates the ways in which, for him, the black-centered stance of coolness is the peculiar attribute of a prototypical vanguard class. Sphere, from a racial position of particular vulnerability to power and history, shares with SHROUD and SHOCK the character of an experiment. Coolness is posited as the cumulative affective consequence of living through the twentieth-century postwar period - simulacrum of the cultural affect distinctive of blackness, created to work through its emotional consequences in much the same way as SHROUD and SHOCK are created to assess the physiological ones (fallout, impact, and so forth).

2.7.2. 'No Magic Words' - The Limits of The 'Golden Mean' and the Limits of Racial Solidarity.

Congruent with the 'golden mean's' status as a not-too radical departure from preexisting notions of cool, is the fact that it is a none-too-effective resolution, or 'way clear' of the deterministic 'flipflop' of the inanimate. Although Sphere is clearly satisfied (perhaps too satisfied) with his gnomic maxim, going so far as to say that 'if my mother was alive I would have her make a sampler with that on it' (V 366), the

narration drops strong hints that its proposed resolution is deceptively epigrammatic and the help it offers illusory. As they leave New York in Sphere's Triumph, the weather motif rears its deterministic head once again: 'their own wind was cool' giving Sphere a 'cool' receptivity to Paola's unburdening and revelation: 'She talked to him straight, and McClintic kept cool'. (V 365) Immediately afterwards, Sphere seems to contradict the finality of his maxim. 'There's no magic words', he says, 'Not even I love you is magic enough [...] Nobody is going to step down from heaven and square away Rooney and his woman, or Alabama, or South Africa or us and Russia'. (V 366) Significantly, Rooney's difficulty with 'his woman' was one of Sphere's examples of the cool/crazy flipflop in action seventy pages earlier in his very first ruminations upon coolness. This apparent admission that the 'squaring away' of differences with 'magic words' cannot work is accompanied by and helps to gear the admission that his 'way through' the 'flipflop' cannot resolve the original set of problems that started him on his journey towards it. The stench that has 'followed them for miles' from the flattened skunk, too, is perhaps a cheeky and sideways admission that Sphere's vaunted maxim 'stinks'. Sphere and Paola cannot escape the inanimate completely via this maxim. The simulation of blackness marks Sphere's characterization out as little more than an emotional cellulose acetate butyrate mannequin in the grip of larger forces.

Pynchon's affinity for Yippie-inspired pranksterism, as opposed to the embrace of militancy and linguistic transparency that marked the later counterculture, locates him within wider debates about cool's political/activist ramifications in countercultural circles; it also has a bearing on the status of his black simulacra. An affinity with earlier countercultural modes of resistance, which were, in the main, formulated and

participated in by white, college-educated youth came at the expense of the call to action and refusal of passivity issuing from the black revolutionary vanguard movements, dominating their interactions with coolness as a concept, and leading the rest of the counterculture towards committed revolutionary action. Truces and strategic alliances between the two countercultural factions were attempted at times, but lead only to the frustration of both. Seeking to appeal to white, middle class, student activists, Eldridge Cleaver's selection of the Yippie co-founder Jerry Rubin as his running-mate for the Peace and Freedom Party's 1968 presidential bid 'dismayed radicals nationwide' and forced the party's national convention to nominate Judith Mage as potential vice-president instead.²³⁰ This failure by leading Panthers and Yippies to cross the aisle and unify their support base can be seen not only in the failure to launch a joint presidential bid, but in the awkwardness and clashing stylistics of the text of the 1968 'Yippanther pact', as the respective rhetorics of militancy and play fail to gel, fail to present a coherent set of objectives or strategies, fail even to complement one another.²³¹ The Yippie preoccupation with 'poetics over politics', as Adolph Reed puts it, represented an inverse trajectory to that being undertaken by black activists from Cleaver to Baraka.²³²

Pynchon's black coolness thus remains, as it did for Mailer, and for the Beats, an addendum to, or at best a conceptual model for, white radicalism(s). The debates and explorations of cool and coolness in *V*, centered as they are, on black characters and the simulation of blackness, participate in the persistent demarcation of cool as a

²³⁰ Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Redwood City CA, 1994) p.125.

²³¹ Eldridge Cleaver, Stewart E. Albert, Abby Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, 'The Yippanther Pact', uindy.archivestree.com/item/recordview.php?itemid=701054&record=146147&ftype=pdf. Last accessed: 5 December 2016.

²³² Adolph L. Reed, *Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960's* (Westport CT, 1986), p.111.

racialized marker of affect and a form of conceptual experiment. Just as the ‘spades on the hip scene’ of *The Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test* are seen as ultimately an impediment to Kesey and co., and their project of the transformative *kairos*, the black authors and activists calling for a self-conscious abandonment of cool in pursuit of authentically revolutionary activism create a distance between their own ‘seriousness’ and the Yippie ‘fun’ that is a critical component of Pynchon’s novelistic ethos.²³³

What Freer sees as Pynchon’s universalizing of the virtue of countercultural engagement, namely honest and open communication, an organic ‘coming together’ across political, class, or racial boundaries, is undermined by the logic of racial simulation, as it is by the diverging aims of Pynchon’s countercultural/political positioning from those of the self-professed needs and aims of the various black activisms of the period.

²³³ Wolfe, *Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test*, p.127.

3.1. Cool Beyond the Counterculture.

This chapter deals with cool in the nineteen seventies and eighties. During this time, the term ‘cool’ began to shift away from its specialized usages among the youth subcultures of midcentury to enter the mainstream of middle-class society. It retained, to an extent, an association with social alienation via its status as the special possession of youth culture. In doing so, however, it drifted from its marginal position among oppressed groups and increasingly came to be a far more mainstream term of approbation.

Part One examines the way in which coolness became a locus for a certain strain of moralistic social criticism with an implicit racial dimension. It came to be associated with the increasingly separate culture of the much discussed ‘alienated youth’ of the commodity culture of the nineteen seventies and afterwards. I will unpack this moralistic criticism via a reading of Bret Easton Ellis’s *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). Critics have often described Ellis’s novel as ‘blank’ fiction – removed from the specificity of place and time and free of moral judgment. I aim to dissect his usage of ‘cool’ as an indexal term for this moral neutrality, describing a worrying emotional and interpersonal paralysis. In doing so, I explore Ellis’s affinity with a strain of social commentary originating with Christopher Lasch. Lasch’s impassioned writing deploys a heightened affective tone almost, one feels, as a corrective to what he describes as an increasingly emotionless world concerned with appearance over emotional depth. The Laschian undertones to Ellis’s satire undermine the apparently

‘neutral’ presentation he engages in. I will also push back against the supposed atemporality of Ellis’s novel, exploring how he historicizes his formulation of ‘cool’ as fallout from the failure of faith in a now-discredited counterculture, not least the failure of coolness to deliver on the redemptive potential it once presented.

Part Two explores the ways in which this moralistic strain in Ellis’s writing dovetails with scepticism towards the post-sixties avant-gardes. It will touch on the scepticism of some critics toward what they see as a ‘shallow’ and ‘affectless’ postmodernism that has its origins in ‘The New Cool Art’ of midcentury. Here I will explore ‘cool’ as an term of aesthetic judgement with connotations specific to this period, one that provides a critical evaluation of core features usually found under the heading of ‘the postmodern’, namely flattened affect and a concern with surface over depth. The deployment of ‘cool’ in this sense, I will argue, registers a historically-determined condition arising from the artistic upheavals of the nineteen sixties. Doing some of the same descriptive work as the label ‘postmodern’, ‘cool’ encodes a more judgmental attitude.

Finally, in part three, a reading of Martin Amis’s *Money* will bring these strands together. It will delineate the parallels between criticisms of cool-as-a-social-phenomenon now removed from its countercultural contexts, and cool as aesthetic judgment of a vacuous avant-garde stylistics, similarly coming out of the nineteen sixties but now unstuck from its original motivations. Amis effectively unifies these threads in his depiction of his narrator, an advertiser and ‘product of the sixties’ who, like Ellis’s characters, suffers from affective and semantic depthlessness as one might suffer from a disease. Finally, this section will return to the issue of race, highlighting

the ways in which coolness, in becoming increasingly the provenance of a comfortable and commodity-minded mainstream, undercuts the potential it might have had for cross-racial understanding, in effect making Amis's John Self retread similar ground to Pynchon and Sphere. Like Pynchon (whose influence on Amis has been underexplored) Amis engages with blackness on the ground of (expensive) simulacra and simulations. Spending money on a borrowed, commodified expression of blackness, in effect becomes a surrogate for cross-racial understanding.

3.2. 'It All Comes Down to Cool': Bret Easton Ellis and The Moralists.

As the waning of the counterculture in the nineteen sixties gave way to the commodity culture of the nineteen seventies and the conservative triumphs of the nineteen eighties, the cultural territory occupied by 'cool' began to shift. No longer the provenance of marginalized people, or the alienated youth of midcentury, it attached increasingly to mainstream youth culture, including an affluent, white middle class. As usage of the term broadened, it became a focus of consternation among social commentators who detected a morally threatening trend whereby respectable middle-class youths were adopting the posture of outsiders in a form of aesthetic play. Christopher Lasch and his inheritors blamed its proliferation on a countercultural style divested of revolutionary urgency and adapted to a world increasingly governed by consumerism, advertising, and rampant materialism. They saw its stance of alienation and emotional detachment as a worrying trend.

It is against this background that Bret Easton Ellis wrote his early fiction, dramatizing a world where the young protagonists are emotionally crippled and made spiritually bankrupt by the prevalence of a stance he names as 'cool'. Critics, most notably

Young and Caveney (1992), have regarded Ellis's novels as 'blank' generation fiction – a style of writing internally emptied of historical context and moral judgment. I aim to recast Ellis as a respondent to conservative moral writing about cool that proliferated in these years, and to show his kinship with Lasch and others. In doing so I hope to illustrate the ways in which Ellis echoes many of their moralistic concerns about social, especially racial, relations, waning affect, and the perceived 'narcissism' of post-sixties society.

3.2.1. The Conquest of Cool – Shifting Contexts.

The perception, that the 'cool' fellow-travelers of the midcentury youth subcultures and avant-garde had 'sold out' those movements, allowing 'cool' to be absorbed by the capitalist mainstream it had once resisted, comes tinged with a feeling of thwarted revolutionary potential that hangs heavy on those who romanticize it, such as MacAdams and others who witnessed the sixties give way to the materialist turn of the nineteen-seventies and the conservative victories of the eighties.

The adoption of cool by the advertising industry is discussed by Thomas Frank in his book *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, which, coincidentally, appeared in the year of Ginsberg's death, 1997. Frank agrees with Ginsberg that the advertising industry provided a home for a cool-informed ethos and aesthetic. The nineteen-sixties and the decades that followed witnessed a shift in mainstream advertising style towards a witty, self-reflexive and often ironic style in mainstream advertising that borrowed its ethos from the counterculture. Frank polemically argues, however, that rather than being co-opted by capital and power, the vibrancy of the new advertising, which passed sly comment on

its own media whilst celebrating consumption as an assertion one's individuality and uniqueness, represents a voluntary and organic outgrowth of the wider countercultural phenomenon. Frank argues that cool advertising represents a 'creative renaissance' that overturned the conformity of nineteen-fifties Madison Avenue. In entering into the mainstream, he contends, cool conquered it, as opposed to being conquered by it. And whereas the dominant advertising style that preceded this creative turn sought to assure the prospective buyer of their uniformity and conformity, the decades that followed could expect, for example, an advertisement for a brand as fusty and conservative as Booth's House of Lords Gin to represent that purchase as a 'protest against the rising tide of conformity'.²³⁴

In keeping with cool's stylistic conquest of the advertising world, the term itself continued to grow in popular usage. Despite some preemptive declarations of its demise (a 1970 *Time Magazine* article that confidently states that 'Things aren't [...] "cool" any more – these [...] resurrected favorites of the 40s are dead again [...] co-opted by the straight'),²³⁵ the word continued to proliferate in common usage and to persist and thrive beyond the expected single-generation lifespan of most slang lexemes. Former *Oxford English Dictionary* editor-in-chief John Simpson notes this persistence as marking the term out as a special curiosity among basic slang lexemes for this reason: 'It is surprising that 'cool' has survived so long. Usually one generation tries not to use the slang of the previous generation'.²³⁶

²³⁴ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago IL, 1997).

²³⁵ Ted Owen, "'Right On" is Off and Other Hiplingua News', *Time*, xcvi 17 August 1970, p.36.

²³⁶ Steve Lohr, 'It's Hot, Has Four Letters and Legs' *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/1995/08/27/weekinreview/ideas-trends-it-s-hot-has-four-letters-and-legs.html. Last accessed: 25 June 2017. First published 27 August 1995.

The term's shift into the mainstream, especially among the young, is accompanied by an apparent generalization in its meaning and deployment. Where the use of 'hot', 'crazy' or 'care' as its various antonyms had established specialized contextual meanings, through the nineteen-seventies and beyond, the more general antonym 'uncool' bespeaks the term's increasing ubiquity. From the closing years of the nineteen sixties onwards, 'cool' is familiar enough to no longer need a specific counter-term anchoring its definition.

Linguistic studies of the post-1970 popular usage of the term bear this out. Dalzell (1996) tracks the history of *cool* as a slang term, focusing mainly on its emergence with 'bop musicians in the 1940s'. Like most of those who attempt to explain the more modern usage, he finds it unusually 'amorphous and ubiquitous', moving from the specialized provenance of 'detached, cerebral, stylish hipsters, jazzmen and rebels', before it 'quickly began its surge towards a mainstream term of approval'.²³⁷ Ilan Dar-Nimrod et. al. (2012) surveyed 353 participants between the ages of 15 and 56 years old on what 'cool' meant to them. They generated 1,639 adjectives associated with coolness, the top-ranking being 'social, popular, smart, talented, current, hip, awesome, great, handsome' and 'hot'. The authors of the study noted that the common usage of 'cool' privileged prosocial, values, apparently at odds with its traditional connotations of roughness, rebelliousness, and stifled affect - although when surveyed further, Dar-Nimrod's subjects readily distinguished between 'contrarian' and 'cachet' coolness, i.e. between the approbatory use of the term, and its more traditional connotations of roughness, independence and hard-bitten outsiderliness. Dar-Nimrod concludes that 'cool' retains a recognizably particular set

²³⁷ Tom Dalzell, *From Flappers 2 Rappers: American Youth Slang* (Springfield, Mass, 1996), pp.80-81.

of counter-cultural connotations that underwrite its meaning even now, in what he calls a ‘halo effect’.²³⁸

Typically, the apparent drift of the term’s usage is described as a move into the affluent white mainstream and an ever-increasing distance from the marginal and marginalized communities among whom it originally arose. In *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (2004), Alan Liu argues that cool has since taken on special importance in the world of work. It has become a ‘gestural stance’: ‘those in the pipeline from the academy to the corporation “gesture” toward an identity recompensing them for work in the age of identity management’.²³⁹ In the context of modern corporatism, cool allows the individual to maintain a core aspect to his or her character that declines co-optation by the corporation. Liu holds that cool thus acquires a paradoxical relation to the concept of the outsider:

the middle class identified primarily with the empty *position* rather than the *identity* of the outsider. It identified less with the actor or even action of the outsider’s challenge to the system, in other words, than with the empty stage or site of the exotic on which the challenge was enacted. This is why, for example, the most iconic “cool” film stars had inscrutable faces, signifying either nothing or the blankness of the middle class itself at work. [...] thus did cool first come into its own as the ethos of modern alienation: a whole attitude or character of low affect that at once harmonized with the system of technological rationality and disengaged itself from that system.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Ilan Dar-Nimrod, et. al., ‘Coolness: An Empirical Investigation’, *Journal of Individual Differences* xxxiii.iii (2012), 175-185.

²³⁹ Liu, *The Laws of Cool*, p.78.

²⁴⁰ Liu, *The Laws of Cool*, p.103.

This gestural outsiderhood expresses itself, according to Lasch, Gary Cross,²⁴¹ and others, through consumption and leisure choices as much as through the performative display of emotion-guarding and low affect.

Given this broadbrush account of cool in post-sixties society, we can begin to assess what kind of cultural, political, and affective work is being done by a coolness that has apparently emptied itself of much of its specifically counter-cultural significances. Clearly, it becomes the focus of concerns relating to lost depth, and to a countercultural style 'run amok' and detached from its revolutionary contexts. Authors and commentators begin to engage with coolness in this period in terms of a period-specific shallowness in the realms of art, literature, and social interaction. Despite the apparent banality of post-sixties cool as an innocuous, approbatory term and an empty gesture towards rebellious alienation, we can point to a good deal of material, originating in the cultural criticism of the nineteen seventies, that continues to identify coolness as a threatening manifestation of rampant cynicism, narcissism, and shallowness particularly attracting the young. Christopher Lasch's widely sold 1979 *The Culture of Narcissism* is the likely originator of this critique. Locating the origins of the change in the fallout from the cultural upheavals of the sixties, Lasch (although he does not term it 'cool' explicitly) describes a 'protective shallowness' cultivated as a 'survival strategy' that expresses 'a new taste for personal independence' and 'a revulsion against close emotional attachments of any kind'.²⁴² These terms share an obvious affinity with the midcentury descriptions of cool which originate with Baraka and others, and have since been reiterated by McAdams,

²⁴¹ Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool* (Oxford, 2004); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (London, 1980).

²⁴² Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp.191-200.

Pountain and Robins, and others. Significantly, Ellis will bring many of Lasch's criticisms under the nominal banner of 'cool'. This 'posture of militant alienation' that Lasch discusses in grave moral tones, owes as much, he argues, to the 'pretense of revolutionary solidarity' fostered by the various movements of the counterculture as it does to its disintegration into a vacuous consumer/advertising-driven culture that uses branding and commodities as a substitute expression for true individualism.²⁴³

Lasch's refrain was taken up by other voices in the following decades through to the present. R. Jay Magill, in *Chic Ironic Bitterness* (2007) states that the prevalence of 'cool' as an attitude is evidence that irony and cynicism have become a dominant cultural style among the young in the West. Nonchalance and dispassion, the characteristics he identifies as dominant in cool-as-social-attitude, enact 'the near-algorithmic function of showing the opposite of what one feels or experiences.'²⁴⁴

Cool shares with irony the attitude of detachment, in that both are 'a *psycho-strategy* for hiding one's feelings by suggesting their opposite - pretending to be bored in the face of danger, being amused at insult'.²⁴⁵ Magill writes that 'cool's primary objective... is not to *provoke* anger or social rejection, but to feel free internally, to feel self-possessed, to relieve itself of having to respond to interpersonal expectation'.²⁴⁶ Magill's explicit use of 'cool' marks out his more sympathetic approach when compared to Lasch. The naming of coolness brings in an ameliorative quality in contrast to Lasch's 'narcissism'. Magill's familiarity with cool's countercultural origins allows for considerably more sympathy on his part towards the motivations that lead one to become cool.

²⁴³ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.67.

²⁴⁴ R. Jay Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness* (Ann Arbor, Mich, 2007), p 49.

²⁴⁵ Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, p. 50.

²⁴⁶ Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, p. 51.

Gary Cross, a historian of childhood, has written that the nineteen seventies represented a break with the past which he expresses as a shift from ‘cute’ to ‘cool’ in children’s culture. The ‘cute’ represented the traditional childhood of the parent-controlled world and the romantic notion of the innocence of youth. Beginning with the increased marketing of children’s television in the late nineteen sixties, he contends, ‘cool’ became the watchword of a new aesthetic of youth, from young children to teenagers, which emphasized distance from parental culture and control, ‘dark fantasy’, ‘violence’ ‘world-weariness’, ‘self-sufficiency’ and ‘nastiness’.²⁴⁷

This strain of cultural commentary identifies post-sixties cool as an ethos of hyper-individualism and emotion guarding that arises from the youth cultures of the fifties and sixties before being propagated via consumer and advertising culture. Its deleterious effects on the young are emphasized. It is constructed as a moral threat that creates a gulf between parents and an increasingly aloof younger generation. ‘The menacing nonchalance of coolness’, as Daniel Harris (2000) writes, became the ‘aesthetic plaything’ of suburban youth, ‘mimicking gestures and facial expressions designed as deterrents to attack’. It offered disaffected bourgeois youth ‘an enticing fantasy, that of going downscale, of descending into abysmal yet liberating poverty’. For Harris, its central feature is summed up by saying that ‘coolness represents a denial of innocence on the part of youth culture’.²⁴⁸

Lasch, and those who follow after him in assessing coolness as a social phenomenon, have similar strains to their arguments – the role of consumerism, the adaptation of

²⁴⁷ Cross, *The Cute and the Cool*, p.149.

²⁴⁸ Daniel Harris. *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York, 2000), pp.52-74.

the individual to the corporate world, and the effect of market forces and advertising. But despite this they are far from a homogenous grouping. Lasch's political partisanship and judgmental tone are very far removed from Magill's loosely journalistic, anecdotal accounts. In utilizing the previously narrow Freudian concept of narcissism as a diagnostic panacea for society, Lasch does not shy away from injecting his populist/traditionalist values into the discussion to the extent that his book was widely compared to the apocalyptic tone of the Old-Testament prophets. The tone at times veers close to the ridiculous, as when describing the 'peculiar horror of contemporary life'.²⁴⁹ Cross is, perhaps, closer to Lasch than to Magill in his traditionalism, portraying a quasi 'fallen' cool in contrast to the relatively prelapsarian 'cute'. Despite the differences, these commentators have affinities with Lasch, even though they avoid his blistering tone. Lasch casts a long shadow over post-sixties American cultural criticism, and it is under this shadow, I believe, that these writers carry out their assessments of the counterculture's fallout as they see it expressing itself. The discourse that surrounds cool, in these years, inherits some of the moralizing flavour of Lasch's work.

3.2.2. A World Without Feeling – Ellis' Early Fiction.

Bret Easton Ellis, in his own words, sought to portray through his fiction a society of individuals who have 'adapted to the culture of Narcissism' to the point where they 'do not feel any more'.²⁵⁰ His phrasing is, of course, Laschian in origin. But, on the surface, there could be no greater gulf between Ellis and Lasch in terms of style and tone. Whereas Lasch's tone in *The Culture of Narcissism* was described by

²⁴⁹ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.99.

²⁵⁰ Alice Salfield, Andy Gallagher, Paul MacInnes, 'I really wasn't that concerned about morality in my fiction' (Interview with Bret Easton Ellis). *The Guardian* (July 19, 2010). www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/video/2010/jul/19/bret-easton-ellis-video-morality-technology. Last accessed: 25 April, 2015.

Frank Kermode as a ‘hellfire sermon’, one that had no hesitation in damning both the social programs of the left and the free-market deregulationist impulses of the right in favour of his own explicit populist/traditionalist political program, Ellis’s style has become a byword for “blank” neutrality, and (apparent) removal of the author’s voice and opinions in favour of a studied flatness.

Ellis shot to literary fame in 1985 at the age of 21 with the publication of *Less Than Zero*, which became an overnight sensation, and which he followed with *The Rules of Attraction* in 1987, and *American Psycho* in 1991. Immediately hailed by newspaper reviewers, Ellis’s work was slow to attract critical attention from the academy, especially in Britain. He was, in the words of Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney, two important early critics, synonymous with hype, notorious for late-night debauchery with celebrities, and associated with the kind of vacuous culture of fame and consumption his work satirized. Ellis was numbered by the press among a new young generation of American urban fiction writers coming of age in the 1980s. The group, including Jay McInerney, Kathy Acker, Tama Janowitz, Patrick McGrath, and, sometimes, Donna Tartt, were called ‘The Brat Pack’, ‘downtown’ ‘post-punk’ ‘new narrative’, even ‘the lost generation’ before the epithet ‘the blank generation’, stuck. Their works had in common a flat, affectless prose (Tartt is an exception) which dealt with all aspects of contemporary urban life: crime, drugs, sexual excess, media overload, consumer madness, inner-city decay and fashion-crazed nightlife.

Taken together, Ellis’s first two novels represent an early phase to his work, before his fiction became more involved with genre. At the heart these novels is an experimental emptiness. Georgina Colby calls it ‘melancholy’ while the advertising

copy on the rear cover of the 1995 Picador edition calls it ‘the death of the soul’.²⁵¹ Young and Caveney complain about vacuous talk of ‘soullessness’, and that the characters in Ellis’s novels are invariably described by critics as being ‘disaffected’ or ‘affectless’ while nevertheless falling back on the same terminology themselves the very next paragraph.²⁵² Certainly, this is the dark heart of Ellis’s satire: the atomized society of narcissistic, guarded, self-interested individuals who find themselves unable to form more than superficial connections with others. The illustration of this cultural pathology is largely the point of Ellis’s early fiction. The almost metaphysical dread felt by his characters is personified in *Less Than Zero* as a great beast or monster rumoured to be stalking the city, or a force that has driven the people mad.

Thwarted or self-thwarting interpersonal relations constitute a major theme of Ellis’s work, especially his early work. He announces the theme strongly with the opening sentence of his first novel *Less Than Zero*: ‘People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles’.²⁵³ The brief love affairs between the characters propel *The Rules of Attraction*’s narrative momentum, as Lauren, Paul, Sean (and the distant, travelling Victor, absent for most of the novel) meander in and out of love and lust with one another as they take turns narrating with interior monologue. There ensues a series of missed opportunities, misunderstandings, thwarted affections and, ultimately, cold, affectless, and unhappy outcomes. All three seek, or purport to seek, some degree of deeper interpersonal relation, and all three call this ‘love’. The main characters are shown to be in a sort of emotional arms race, employing and cultivating an emotion-

²⁵¹ Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (New York, 2011); and Bret Easton Ellis, *The Informers*, (London, 1995), back cover.

²⁵² Elizabeth Young, ‘Vacant Possession: Less Than Zero – A Hollywood Hell’, in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American Blank Generation Fiction* (New York, 1994), p.30.

²⁵³ Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (New York, 1985), p.1

guarding strategy of affectlessness, disdain, and performative self-sufficiency that ultimately thwarts their ambitions of deeper engagement.

Paul and his clique of quasi-friends (he thinks of them with too much disdain to call them ‘friends’ outright) are introduced to us putting together a seemingly inexhaustible ‘blacklist’ of people they loathe, the criteria for inclusion being plainly arbitrary and encompassing most of the rest of the student body.²⁵⁴ Unlike the activists of a previous generation of students, the campus inhabitants of Camden express disdain and apathy towards any engagement with politics or the political on the grounds that it provokes, or is provoked by, trite emotionality. An ‘earnest-looking’ girl ‘on the verge of tears’ cries ‘I do!’ to the laconic rhetorical question ‘who gives a shit [about Vietnam]’; she is dismissed by Sean as ‘boring’ and the whole incident written off as a ‘Social-Science-Major-Breakdown’. (RoA 120)

Towards the end of the novel, Lauren flatly states that there ‘wasn’t anything to hear’ on the news: ‘politics, mass death, it was all boring’. (RoA 303)

The characters wrap themselves in a fatalistic contempt that is open to analysis in Magill’s terms as emotional armour. ‘My relationships with people aren’t tense or trying’, explains a narrator in *The Informers*, ‘because no-one requires a whole lot of serious emotional investment at all. They’re very safe’.²⁵⁵ This emotional safety is encapsulated by the universalized, all-purpose reaction to people and situations encoded in Sean’s ubiquitous catchphrases ‘Rock’n’roll’ and ‘Deal with it’, with which he responds to virtually every situation, from the trivial to the grave, in imperturbable monotone. This can be thought of as an affect strategy that pre-

²⁵⁴ Bret Easton Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (New York, 1987), p.29.

²⁵⁵ Bret Easton Ellis, ‘Letters from LA’, *The Informers* (London, 1995), pp.130-151, p.140.

emptively negates emotional pain, as in the case of Sean's break-up with Lauren. 'I don't care. Rock'n'roll', is his reaction. (RoA 216) Studied contempt and disregard for others serves to further Sean's emotional autarky, pre-empting and precluding the possibility of emotional hurt. Lauren, the novel's third principal narrator, 'in love', by her own admission, with the absent Victor, cannot bring herself to admit it publicly. To do so would be tantamount to an admission of weakness and dependence on another person. Going, with a friend, to the 'orgy in Booth [House]', she is asked if she has heard from him. 'I hated saying it, but did it anyway. 'Who?'' (RoA 159) The anonymous author of the book's periodic love-letters calls this imitative offhand disdain the 'simple dumb cruelty of it all'. (RoA 65) Ellis effectively dramatizes Lasch's darkest diagnoses. The unremitting bleakness of the world he portrays, the constant pitch of its emptiness, shares a heartbeat with a very Laschian impulse – the of cultural pathology. Despite the apparent lack of moral judgment in Ellis's 'blank' presentation, I will argue that the aims and motivations behind his project are of a kind with Lasch's impassioned 'hellfire sermon'.

3.2.3. 'What It All Comes Down To'.

The bulk of Ellis criticism revolves around attempts to define, and account for, the nature and cause of this affectlessness, since Ellis himself makes very few attempts to contextualize or psychologize its causes within the texts. Not a few critics have ascribed the characters' 'blankness' or 'soullessness' to 'late' capitalism.²⁵⁶ One of the seminal moments in the history of Ellis's critical reception comes in 1992 with the publication on Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney's *Shopping in Space*:

²⁵⁶ Elizabeth Young, 'Children of the Revolution: Fiction Takes to the Streets', in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American Blank Generation Fiction* (New York, 1994), p.18; Young, 'Vacant Possession', p.25; Johannes Malkmes, *American Consumer Culture and its Society: From F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1920s Modernism to Bret Easton Ellis' 1980s Blank Fiction* (Hamburg, 2011); James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (London, 1998).

Essays on American 'Blank Generation' Fiction. Young and Caveney emphasize the 'interminable contradictions of a mediatized consumer society' as the cause for the characters' 'ethical emptiness' and self-destruction set against a background conspicuous consumption.²⁵⁷ They locate Ellis's fiction in the ahistorical eternal 'now' of consumer society, a temporally and even geographically isolated space created by consumer society. The theorists of the blank generation argue that the landscape of the novel, a series of parties, clubs and cafes linked only by car journeys, creates a spatial blankness that doubles 'the subject's ethical blankness', assigning the root cause of this emotional and interpersonal detachment to the 'floating' and disconnected nature of the characters' world. The label of 'Blank Generation' and the use of the epithet 'blankness' (denoting the ahistoricity and atemporality of Ellis's fiction) would become a dominant paradigm of Ellis criticism.

This is a mistake. Ellis's early fiction, especially *Rules of Attraction*, locates him, I argue, as an historically-minded moralist, of a type with Lasch and his inheritors, who saw in post-sixties youth culture a moral failure consequent on an affective hardening into narcissistic cynicism and emotional distance, a phenomenon that has at its root a surfeit of cool 'emptied out' of its original subcultural/countercultural contexts and rationales. To be sure, Ellis goes to great lengths to excise his own voice from his works, to the extent that Mailer criticized this apparent lack of opinion and judgment on the part of the author.²⁵⁸ As a result, much of Ellis's politics remains oblique.

Nonetheless, it is my argument here that moral panic, the fear of 'what has happened

²⁵⁷ Young, 'Vacant Possession', p.25, and Graham Caveney, 'Notes Degree Zero: Ellis Goes West,' in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American Blank Generation Fiction* (New York, 1994), p.124.

²⁵⁸ Bret Easton Ellis, 'So you're a misogynist, a racist – so what? Does it make your art less interesting?', *The Guardian*, 26 July 2010. www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/26/bret-easton-ellis-pain-misogyny-drugs. Last accessed: 19 March 2017.

to our youth', motivates Ellis as it does Lasch, and that the two share a certain ground in the pathologizing of youth culture.

The novel is bookended by two extended interior monologues from Victor. The first is a frenetic travelogue of his experiences in Europe, with 'cool' deployed in its newer (post-sixties), more diffuse usage as a term of approbation covering everything from the tolerable to the exciting to the deeply compelling. The usage is indiscriminate and frequent, covering everything from a personable stranger to a Van Gogh painting. (RoA 16-18) The later monologue, towards the novel's close, occurs at a concert back in the U.S., where his friendly smile is rebuffed with indifferent scorn by an attractive girl, prompting him to offer this insight into the deep root of their problems:

And I got really disgusted and started thinking, what was this girl's problem? Why couldn't she have been nice and smiled back? Was she worrying about imminent war? Was she feeling real terror? Or inspiration? Or passion? That girl, like all the others, I had come to believe, was terminally numb. The Talking Heads record was scratched maybe or perhaps Dad hadn't sent the check yet. [...] Why did she have to act so fucking *cool*? And that's what it all came down to: cool. (RoA 314; Ellis's italics)

Not only does Victor offer an apparently sincere definition of the root of the characters' problems, but his usage shows an, admittedly clumsy, understanding of the older context for the word's usage. Victor appears to know that 'cool' is a stance appropriate to extreme and threatening situations. 'They [the young couple] didn't have to worry about keeping warm or being fed or bombs or lasers or gunfire. Maybe their lover left them, maybe that copy of 'Speaking in Tongues' was really scratched - that was this term's model and their problems'. (RoA 315) Victor deems it wholly

inappropriate, even pathetic, that his wealthy, comfortable peers should be attitudinizing in this way. That a record had been scratched or dad hadn't sent the cheque yet or a love affair had ended are mocked as insufficient cause to adopt coolness in its earlier Mailer/Baraka terms of a socio-political stance that arises from precarious conditions or the proximity of existential danger.

This diagnostic moment, close to the end of the novel, is one of the rare instances where Ellis's characters 'break cover' to offer a generalising comment on their situation. It is comparable in this way to the oft-cited 'but you've got everything' exchange in *Less Than Zero*. (LtZ 126) Ellis immediately looks to undermine and thwarts Victor's moment of self-realization. Victor finds the girl contemptible, pitying and deriding her for her lack of warrant in adopting coolness as a stance, and turns away in disgust. He thus mirrors how she acted towards him in the first place, confirming a cycle in which alienation breeds more alienation.

I really believed that the extent of their pitiful problems didn't exceed too far from what I thought. [...] but they still mattered to Jeff and Susie; these problems hurt them, these things stung. ... Now that's what struck me as really pathetic. I forgot about her and the other geeks and did some more of the coke Lars was offering me ... (RoA 315-16)

Thus Ellis dramatizes his characters' emotional paralysis as a variant on the hedgehog's dilemma whereby they react to one another's coolness by resolving, like Victor, to become more disengaged, hard-bitten, and cool themselves, and in so doing compound the situation. The physical-contextual threat of an actual arms race (the bombs and 'lasers' that Victor mentions) having receded into the background with the waning of the cold war, has left a vestigial attitude among the comfortable and the

privileged, a 'terminal numbness' that no longer finds adequate justification in their situations.

Further evidence in the case against *Rules of Attraction*'s alleged atemporality comes from an undercurrent of thwarted sixties utopianism that runs through the novel. This occurs most strongly in a passage where Sean Bateman listens to the ramblings of his friend Marc as Marc is shooting up heroin:

The Kennedys, man, screwed it ... up ... Actually it was J ... F ... K John F. Kennedy ... He screwed it up ... all up [...] There was this ... our mothers were pregnant with us when we ... I mean, he ... was blown away in '64 and that whole incident ... screwedthingsup [...] it jolted us in a really heavy duty way when we ... were in ... [...] Their ... um, primordial wombs, and, so, that is why we are ... Do you ... understand? ... Is that clear? [...] Jesus ... think if you had a brother who was born in '69 or something ... They'd be ... fucking bonkers ... (RoA 24)

Georgina Colby (2011) uses this passage to attempt to rescue Ellis from what she calls the charge of blank fiction by highlighting the ways in which he situates his narrative in post-sixties, post-counterculture malaise.²⁵⁹ She does so by comparing this passage to *The Rules of Attraction*'s opening quotation, from Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War novel *Going After Cacciato* (1978):

The facts, even when beaded on a chain, still did not have real order. Events did not flow. The facts were separate and haphazard, and random even as they happened, episodic, broken, no smooth transitions, no sense of events unfolding

²⁵⁹ Young, 'Vacant Possession', p.25; and Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (New York, 2011), pp.26-30.

from prior events.²⁶⁰

Colby argues that the fractured nature of Marc's testimony is indicative of a 'trauma narrative', establishing a parallel between Marc's identification with the trauma of the sixties and the post-Vietnam trauma of O'Brien's novel. The apparently ahistorical, atemporal setting of the novel, which begins mid-sentence and continues as fragmented, broken narrative, is itself a way of situating the novel temporally, in the apparent atemporality in the post-utopian fallout from the nineteen sixties.

For Colby, the end of the Vietnam War and the American loss of faith in government institutions over the long, bloody and costly conflict is held to be the historical crisis from which the characters in the novel are reeling. This is part of the context for Ellis's modification of cool, certainly, but only part. It is not the failure of faith in institutions, or post-Vietnam war trauma, that affects most immediately Ellis's characters, but, rather, the failure of faith in the redemptive potential that coolness, understood as the capacity for affective self-protection against external threats, once represented. Victor deliberately lampoons the idea that war trauma or war-anxiety could be the cause the character's terminal numbness. And any forays into socio-political analysis are rejected as 'Social-Science-Major-Breakdowns'. (RoA 120) It is not the 'Vietnam' that is important in 'post-Vietnam', but, rather, the 'post-'. The Vietnam War was a major rallying-point for countercultural resistance, and the end of the military draft is commonly taken as one of the primary reasons for the dropping-off in radical activity among American students and the end of the counterculture. In Marc's monologue, the later one is born, the further one is removed from the upheavals of the sixties, and the more 'fucking bonkers' one will be. The hypothetical

²⁶⁰ Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York, 1978).

brother born in '69 would be only six years old when the war ended in 1975, and would lack any meaningful connection to the mid-century utopianism represented by the student anti-war movements. Kennedy 'screwing it up' by being assassinated, could be taken to refer to the slide of sixties optimism into violent outcomes, which Lasch names as one contributing factor in his diagnosis of rampant narcissism, blaming them for the breakdown of the optimistic spirit of community that the 'woodstock nation', for all their perceived shortcomings, fostered.

Unlike Colby, I take the 'Vietnam' of Marc's monologue, the 'social science major breakdown', and the opening quotation, to be doing less commonplace work. 'Vietnam' here refers not to the war as experienced by the soldiers fighting overseas, but to the war as experienced by those who stayed at home, too young to fight. The relationship Ellis's characters have to 'Vietnam' is not the same as the relationship the Beats had with World War II: the naming of the war refers more to the countercultural upheavals that attended it at home than to the violence it caused overseas. The traumatic break its end signals is not the fallout from war experience itself, but, rather, the cultural fallout from the great socio-cultural turmoils that became synonymous with it during the characters' youth.

Towards the end of *The Rules of Attraction*, Ellis performs a brief, dark parody of the Beatnik road trip narrative. Lauren and Sean, attempting to salvage their flagging relationship, have left Camden to visit some older friends who have graduated and settled down. Lauren, disdainful of their BMW and love of Phil Collins, has a dream in which she is married and 'votes the same way my parents did'. (RoA 297-298) This dream activates her emotion-guarding apparatus, spurring her to decide privately to

break it off with Sean, and leave their friends for ‘a blur of motel rooms’, cocaine, and ‘driving all night’. (RoA 302) Disquieted by the Beat specter of ‘the square’, she and Sean reach a peak of interpersonal chilliness as she starts to wear her sunglasses (the iconic apparel of coolness) at all times and becomes totally incommunicative. ‘There was no conversation. We did not speak to each other those days on the road’. (RoA 302) Here Kerouac’s ecstatic and ultimately fruitless search for the ineffable, experiential ‘IT’ is degraded, through imitation and repetition, into an empty ritual, divested of the ecstatic promise that characterized his ‘hot’ Beat ethos. The cool-Beat behaviour of Ellis’s road-trippers effectively empties out Kerouac’s rebelliousness and unconventionality into cliché.

Despite the critical effort that locates Ellis’s novel in the atemporal space of cynical commercialism, the very critical idiom such commentators employ itself posits a link between the Beat generation and the ‘Blank Generation’ of writers, of which Ellis is held up as the prime member. The label is taken from Richard Hell and the Voidoids’ 1976 song of the same name. Hell, an important figure in the first wave of Punk Rock and a direct and important influence on the Sex Pistols created ‘Blank Generation’ by rewriting the lyrics to Rod McKuen’s 1959 record ‘The Beat Generation’, a light-hearted song poking fun at the eccentricities of the New York hipster subculture.²⁶¹ Both sets of lyrics acknowledge the 1950s as the starting point of a separate youth culture and the modern phenomenon of ‘teenagerhood’. But the comparison between the two generations exposes important distinctions. McKuen’s ‘Beat Generation’ pokes fun at the laid-back cool of the Beatniks:

I belong to the Beat Generation

²⁶¹ Richard Hell and the Voidoids, *Blank Generation*, Sire, 1977; and Rod McKuen, *The Beat Generation*, RCA, 1959.

I don't let anything trouble my mind.

I belong to the Beat Generation

And everything's goin' just fine^[SEP]

The Beats and their followers are parodied here as loafing, irresponsible, but ultimately good-natured types who disengage from the 'nine-to-five' rat race in order to immerse themselves in 'poetry and jazz' because that's the only thing that 'satisfies their soul'. Richard Hell's song, by contrast, shows the nihilistic cool of the Blank Generation as altogether more empty and threatening:

I belong to the blank generation

and^[SEP]I can take it or leave it each time^[SEP]

I belong to the _____ generation

but^[SEP]I can take it or leave it each time

The song expresses a deeply nihilistic worldview. Life itself is called 'God's consolation prize'. Empty, unfulfilling lives are lived outwardly 'packed with cash' but inwardly empty.

The 'Blanks' were the acknowledged spokespeople for 'their generation'. There was, as Young and Caveney wrote, 'an understandable urge to see in Ellis and his youthful confreres a new generation of scribes such as had not been seen since the Beat writers. The media fuss and froth were reminiscent of the music press's rapturous discovery of punk in 1975'.²⁶² Taken together with the fact that the label by which they describe Ellis's temporal rootlessness is a self-conscious nod to a Beat legacy, this positioning of Ellis as part of an historical chain of inheritance going back to the nineteen forties undermines the critical consensus on 'blank generation' fiction's

²⁶² Young, 'Vacant Possession', p.25.

atemporality, and supports rather a reading of Ellis as a moral satirist who takes as his material the problem of how far the second generation of postwar youth has travelled from its parents' values, and from 'the old world, the known world'.²⁶³

3.2.4. Cool, Sympathy and Embarrassment in *The Rules of Attraction*.

The image of a now-discredited counterculture, hovering behind the novel's numb present, is personified by a girl Sean recalls once dating and to whom he refers only as 'the hippie'. She is incongruous, out of time: 'This was the Eighties, I kept thinking. How could there be any hippies left?' (*RoA* 101) He plays along with her gauche enthusiasm, pretending to like her bad poetry but irked by her belief that people are fundamentally both good and interesting. He lies and feigns interest in order to sleep with her. The primary emotion that the hippie engenders in Sean (and it is important that she does elicit an emotional response from him) is embarrassment. He keeps her away from his cynical friends to avoid their mockery. The embarrassment is at its most acute in the face of her political commitment (the cringing spectacle of the 'Social-Science-Major-Breakdown') and her demonstrations of emotional attachment (cf. Lauren's inability to admit her feelings for Victor).

In her influential essay '68 or something' (1994), Lauren Berlant explores embarrassment as a consequence of the post-sixties failure of utopian socio-political projects. 'What does it mean to be accused of being '68 in the 1990s', she asks, and the answer is (ostensibly) clear: one runs 'the risk of political embarrassment'.²⁶⁴ Julie Ellison (1999) builds on Berlant's observations to explore the socio-political role of embarrassment in the light of what she calls a failure of sympathy in the public and

²⁶³ Young, 'Vacant Possession', p.35.

²⁶⁴ Lauren Berlant, "'68, or Something", *Critical Inquiry* xxi.1 (1994), 124-155, (137).

political emotional life after the sixties. Sympathy, despite its conspicuous absence in the novel's action, has an important place in *Rules of Attraction*'s repressed emotional substructure. In the course of Victor's 'it all comes down to cool' monologue, he observes the hard-bitten and affectless couple and imagines their petty problems, thinking to himself: 'Other people might not sympathize with this couple's problems and maybe they didn't really matter in the larger realm of things – but they still mattered to Jeff and Susie; these problems hurt them, these things stung ... Now that's what struck me as really pathetic'. (RoA 314-5) Post-sixties 'sympathy', is described by Ellison as a mode of identification with others that 'makes the identity of the person who extends that vicarious support tentative or uncertain'.²⁶⁵

The embarrassment triggered by emotional display is in part protective, because it recognizes a threat that the extension of sympathy will undermine the characters' all-important integrity and independence. The contemporary stoicism that Ellison sees as displacing it 'construes sensibility as [...] a perpetually indebted or embarrassed condition' that enslaves the subject to immediate but transitory 'imperial' desires to help.²⁶⁶ The bitter irony of Victor's observation is that he imagines himself to be uniquely sympathetic to the couple he observes, but the conclusion of that sympathy is once again reinforced contempt. He resolves to shun involvement with them out of disdain for their coolness, whilst acting coolly towards them himself, nominally in order to protect his unique selfhood, his supposed capacity for 'sympathy'. This dark mirroring of the sympathetic reaction serves to further isolate Victor, and the other characters, evoking a feeling of aloof superiority and independence rather than the more generous potential imaginable in an 'embarrassed' sympathy.

²⁶⁵ Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (London, 1999), p.175.

²⁶⁶ Ellison, *Cato's Tears*, p.190.

Ellison assesses embarrassment as symptomatic of liberal failure, especially a failure of emotional and political engagement on the part of the privileged, creating the ‘liberal guilt’ of an ‘embarrassed position nobody wants to occupy’.²⁶⁷ This framework provides a way of tying Ellis’s treatment of the affective failure of countercultural opposition to a critique of post-sixties commodity culture. Ellison argues that the particular character of liberal embarrassment, post-sixties, owes much to the way in which political action risks becoming a futile gesture when the scope of the problem is perceived as too large.²⁶⁸ The failure of the liberal programs of the nineteen sixties, for which sympathetic understanding, especially across class, race, and gendered lines was a necessary prerequisite, left a propensity for institutions and individuals pursuing liberal objectives in a post-sixties world to feel a certain embarrassment when confronted with the label ‘utopian’.²⁶⁹ The public-political emotional life of the west, she argues, shifted, post-sixties, in tandem with a libertarian revival (begun under Reagan in the 1970s) brought about by the move towards deregulation, financialization and the dismantling of the welfare apparatus. The ‘new stoicism’ engendered by conservative think tanks such as the Cato Institute associated wasteful government expenditure with sentimentality, and with the ‘guilt’ and ‘sympathy’ that underwrote the left’s ‘politics of feeling’.²⁷⁰ In its place they exalted the ‘tough-mindedness’ of the stoic individualist, opposed to conformity and enamored of his own independence (both fiscal and emotional). Such individuals are, almost by definition, disdainful of the ‘emotion-driven’ liberal program. These decidedly masculine and inevitably “rugged” entrepreneurs were held, Ellison argues,

²⁶⁷ Ellison, *Cato’s Tears*, p.172.

²⁶⁸ Ellison, *Cato’s Tears*, p.175.

²⁶⁹ Ellison, *Cato’s Tears*, p.173.

²⁷⁰ Ellison, *Cato’s Tears*, pp.193-4.

as the model for a citizenry adapted to the economic and political conditions of the nineteen seventies, eighties, and beyond. The ethos of absolute self-sufficiency, expressed in both financial and emotional terms, is of course reminiscent of, though not the same as, a Laschian critique of market forces, and their deleterious effects upon the individual. The libertarian figure of the independent iconoclast, going their own way and looking out for ‘number one’, stoically controlling their sympathies, shares a great deal with the image of the cool outsider even as it avoids the Laschian charge of deadening cynicism.

Ellison intervenes in Berlant’s argument to effectively historicize Berlant’s conception of the post-sixties liberal moment as a curiously a-temporal stagnancy. ‘‘68 [is regarded] as no longer historical, as *finished*, and therefore failed’, Berlant laments, contrasting her present institutional reality with the teleological (and sometimes even eschatological) dynamism of sixties optimism, in which progressive movements (in Berlant’s case, feminism) ‘refused to lose’ their ‘impulse toward a revolutionary utopian *historicity*’.²⁷¹ In framing the causes not just in terms of the failure of liberal institutions, but, rather, as involving an ongoing struggle with conservatism in the political and social arenas, Ellison partly relieves the onus Berlant places on liberal activists for the apparent death of the historical future by locating this ‘post-utopia’ in a nexus of competing social forces.

Ellis’s direct treatment of these economic and cultural shifts is sparse but telling. ‘The hippie cried when Reagan won’, *The Rules of Attraction* tells us. (RoA 102) A minor character is apparently writing a dissertation on ‘Reagan’s Eighties: Detrimental

²⁷¹ Berlant, “‘68, or Something”, pp.125-28, 132, 155.

effect on underclassmen' (*RoA* 112), which could be taken, almost, as Ellis's first flirtation with metafiction - a slyly alternate title to his own novel. In their political scepticism, rampant consumerism, and strong desire for independence above all, Ellis's fictional students are, in their own way, perfectly adapted to this dark vision of neoliberal/libertarian society. They pride themselves on their cool distance from one another, despite the homogeneity of their group in terms of wealth, consumption habits, lifestyle choices, and their racial uniformity.

That racial homogeneity is significant. Blackness is hardly mentioned in *The Rules of Attraction*, excepting one brief mention of the image of the 'cool jazzman' when Lauren recalls Victor 'busy scribbling non sequiturs to a black man that always wore sunglasses that reflect your eyes even if it was storming outside. What was that class? Electronic Jazz?' (*RoA* 92) In the course of re-stating a Laschian objection to the 'Culture of Narcissism', the white, wealthy focus of Ellis's novel re-creates some of the troubling racialized undertones of Lasch's socio-politics. While the logic of Reaganite neoliberalism was, at least nominally, postracial, erasing the distinctions of race gender and ethnicity - now deemed irrelevant to an "organic" free market, Lasch's moral conservatism saw the exaltation of individual competition as a social force that propelled middle-class whites into a state of 'ghetto' selfishness.²⁷²

Lasch argues that consumer culture and unfettered economic competition brought with them a ruthlessness he clearly associates with urban, black, inner-city life. He draws a disturbing parallel between this decline in mannered white society and the increasing penetration of black youth jargon into white, affluent communities.

²⁷² Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp.67-8.

In some ways, middle-class society has become a pale copy of the black ghetto, as the appropriation of its language would lead us to believe. We do not need to minimize the poverty of the ghetto or the suffering inflicted by whites on blacks in order to see that the increasingly dangerous and unpredictable conditions of middle-class life have given rise to similar strategies for survival.²⁷³

Whites, especially those suffering from Reagan's programmatic de-industrialization, are seen by Lasch as turning toward a racialized 'survival strategy' of 'militant alienation' that persists as a countercultural leftover, now detached from its revolutionary context. No great fan of the counterculture itself, Lasch, a traditionalist, instead looks to communitarian models of the working class as a corrective. What position Ellis may hold on the counterculture is more difficult to pinpoint, beyond the fact that both locate the origins of the spread of this 'ghetto' attitude in the fallout from the sixties.

Accompanying, and signifying this 'survival strategy', according to Lasch, is the prevalence among whites of 'black idiom'.

In the late sixties, white radicals enthusiastically adopted the slogan, "Up against the Wall, Motherfucker!" But the term has long since lost its revolutionary associations, like other black idioms first popularized among whites by political radicals and spokesmen for the counterculture, and in slightly expurgated form has become so acceptable that the term "mother" has become everywhere, even among teeny-boppers, a term of easygoing familiarity or contempt. Similarly the Rolling Stones and other exponents of hard or acid rock, who used the obscenity of the ghetto to convey a posture of militant

²⁷³ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp.67-8.

alienation, have given way to groups who sing more sweetly, but still in ghetto accents, of a world where you get only what you're prepared to take. The pretense of revolutionary solidarity having evaporated, as the zonked-out lovefest of the "Woodstock Nation" deteriorated into the murderous chaos of Altamont, the underlying cynicism surfaces more clearly than ever. Every mother for himself!²⁷⁴

Ellis's conspicuously white world of Camden and campus partakes in this strain of provocative moralizing. Just as the notable absence of sympathy draws attention to itself, the notable absence of the conditions of poverty, deprivation and the existential threat of immanent violence are seen to underwrite the incongruity of the characters' extreme affectlessness, underwritten as it is by considerable economic and cultural privilege. Where Mailer saw his 'white negro' as adopting a ready-made survival strategy in black coolness, Lasch and Ellis observe a similar phenomenon of the young, wealthy and white 'acting black' and adopting the 'posture of the ghetto', and bemoan its deleterious effects. Ellis, like Lasch, remains largely silent and circumspect about the counterculture itself, whilst poking fun at some of its more extreme and parodic aspects. But on the subject of its vestigial remains, and their passage into the mainstream of white society, the two are united in their tone of moral alarm.

3.3. The Cooling of the Avant-Garde- 'The New Cool Art': Postmodernism and Coolness.

The sense of post-utopia recurs in Fredric Jameson's writing on the Bonaventure Hotel. Here, as in Berlant's '68 or Something', thwarted utopianism

²⁷⁴ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.67 (footnote).

takes on an affective valence, as Jameson describes the reflective surface of the hotel's exterior with reference to that iconic totem of coolness – the mirror shades.

one would want to stress the way in which the glass skin repels the city outside; a repulsion for which we have analogies in those reflective sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes and thereby achieve a certain aggressivity towards and power over the Other. In a similar way, the glass skin achieves a peculiar and placeless disassociation of the Bonaventure from its neighborhood: [...] you cannot see the hotel itself, but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it.²⁷⁵

Codified in the architecture of the Bonaventure, Jameson sees an aggressive distancing that enacts self-sufficiency tinged, as it is, with the iconography of cool interpersonal distance and self-guarding. Like a character in *The Rules of Attraction*, this aggressively cool and self-sufficient projection apparently isolates the Bonaventure from its specific setting, throwing it into a 'placeless' a-locality. But, simultaneously, Jameson offers us an alternative reading, one in which these same reflective and blank qualities situate and ground the Bonaventure not only in place, but very firmly in time, as well. Whereas the utopian modernism of Le Corbusier sought to 'radically separate' the 'new utopian space of the modern from the degraded and fallen city fabric', the Bonaventure's mirror-shades effect ends up excluding the city around it. Having no exterior features of its own beyond the aggressive self-sufficiency of its mirror surface, the reflected city itself becomes the thing against which it defines itself, an effect which Jameson sums up with a brief Heideggerian parody: 'let the fallen city fabric continue to be in its being'.²⁷⁶ The hotel's efforts to

²⁷⁵ Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1988* (London, 1998), p.13.

²⁷⁶ Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', pp.12-13.

enact a cool, locationless self-sufficiency paradoxically result in its placement both in the space of the 'fallen city' and in the post-utopian moment of postmodernism.

Jameson famously made much of the 'waning of affect' in the artistic and cultural life of the postmodern era. Beginning with his 1984 article in the *New Left Review*, Jameson's portrait of postmodern culture dwelt on the contrast between the modernisms of the turn of the century and the postmodernisms of the nineteen sixties and afterward. Rather than follow Jameson into a general discussion of postmodernism at this point, I would like to isolate two important features of his portrayal of the contrast with modernism – the aforementioned 'waning of affect', as well as 'surface and depth'. This waning of affect is powerfully evoked by his contrast of Van Gogh's 1887 'A Pair of Boots' and Warhol's 1980 'Diamond Dust Shoes'. Jameson sets up this contrast to argue that, by the nineteen sixties, a new affective tenor was at large in art that had replaced the emotional depth of early modernism, concerned as it was with depth as a metaphor for the operations of the psyche– the ego, the unconscious – with a new emphasis on surface. There is nothing behind, beyond, or underneath Warhol's flat presentation of shoes. No emotional significance to them. This observation is part of a larger concern in Jameson with surface and depth. The postmodern, as he defines it, is concerned with surface play over deeper, hidden, or otherwise obfuscated meaning. He sees its semantic character epitomized by the displacement of parody by pastiche, the prevalence of 'blank' parody that takes the form of stylistic play the ironic or satirical component that would direct its audience to an ulterior meaning. The new avant-garde, according to

Jameson, shares with the old a 'stylistic and discursive heterogeneity', but one lacks its modernist predecessor's implicit commitment to critique.²⁷⁷

Jameson was not the first to link the avant-garde of the sixties and afterwards with flattened affect. In 1965 the then-art-critic for the *New York Post*, Irving Sandler, published a paper entitled 'The New Cool Art', in *Art in America*, in which he maintained that, in 'the last five or six years, a growing number of American artists have rejected the premises of Abstract Expressionism'. The 'most extreme' among these artists, he says, include Warhol and Lichtenstein whose 'dead-pan' and 'mechanistic' approaches to art rejected the 'hot gestural style' in favour of muted affect.²⁷⁸ Before Jameson penned his essay, the label 'cool' had already stuck to the new visual avant-garde. *Newsweek* referred to Jasper Johns as 'mint cool' whilst David Bourdon would reflect on the sixties artists as a 'comparatively cool, impersonal' generation, and *Time* magazine's resident art critic Robert Hughes gave Warhol's art the label of 'cool and silent'.²⁷⁹ Alan Solomon, in 1967, offered a different conception of coolness in relation to the visual arts, one that did not necessarily preclude strong passion, but which encoded suspicion of conventional beliefs, strongly redolent of Lyotard's conception of postmodernism.²⁸⁰

Robert Hughes provides an interesting example, coming from a perspective that dwells extremely negatively on coolness. He chose to end his 1980 television series *The Shock of the New* with a reflection on what he called 'modernism in its declining

²⁷⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham NC, 1991), p.17.

²⁷⁸ Sandler, 'The New Cool Art', pp.96-101.

²⁷⁹ 'The Younger', *Newsweek*, 24 February 1964, p.82; David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York, 1989), p.66; Robert Hughes, 'Bronx is Beautiful', *Time* lxxviii, 2 August 1971, p.68.

²⁸⁰ Alan Solomon, 'The New York Art Scene: Who Makes It?' *Vogue*, 1 August, 1967, p.136.

years'. 'The famous radicalism of sixties and seventies art turns out to have been a kind of dumb-show', he tells us, 'a charade of toughness, a way of avoiding feeling'. Hughes's concluding monologue outlines what he considers the pivotal role of emotion in art, the basic project of which is to 'restore the world in its entirety [...] not through argument but through feeling [...] and to pass from feeling to meaning'.²⁸¹ For Hughes a paucity of 'feeling' in the material bespeaks not only an isolated failure of emotional connection with the audience, but a lack of meaning. Or the possibility of meaning. Coolness in art thus denies not only emotional depth but semantic depth as well.

The label of coolness tends to adhere more to the visual and plastic arts than to literature, but, nonetheless, Lasch effectively anticipates many of the strands of Hughes and others' objections. Taking aim, in particular, at the avant-gardism of Donald Barthelme, Lasch excoriates postmodern literature as a degradation of modernism. The 'evasive mood' of contemporary literature, according to Lasch, causes confessional impulses in the writer to degenerate 'into anticonfession' where the 'inner life is precisely what can no longer be taken seriously'. He tells us that, in this context, 'The voyage to the interior discloses nothing but a blank. The writer no longer sees life reflected in his own mind'.²⁸² Instead, like Jameson's portrait of the Bonaventure, 'he sees the world, even in its emptiness, as a mirror of himself'.²⁸³ Using quotations from Paul Zweig, Lasch portrays this strain in art as symptomatic of a 'core of blandness' arising from 'emotional hibernation' and 'suspicion of personal emptiness' at the heart of modern life. Lasch portrays this inner desolation (in the ominously titled sub-chapter 'The Void Within') as a result both of literature and of

²⁸¹ Robert Hughes, 'The Future that Was', *The Shock of the New*, BBC/Time-Life, 1980. Television.

²⁸² Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp.20-21.

²⁸³ Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', pp.13.

the American people's status as a movie-going public, with the interior vacuity demonstrated alike by popular culture and literary high culture.

The Rules of Attraction contains some parodic jabs at postmodern literature and the effect it is seen as engendering in the residents of Camden. In the course of the novel we are presented with a series of artworks the claimed allegorical-symbolic meaning of which is lambasted by the narrators as vacuous. Stump, the poet, is working on a sequence of bestiality poems. The concept is, in his own words, 'that when Man fucks animals, He's fucking Nature, since he's become so computerized and all [...] I'm working on the dog section now where this guy tied up a dog and is having intercourse with it because He thinks dog is God. D-O-G ... G.O.D. God spelled backwards. Get it? See?' (RoA 222) The assignment of semantic depth is reduced to a paltry game in the narrators' estimation. Their cynicism toward the 'Get it? See?' moment bespeaks a rejection of the interpretive process itself and an uncaring, eye-rolling disregard for the messages 'hidden' in art that need to be 'decoded'. The sculpture students wonder what Tony's latest sculpture 'really means', calling it 'disturbing, lyrical', and 'Like Diane Arbus with none of the conviction'. Sean, watching this exchange, knows first-hand from Tony that it is 'meant to be a steel vagina' and regards the girls' attempts to assign meaning as evidence of having 'a serious problem'. (RoA 119) These "deep and meaningful" works of art are treated by Ellis's narrators as empty posturing that conceals shallowness or total depthlessness: shallowness in the case of the steel vagina and the bestiality poems, depthlessness in the form of the 'Korean Art major' who, Paul tells us, paints self-portraits of his penis and 'keeps screaming 'let's call this art' during a drunken car-ride into town to get more beer. (RoA 289) Ellis thus portrays the loss of depth in art as a parallel condition

to the loss of deep emotional and interpersonal connections in his fictional world.

We will turn, however, to Martin Amis, for a fuller exploration of the cooling of the avant-garde and its effects. Amis deals with this notion of an avant-garde that suffers from the linked phenomena of flattened affect and semantic thinness. In his 1984 novel *Money*, Amis, in a similar vein to Hughes, links ‘feeling’ with ‘meaning’ very strongly. He portrays this lack, or loss, of depth as both a cultural and a literary phenomenon that pertains to the spectacle-driven world of advertising, Hollywood blockbusters and ‘mass’ culture, as much as to the literary world of the avant-garde. Like Lasch, he sees this cultural force as inculcating in the individual a mirror image of itself – the ‘cool’ life of consumption and satisfaction, which brings with it a stunted emotionality and an ‘inner life’ bereft of reflection. And, like Ellis, Amis historicizes this phenomenon as a product of the post-utopian aftermath of the nineteen sixties counterculture. The ‘cool life’ that the novel’s protagonist lives is one afflicted by the twin and linked conditions of semantic and affective shallowness. I will argue that Amis, similar to Ellis, views this condition of alienation as a product of countercultural fallout, and ultimately offers a critique both of the deleterious and linked effects the counterculture has had on society and the individual, and of the shallow truncated and stunted nature of post-sixties racial relations, mediated as they are by the exchange of money and the status of cool ‘iconoclasm’ as effectively a consumer choice.

3.4. ‘The Special Affect of Affectlessness’: Martin Amis’s *Money*.

In a 1990 report for *Premiere*, from the set of *RoboCop 2*, Martin Amis chooses to end his essay with an observation on a group of skateboarding teenagers he spots outside the set at night:

the young rollerskaters loop and glide, remote and self-possessed. Ironically, these incurious youths are themselves much talked about and widely celebrated; magazine articles have been written about them. They exude calm and indifference and silent *esprit de corps*: immaculately affectless. They are the audience of the future. They will watch the *RoboCop* double bill with no response at all – without a tremor, without a smile, without a flinch of recognition.²⁸⁴

The reference to extensive earlier discussion of these ‘self-possessed’ and ‘immaculately affectless’ youths remains vague, but is highly redolent of Lasch and others. Amis’s apparent insider knowledge of the actions and intentions of these youths bespeaks an affect all its own – he is at once fascinated and repelled, able to understand and represent their condition whilst maintaining a certain critical and moral distance.

Amis hazards his own guess as to the origins of this muting of affect. Like Cross, he lays a measure of responsibility at the feet of a ‘nasty’ and ‘edgy’ popular media style. Describing the futuristic technological overkill of *RoboCop*, where a man is shot over two hundred times by a malfunctioning killer robot, he says the scene relies as much on special effects as it does on projecting a ‘special affect’.

To define: *affect* means ‘feeling tone’; and *affectlessness* means ‘no feeling tone’ – no heart. And the heartlessness of our response to the *RoboCop* future is

²⁸⁴ Martin Amis, ‘RoboCop II’, in *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov And Other Excursions* (New York, 1994), pp. 159-169, (165).

most noticeable, of course, when we confront the movie's extreme violence.

American children laugh at *Rambo* because they don't yet know what violence means, because they shouldn't be watching *Rambo* (what, you wonder, will *their* children be laughing at?). The hoods in *RoboCop* – and in most American thrillers of the past twenty years – laugh as they kill and rape and devastate because this is the expression of their anti-ethics, their sociopathology. But we laugh at the violence in *RoboCop*, even though we really should know better. We laugh because we have no response to it.

We laugh to fill the vacuum, like embarrassed Japanese.²⁸⁵

The 'special affect' of 'affectlessness' is – for Amis – both the cause and the effect in the audience of the moral vacuity in the material. The effect of movie violence is a familiar refrain for Amis in his nonfiction writing. His 1984 novel *Money* offers a deep exploration of these themes, set, as it is, in the world of American media production, and taking as its main character a man whose emotional life and inner voice are impoverished through immersion in this vacuous culture. In it, Amis gives his take on the nature and origins of cool affectlessness as a cultural style. Like Ellis he offers a moral diagnosis of the affliction of a young and privileged generation; unlike Ellis, he works (up to a point) to correct its effects in his protagonist. *Money* is, in the end, a comedy about the incredibility of the moral redemption tale as a genre of response to the cultural crisis it perceives.

The novel follows John Self, a television advertising producer and 'media huckster' as he travels back and forth between New York and London in an effort to produce a

²⁸⁵ Amis, 'RoboCop II', p.165.

feature film, the title of which alternates between '*Good Money*' and '*Bad Money*'.²⁸⁶ Self is presented as a character of conspicuous emotional vapidness and crass appetites. In similar vein to Ellis's characters, he is portrayed as 'numbed' by conspicuous consumption – of alcohol, cigarettes, junk-food and pornography. His unfaithful relationship with Selina is emotionally barren, sustained almost solely by her sexual degradation. When, on occasion, he assesses the condition of his emotional or 'inner life', his findings are bleak. 'I think I must have some new cow disease', he thinks early on in the novel, 'that makes you wonder whether you're real all the time, that makes your life feel like a trick, an act, a joke. I feel, I feel dead'. (M 60) Nonetheless, he is at least nominally satisfied with what his 'cool' life has to offer. 'Look at my life' he enjoins his readers: 'I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: But it's terrific! It's great! You're thinking: Some guys have all the luck! Well, I suppose it must look quite cool, what with the aeroplane tickets and the restaurants, the cabs, the filmstars, Selina, the Fiasco, the money'. (M 123) These graspings after self-knowledge highlight the novel's metafictionality. Self is on the verge of, but never fully achieves, an awareness of his status of a character in a novel. Unlike Hamlet, the hero of consciousness, whose intellect rankles at being confined to the conventions of revenge tragedy, the sluggish Self never fully succeeds in realizing the extent of the powers at work around him. His metafictional awareness never rises above unease and intimation while he remains in the grip of authorial agencies he never completely comprehends.

The forces that vie for control over Self are split into two camps. As he works to develop his movie, Self falls into the orbit of the deranged film producer Fielding

²⁸⁶ Martin Amis, *Money* (London, 1984); p.78; James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (Columbia SC, 2004), p.74.

Goodney and his proposed scriptwriter (and secret lover), the avant-garde fiction writer Doris Arthur. Goodney simultaneously pulls the wool over Self's eyes through his fake film project and imaginary lines of credit, whilst encouraging and enabling his pornographic appetites both literally, in furnishing him with a seemingly bottomless expense account and encouraging him to spend conspicuously and visit brothels, and more subtly, by crafting around him a world without any demand beyond the satisfaction of those appetites. Doris Arthur, who is 'in on the joke' serves as Goodney's stooge, delivering a deliberately unworkable script in order to draw out the development process, and in so doing, extend the cruel 'prank' they are playing on the hapless Self. Arrayed against Fielding Goodney and Doris Arthur are "Martin Amis", the author's eponymous self-insert character, whom Self approaches in London to fix Doris Arthur's script, and Martina Twain, who serves (as the name suggests) as a female doubling of Amis, an old friend of Self whom he gets back in touch with in New York.

These quasi-authorial forces vie for control of Self. Goodney and Doris Arthur strive to encourage Self's 'pornographic' appetites. 'Pornographic' recurs frequently as a keyword to describe John Self's consumption habits and lifestyle (beyond the explicit sexual material). Pornography belongs to the Amisian aesthetic category of the depthless. The pornographic, is, for Amis, 'the classic humourless form [...] a state where irony, wit and self-knowledge are entirely absented, [...] a cultural force that can be extremely dangerous'.²⁸⁷ Goodney and Doris Arthur in effect work to keep Self from exploring depths, depths of self-knowledge and of meaning. They are, in the final estimation, the apotheosis of shallowness themselves. Goodney is ascribed

²⁸⁷ Tom Chatfield, 'Martin Amis: The Prospect Interview', 1 February 2010, www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/martin-amis. Last accessed: 2 March 2017.

no understandable motivation at the novel's end. Questions of motivation, of character depth, for Goodney are relegated to being unimportant or inapplicable or both. (Self even gives the reader Goodney's mother's telephone number, if we can be bothered to enquire about his motivations).

"Martin Amis" and Martina, meanwhile, serve to direct Self toward depths, be they emotional or semantic, variously pushing him in the direction of a deepening of his emotional and intellectual engagement with the world. Martina gently offers Self, through her friendship, a crash course in allegory, lending him *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and explaining, to Self's initial bewilderment, the basics of double or deeper meaning. "Martin Amis," meanwhile, stymies Goodney's plans by adding realism and character depth to the film script. Both "Martin Amis" and Martina also encourage Self to explore his own emotions, nudging him toward admission of his feelings. Their ultimate goal is to wrest Self away from the influence of Goodney and Doris Arthur's meaninglessness and emotionlessness, and to lead him towards emotional continence and his story towards a 'meaningful' conclusion.

The depthlessness that Goodney and Doris Arthur work to foster in Self's world serves to bring together, via the union (including the sexual union) of the two conspirators, the thematic marriage of the mediatized, appetite-driven world of advertising and popular entertainment (Goodney's fiefdom) with Amis's parody of empty postmodern stylistics (as represented by Doris Arthur and her works - Amis's caricature of a flash, but ultimately vapid postmodernist literature). Amis also equates, through the character of Self, semantic depthlessness with emotional barrenness. He portrays the two as linked, and moves his fictionalized avatars to

address both as facets of the same problem. In this way, Amis brings together advertising and mass-culture, the postmodern literary avant-garde, emotional shallowness and lack of deeper ‘meaning’ as linked and mutually supporting attributes of the malaise that is afflicting Self, his world, and the literature to which it has give rise. His criticisms of Hollywood ‘nasties’ can be seen to effectively mirror his treatment of certain sectors of the literary avant-garde. In this way the criticisms of – explicitly - post-sixties mass culture (the ‘cool nastiness’ Gary Cross saw resulting from a style’s detachment from its original rebellious impetus) are also a critique of postmodern fiction. By looking at each of these two ‘villains’ in turn, Fielding Goodney and Doris Arthur we can get a clear picture of what they represent, and the singularity of the effect Amis sees them as producing.

3.4.1. Goodney, Doris Arthur, Postmodernist Fictions, and Questions of ‘Style’.

Amis’s view on the mainstay of Hollywood’s output was no secret. The figure of Fielding Goodney is immediately resonant with the frequent appearance in Amis’s nonfiction of the vacuous, edgy, and pointlessly transgressive cinema hack who substitutes gratuitous violence for psychological/emotional depth. The prime candidate for Fielding Goodney’s real-life basis is Brian De Palma. In his journalistic writings, Amis singles De Palma out for special vituperation, making him the exemplar of the ‘media-bourne cretinization of life’.²⁸⁸ The specific objections Amis raises against De Palma in his 1979 interview constitute ground for identifying Goodney with him. Amis characterizes his output as lowbrow, violent, sensationalist, and crassly commercial, even providing the title for *Money*’s fictional film with his

²⁸⁸ Martin Amis, ‘Brian De Palma: The Movie Brute’, in *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America* (London, 2006), pp.79-88, (88).

aphoristic ‘there is no clean money’.²⁸⁹ Amis classes De Palma’s oeuvre as ‘pornography’, and De Palma admits that he would like to make an x-rated film if only the hated censors would allow it a general release.²⁹⁰

This background has led critics such as Diedrick to posit that John Self represents De Palma,²⁹¹ an interpretation that fails to take into account the power relation between the two. Goodney is the one encouraging and enabling Self’s pornographic appetites both literally, in furnishing him with a seemingly bottomless expense account and encouraging him to spend conspicuously, and more subtly, by crafting around him a world without any demand beyond their satisfaction. Self thus represents De Palma’s self-described ‘ideal audience’: ‘a real street audience [...] a very unsophisticated [...] crowd!’ In the interview, Amis comments that his ‘movies depend, not on a suspension of disbelief, but on a suspension of intelligence such as the Forty-Second Street crowd have already made’.²⁹² He accuses De Palma of crafting characters devoid of psychological depth or understandable motivation. His characters show no inkling of human complexity. The same can be said of Goodney. Like a De Palma creation himself, Goodney has no rationale for his wantonly cruel behaviour. His objective is to purvey this world to Self and to reject Self’s periodic grasps at understanding him.

Amis’s critiques of mass culture and literary culture effectively mirror one another, especially with regard to the role of ‘style’. ‘Style’ is a quality Amis recognizes in De Palma. But in this case Amis bewails its possession by an artist so bereft of content

²⁸⁹ Amis, ‘Brian De Palma: The Movie Brute’, p.83.

²⁹⁰ Amis, ‘Brian De Palma: The Movie Brute’, p.86.

²⁹¹ Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p.76.

²⁹² Amis, ‘Brian De Palma: The Movie Brute’, p.88.

beyond the reality-burring and the confrontationally nasty. 'Style', he laments in regard to De Palma, 'will always convince cinematic purists that the surfaces they admire contain depth'.²⁹³

Though Martin would say that there 'wasn't any of that generational stuff' between himself and his father Kingsley, questions of style concerned the Amises of both generations, and marked one of the few intergenerational disputes between father and son.²⁹⁴ A footnote in *Experience* (2000) recounts Kingsley Amis's reaction to *Lolita* (1955). Kingsley is recorded as having told Martin that Nabokov's writing is 'just flimflam, diversionary stuff ... That's just style'. Martin Amis responds with the aphoristic pronouncement: 'Whereas I would argue that style is morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified. It's not in the mere narrative arrangement of good and bad that morality makes itself felt. It can be there in every sentence'.²⁹⁵ Kingsley regarded style and expression as qualities that ought to forward the action whilst deploring what he calls the 'verbal shock tactics, dislocated syntax, unnatural epithets and other affectations of singularity', which he viewed as the legacy of *Ulysses* (1922).²⁹⁶

The response of Amis the younger imputes to style a mode of seeing: rather than appended ornament, whereby stylistics are co-temporal with perception: 'you should not waste anything. There should be no dead areas. [...] Style is not an icing, it is an ingredient, perhaps the main ingredient of your way of perceiving things'.²⁹⁷ This co-temporality with perception brings, for Amis, obvious dangers and responsibilities, as

²⁹³ Amis, 'Brian De Palma: The Movie Brute', p.84.

²⁹⁴ Neil Powell, *Amis and Son: Two Literary Generations* (London, 2008), p.360.

²⁹⁵ Martin Amis, *Experience* (London, 2001), p.122.

²⁹⁶ Kingsley Amis, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* ed. Zachary Leader (London, 2000), p.989.

²⁹⁷ Christopher Bigsby et. al., *Writers in Conversation with Christopher Bigsby* (Norwich, 2000), p.31.

evinced in his moralistic concern for the recipients of a lifelong diet of the special affect of affectlessness.

Through the character of Doris Arthur, Amis links this pop culture ‘special affect’ to the literary avant-garde. Arthur is presented as Goodney’s ally, in league with him in his scheme against Self. She is the other scriptwriter on ‘Good/Bad Money’ besides “Martin Amis”. Her draft of the script, we are told, is based upon her short story collection *The Ironic High Style*, an Amisian parody of ‘postmodern’ literature, about a tramp who speaks in Shakespeare quotations but uses them to say nothing more than ‘begging and scrounging’. (M 59) Her script advances Goodney’s agenda through its participation in Goodney-De Palma’s ‘unreality’. “Martin Amis” is brought into the project by Self to correct Doris Arthur’s ‘realism problem’, tainting Arthur’s literary ‘high culture’ stylistics with the unreality and shallowness of Goodney-De Palma’s pop cultural style.

The title of Doris Arthur’s short story collection, *The Ironic High Style*, should be read against Amis’s own formulation of what he calls the ‘High Style’. This is his name for a style of fiction that has its roots in morality and points to ‘deeper truths’. An essay dealing with Saul Bellow gives Amis an occasion to lay out what he sees as the ‘High Style’. ‘The High Style is not just a high style for the hell of it. There are responsibilities involved’, he declares. It ‘attempts to speak for the whole of mankind with suasion’, and comes at a great emotional cost to the writer, who is made exposed and vulnerable through its use.²⁹⁸ It is important to note that the High Style, as Amis formulates it, has two significant characteristics – one is the fact that it is not just style

²⁹⁸ Martin Amis: ‘Saul Bellow and the Moronic Inferno’, in *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America* (London, 1986), pp.1-11, (5).

‘for the hell of it’, that is, it has depth and not just the surface-level appearance of sophistication. The other is its emotional component. It is based in a desire to ‘move’ and a longing ‘for passionate speech’.²⁹⁹ Here, once again, Amis equates emotional depth with semantic depth. The two are inseparably intermingled in the High Style. And his construction of the High Style tells us, presumably, everything the ‘Ironic High Style’ is not.

“Amis” differs from Doris Arthur in that he agonizes about the morality of fiction, even referring to his moral responsibilities to his characters, thus recreating his namesake’s assertion that style and moral responsibility are one and the same. “Amis” only reluctantly accepts the place of Irony, telling self that ‘rockbottom realism’ is ‘too grand’ for the ‘downward-looking’ twentieth century. By implication, the Ironic High Style has no such morality, nor aspiration to depth or realism. (M 248)

Again turning to Amis’s nonfiction writings, we can see that he historicizes the depthlessness of contemporary culture, both literary and popular, as the artefactual residue of a depleted counterculture.

3.4.2. A Countercultural Hangover.

Amis treats what he calls De Palma’s ‘moral and artistic anarchy’ with disdain. He castigates him for his ‘monomaniacal’ fixity on the transgressive. The phrasing of his attack on De Palma is particularly curious when considered in relation to Amis’s writings on William Burroughs. Burroughs is acknowledged by Amis as a major early influence whose voice, he concedes, overwhelms his own in *Dead Babies*

²⁹⁹ Amis: ‘Saul Bellow and the Moronic Inferno’, p.6.

(1975). Reading Amis's critical writings on Burroughs and De Palma side by side reveal that one is saved and the other is damned for possessing many of the same attributes. Beyond their 'unyielding fixity' on the unreal and the extreme, neither shows 'real people'. Amis meets Burroughs' 'illogicality' and 'reality blurring' with approval. Burroughs is also praised for the 'peculiar slant' of the 'comic valuelessness of his despair'.³⁰⁰ While approving of these aspects of Burrough's work, Amis never explicitly unpacks them. Indeed, he appears to set little store by the efforts of critics to 'decode' them and the 'humorless' monographs that result.³⁰¹ Whatever quality serves to excuse Burroughs whilst damning De Palma is taken by Amis to be self-evident. The uneducational nastiness that Amis excoriates in De Palma is given a pass in Burroughs, whose novels 'don't seek to convert or to convince', and offer compensatory virtues in 'their style'.³⁰²

One possible answer to this apparent discrepancy can be found by looking to Lasch's ideas of a depleted countercultural style. The characters of Self and of Goodney exhibit a transgressiveness that has its origins in the sixties counterculture, but which has turned to consumption and excess in the vacuous commercialized 'post-utopia' which has followed. De Palma's champions have pointed out that Amis singles De Palma out for special vituperation whilst giving 'cheerful' Spielberg a comparatively easy pass.³⁰³ The difference, they hold, is that Amis sees in De Palma a thwarted, sold-out countercultural ideology whereas Spielberg had no such convictions to

³⁰⁰ Martin Amis, 'The Name is William Burroughs', in *The War Against Cliché* (London, 2002), pp.299-304, (304); Amis, 'Brian De Palma: The Movie Brute', p.84.

³⁰¹ Amis, 'The Name is William Burroughs', p.302.

³⁰² Amis, 'The Name is William Burroughs', p.300.

³⁰³ Chris Dumas, *Un-American Psycho: Brian De Palma and the Political Invisible* (Chicago, IL, 2013), p.40.

betray in the first place. Amis laments the commercialization, the co-opting by ‘dirty money’ of De Palma’s ‘anarchic, countercultural origins’.

Urban, radical, anti-establishment [... De Palma entered] via the tv-dominated world of documentary and verite [...] satire and chaotic improvisation, war protest and sexual daring – a product of the sixties, that golden age of high energy and low art. [...] The sixties radical package was merely the set of values that got to him first, and he was wearied of a ‘revolution’ he found ever more commercialized. ‘I too became a capitalist’, he has said. ‘By even dealing with the devil you become devilish. There’s no clean money’.³⁰⁴

‘All that remains’, according to Amis, of the ‘sixties guerrilla’ is ‘the unquenchable taste for anarchy: moral anarchy, artistic anarchy’, with the revolutionary justifications now gone.³⁰⁵ The difference between a Spielberg and De Palma, and, perhaps, a Burroughs and a De Palma, too, is that there was something to betray.

Amis historicizes the ‘special affect’ of affectlessness as a countercultural stylistics come loose from its original radicalism. He situates movie violence as a product of the nineteen sixties: ‘In the cinema, if not elsewhere, violence started getting violent in 1966. [...] And I was delighted to see it, all this violence. I found it voluptuous, intense, and (even then) disquietingly humorous; it felt subversive and counter-cultural’.³⁰⁶ Throughout the novel, Amis similarly offers John Self as a representative of the worse excesses of the sixties and its cultural legacy. Self, like De Palma, is one of this ‘new breed of media huckster who came of age in the freewheeling 1960s, and struck it rich in the mid-1970s making a series of controversial TV commercials

³⁰⁴ Amis, ‘Brian De Palma: The Movie Brute’, p.83.

³⁰⁵ Amis, ‘Brian De Palma: The Movie Brute’, p.83.

³⁰⁶ Martin Amis, ‘I Am in Blood Stepp’d in So Far’, in *The War Against Cliché* (London, 2002), pp.11-17, (11).

pedaling ‘smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines’.³⁰⁷ He describes himself throughout the novel as a ‘product of the Sixties’ (*M* 392; 64):

I was led to believe that being young was quite an achievement. Everyone seemed to encourage me in this apprehension, especially the old. An iconoclast, I had no time for mortality. I used to stand around denouncing you all – you old fucks – and you just nodded and smiled. You seemed to think I was wonderful... Come to think of it, I didn’t look too bad in those days. (*M* 392)

The fantasies he pedals through his commercials sell the dream of trendiness and instant gratification through consumption. He revels in their shocking crassness; proudly recalling that one of his commercials was ‘only ever shown in court’ it was so obscene (the boast is reminiscent of De Palma’s antagonistic relationship with the censors), and his own personal ‘style’ amounts to little more than the needlessly provocative: All my commercials’, he says, ‘featured a big bim in cool pants and bra. It was sort of my trademark’. (*M* 70)

Self is a figure of the counterculture turned in on itself, on the self. Youth, for Self, is a defining aspect of his personality (which is to say, barely defining). Early on in the novel, he describes his face as ‘a face that can usually face them down, wide and grey, full of adolescent archaeology and cheap food and junk money, the face of a fat snake’. (*M* 9) And like a caricature adolescent he lives for the satisfaction of his own ego through spending and play. So obsessed is he with maintaining his youth that his ultimate fantasy is to make enough money to undergo a ‘full body transplant’ in California, transferring his mind to a younger body produced bespoke for him at great expense. His obsession with youth and his voracious appetite for instant self-

³⁰⁷ Amis, *Money*, p.78; and Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p.74.

gratification identify him as Amis's ultimate satire on the excesses of his own generation. 'My generation,' says Self proudly, 'we started all this. Before, everyone was presumably content to feel like death the whole time. Now they want to feel terrific all over. The Sixties taught us this, that it was hateful to be old'. (M 64) Amis bewails this narcissism of the body in Warhol:

The diaries [of Warhol] show very clearly how the transcendentalism of the counterculture eventually turned in on the self, on the human body [...] beauty classes and pedicure into nutrition, collagen, shiatsu treatments, kinesiology, and other desperate quackeries.³⁰⁸

Names are important for Amis. 'Self' and 'selfishness' are the model, the shorthand, in Lasch and others, for the depletion of the counterculture. Fielding Goodney ('feeling good') is the purveyor of this 'Me Generation' ethos, the apotheosis of Lasch's 'antireligion' of therapeutic self-satisfaction and inwardness.³⁰⁹ Initially, Goodney claims to be twenty-five. (M 21) But at the end of the novel, when his scheme is revealed, he confesses to being forty-five, which would make him twenty-five in 1959/1960, and born around 1939. (M 352) He, too, is a 'product of the sixties' rather than of the decades that followed. By extension, so is the style (both in aesthetic terms and 'lifestyle') he represents.

3.4.3. Postmodern Positionings.

Both Amis and Ellis can be thought of as 'cool' writers, a label that comes from their irreverence and iconoclasm, but also touches upon deeper questions of their engagement with the postmodern. The label 'cool', as it came to be used by art critics and social commentators during the decades after the nineteen sixties, reflects many

³⁰⁸ Amis, 'Elvis and Andy: US Males', in *The War Against Cliché* (London, 2002), pp.37-44, (42).

³⁰⁹ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.13.

of the qualities associated with the postmodern. But whereas ‘postmodern’ became a label associated with the academy, and thus with a disinterested description, ‘cool’, as it was deployed by the critics, was always implicitly (sometimes explicitly) in quotation marks - associated with a suspect youthful rebelliousness now shorn of its radical credentials. When a critic like Robert Hughes, his eyebrow cocked, calls an artist or a piece of art ‘cool’, he is identifying many of the features described by postmodern theory – muted affect, a preponderance of surface and lack of depth, a conscious debt to Beat culture. But term is deployed sceptically. ‘Cool’ encodes a negative critical judgment, or at least a suspicion that negative judgement may be in order. Its use, in this way, mirrors some of the discourse that has surrounded the ‘social’ valences of cool in its post sixties context – a stylishness that conceals emptiness, a once-revolutionary stance now commodified by the mainstream. The slang lexicographer Jonathon Green damns the contemporary usage of ‘cool’ as the remnants of a ‘once radical’ stance increasingly deployed as cover, as ‘posturing’ by those ‘with nothing to say’ - a cover for inner vacuity.³¹⁰

The extent to which Amis and Ellis identify (or are identified as) ‘postmodern’ is the subject of some debate. Their hostility towards ‘cool’ as a carrier of negative features associated with postmodernism (depthlessness, both semantic and affective) serves to locate them in a position of some scepticism and even hostility. On the other hand, both are rightly identified with postmodernist techniques of fiction writing. When Kingsley Amis first read *Money*, it is reported that he flung his copy across the room in disgust when “Martin Amis” first appeared. The point at which the novel began to display a po-mo self-referentiality he despised was the point at which he gave up. The

³¹⁰ Green, *Odd Job Man*, p.124

mixed feelings Martin Amis shows towards the fun of literary experimentation reflect a crossroads moment in British fiction during the period 1960-80. David Lodge's 1969 essay 'The Novelist as the Crossroads' and the 1978 symposium hosted by *The New Review* on 'The State of Fiction' both dealt with the question of metafiction's 'necessity' and its 'failure'.³¹¹ Kingsley, despite the willingness of some critics to conflate the angry young men of his generation with the Beats, had distanced himself from the postwar American avant-garde. Martin, on the other hand, had a keen affinity with postwar American avant-garde culture. As a young man, he was a Mod; named for 'modern jazz' (the British popular name for Cool Jazz, as opposed to 'trad' or 'traditional' 'hot' jazz), and as a young writer he fought his early agons with Nabokov and Burroughs. Nevertheless, the younger Amis remained circumspect about the risks of avant-gardism. He expressed an admiration for 'the English sentence' as the traditionalist bedrock for his writings.³¹² He exploited a framework of metafiction in *Money*, but the novel claims no revolutionary agenda in doing so, and only engages on that terrain, as his fictionalized persona states, reluctantly, and with an almost weary sense of necessity, redolent of John Braine at the *New Review* symposium, who concluded that the 'artifice of fiction can be taken for granted'.³¹³ "Martin Amis" (and, perhaps, Martin Amis), in admitting to Self that he is not a 'realist', concedes that a degree of irony and a technical respect for style are necessary.

³¹¹ David Lodge, 'The Novelist at the Crossroads', in *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London, 1971); and Ian McEwan, Kingsley Amis, John Braine, et. al., 'The State of Fiction - A Symposium', *The New Review* v.i (1978).

³¹² Francesca Riviere, 'Martin Amis, The Art of Fiction No.151', *Paris Review* cxlvi (1998), www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1156/martin-amis-the-art-of-fiction-no-151-martin-amis. Last accessed: 15 June 2017.

³¹³ John Braine, 'The State of Fiction - A Symposium', *The New Review* v.i (1978), 41.

When David Lodge revisited the ‘Novelist at the Crossroads’ in a seminar at the University of East Anglia in 1990, he chose not to include *Money* in the litany of ‘problematic or metafictional novels produced since I wrote my essay’, but rather in what he terms ‘crossover fiction’, a middle-ground, which it shared with Margaret Drabble’s *The Ice Age* (1977) and his own *How Far Can You Go?* (1980). This third category displays ‘the fictionality of the texts in a peculiarly drastic way and invariably reveals some anxiety about the ethical and epistemological nature of fictional discourse’, while nonetheless remaining concerned and engaged with ‘developments in contemporary society’.³¹⁴

A similarly mixed critical view is taken of Bret Easton Ellis by critics such as James Annesley (1998) and Zoltán Abádi-Nagy (2001) when it comes to his status within ‘postmodernism’. Belonging to a literary generation raised ‘after the battles of postmodernism had already been fought and won’, his ‘postmodern minimalism’ is a form of fiction that displays a concern with the same issues that obsess ‘high’ postmodern metafiction – a denial of totality and completeness and problematization of ideas of meaning – while simultaneously holding these notions at arms’ length.³¹⁵ Postmodernism’s reflexive metafiction complicates to absurdity the relation between fiction and life. In Ellis’s self-confessed role as satirist, he presents postmodernism as, in Young’s words, ‘a lived reality’: ‘Their fictions arise directly out of their own observations and experiences of postmodern culture [...] from within a lived reality not dissecting its constituents from the academic perimeters’.³¹⁶

³¹⁴ Qtd in Gavin Keulks, *Father and Son: Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, and the British Novel Since 1950* (Madison, WI, 2003), p.191.

³¹⁵ Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, ‘Minimalism vs. Postmodernism in Contemporary American Fiction’, *Neohelicon* xxviii.i (2001), 129-144; and Young, ‘Children of the Revolution’, p.14.

³¹⁶ Young, ‘Children of the Revolution’, p.18.

Young and Caveney, as well as Annesley, conclude that Ellis's writing ought to be considered exceptional within the field of postmodernism due to what they see as an un-postmodern socio-political program in his fiction: he is a satirist who rejects the postmodern convention of overlapping discourses with no centre in favour of a yearning for a 'moral core' that is conspicuously absent, a 'nostalgia for "truth" and "meaning"' amidst 'hyperreality', itself a strategy of resistance to postmodernist thinning of reality.³¹⁷

Ellis and Amis can thus both be seen as set somewhat apart from postmodernism by their concern for social commentary on matters outside of the text itself. And yet, both exhibit many of the features of postmodernist writing – Ellis, an apparent atemporality and inconclusivity; Amis, an insistent metafictionality. Sceptical of the latest forms of avant-gardism in literature, they use postmodern devices to, in effect, intervene in postmodernism from within, offering a critique and (in Amis's case especially) a corrective deepening of its surfaces, and directing their readers' attention toward the objects of their satire beyond the boundaries of textual play. Their styles are 'cool' in the sense Alan Liu gives to post-sixties cool: a gesture made toward a virtuous position from within a 'compromised' system – from the 'belly of the beast'.³¹⁸

3.4.4. 'The Reluctant Black Smile': Race in *Money*.

The status of racial issues in *Money* is troubling. The novel's opening, a place where themes often announce themselves strongly, gives the impression that racism and questions of race might form a large part of the novel's substance. We first meet

³¹⁷ Young, 'Vacant Possession', p.33; and Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, p.8.

³¹⁸ Liu, *The Laws of Cool*, p.104.

Self in a taxi coming from the airport. The driver who is taking him into New York City embarks on a racist tirade against ‘niggers and PRs’. ‘‘Only need a hundred guys, a hundred guys like me,’ he said, throwing his voice back, ‘take out all the niggers and PRs in this town.’’ (*M* 1) The very first thing we see Self do in the novel is to speak up and denounce the cab driver. He calls him a scumbag, saying that he thought it was ‘just a swearword until you came along. You’re the first real one I’ve met’. (*M* 2) We learn, of course, that Self has met all manner of questionable people, a veritable bestiary of criminals, cheats, and dubious characters. He is hardly an angelic figure himself. So his denouncement of the driver implies that racism holds a special status for him. It represents a low to which even the morally-challenged Self will not stoop.

After this initial incident, race largely disappears from the novel’s major preoccupations. We never again see Self denouncing racism or tackling racial issues head-on. In the media background noise of the novel’s world, blackness continually reappears as a threatening spectre. Self hears of a ‘granny mob-raped by black boys’, of an ‘old lady’ beaten up and raped by ‘black boys and skinheads’ who ‘came calling’ to ‘steal all her dough’. (*M* 91; 242). Self observes black youths sprawling in the doorways of ‘dead liquor stores’, the only thing preventing them from attacking him, he thinks, being Self’s size and the depression and diffidence that hangs about them. He later has a run-in with a ‘seven foot tall black pimp with a mahogany baseball bat’ who threatens him after one of Self’s episodes of drink-induced lost time. Self diffuses the situation by croaking the word ‘money’ and offering him the contents of his wallet. (*M* 3; 169). These instances pass by without any comment from Self, any reflection on the wider social or cultural implications. He simply absorbs

them and moves on. In a novel that casts a white man as Othello, apparently without much textual self-reflection on this cross-racial casting, race seems at once central and completely peripheral. Just as racial questions fade from the foreground of cool and coolness's cultural contexts as they increasingly become the provenance of a wealthy white commodity culture, so, too, questions of cross-racial understanding and misunderstanding become increasingly sub-textual in *Money*.

It is against this omnipresence of sinister and criminal blackness that Self strikes up an apparently cordial friendship with Felix, the black 'bellhop' who attends him in his New York hotel. Felix runs errands for Self while gently remonstrating with him for his self-destructive lifestyle. Self appears to have genuine affection for Felix, praising his diligence and good humour. But, above all, Self sees in Felix a kind of authentic spontaneity, exemplified by what he calls his 'pleasant agitation' (*M* 17), a characteristic he emphasizes again and again. He has a 'quick presence' that bespeaks 'careless intensity of life'; he is 'restless' (*M* 36), and possessed of nervous energy.

Self showers Felix with money, and enjoys doing so, relishing the apparent delight this causes Felix, and, above all, the very visible and bodily effect it has on him. After presenting him with a particularly extravagant tip, Self observes the change that comes over him:

There are few things worth more than the reluctant black smile: worth a hundred dollars. Worth more. The slopes of his eyelids were infinitely dark, making the stare louder and the smile more furtive. This would always give Felix a cheeky look, even when he stopped being a black kid and started being a black man. Perhaps I had the same look once, though I've lost it now. (*M* 143)

This episode represents the highest pitch of their ‘friendship’, and the limits of that friendship are clear. Self both draws near to, and remains distant from, Felix. On the one hand, he recognizes the boy’s similarity to his younger self (they perhaps share the same smile). On the other, Felix’s smile remains characteristically ‘black’ and explicitly other. Self insists that with Felix he is in pursuit of the honest interpersonal ‘touch’ – ‘I tried to get a negro hand-slapping thing going with Felix. *Why?* I thought. It’s for the touch, for the touch. After all we are only human beings down here and could do with a lot more praise and comfort than we actually get’. He and Felix, he imagines, are both ‘earthlings’, a favourite term that to Self denotes a common humanity in which racial and sexual differences are erased. Men, women, black, and white, Self purports only to see ‘earthling’. (*M* 97)

What Self sees as an authentic friendship in effect reduces Felix to a racialized body upon which external forces act, animating that body. The exchange of money (which Self confesses he uses as a surrogate for interpersonal connection, offering to slip the reader ‘good money’, at one stage, in return for us thinking well of him makes its effect known on Felix in a visible way. (*M* 46) It is the same force of market economics that runs rampant in the novel’s world, disenfranchising the young of London and degrading the landscape of the cities. Here it works to manipulate Felix’s features until he takes on the characteristics of the ‘elasticated black kids Felix’s age’ that Self sees around New York. (*M* 117)

The above-quoted passage dwells heavily on the diminishment of Felix’s agency. His smile is worth more because it is reluctant, furtive. The physical responsiveness that Self reads as youthful spontaneity and innocence is legible to the reader as something

much more political significant: a painful pliability to external influences – money and power. The ‘elastic’ and ‘agitated’ blackness of *Money*’s world invites comparison once again with Ngai’s animatedness, whereby the racialized body becomes ‘an instrument, porous and pliable’, ‘automized’ as an effect of subjugation to power.³¹⁹

According to Ngai, this plasmatic characteristic occurs most acutely in comedic and farcical depictions of racialized subjects. She names the early Disney animations and vaudeville as examples. In *Money*, Felix, in his role as ‘bellhop’, is placed in a similarly stereotypical role. The habitual title by which Self refers to him identifies him by his role in the world of work, and by his employer/employee relationship to Self. The inauthenticity of this role is hinted at by Self’s narration, which touches upon ‘Pornographic slapstick, custard pie, the comic relief with the landlady or bellhop, before the real fucking resumes elsewhere’. (*M* 257) Like Chaplin in *Modern Times*, one of Ngai’s examples, Felix’s ‘pleasant’ agitation is in fact the result of the routines of the work-world and routine in which he is subsumed, ‘hopping-to’ Self’s every demand and errand, transforming himself, with Sartrean bad faith, into a vaudevillian comic porter, the agitated ‘steppin-fetchit’ paradigm of animated blackness so abhorred by Baraka. He becomes, in this way, what Rey Chow calls the ‘automized other’.³²⁰

An important component of Self’s self-image is that he is an ‘iconoclast’. He frames himself in the habitual countercultural terms of rebellious youth opposed to the tyranny and morality of ‘old men’. (*M* 392) The countercultural virtue of sympathy is

³¹⁹ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p.97.

³²⁰ Chow, ‘Postmodern Automatons’, p. 63.

also important to him. Despite everything, he values the sympathy of the reader and believes himself sympathetic to others. (*M* 211; 29) This extends, in keeping with the sixties ethos with which Self's 'sympathies lie', to marginalized groups, at least nominally. (*M* 64) Everyone is an 'earthling'. In spite of his rampant misogyny, Self attests that he 'loves women', that he thinks 'chicks are cool', i.e., that he is 'cool with' them in the sense of possessing a knowing, insider familiarity with them. (*M* 143) The use of that word bespeaks its sixties heritage. Even the early Kerouac valued being 'cool' with African-Americans and other marginal groups. Old fashioned in its usage here, it connotes an intimate knowledge, an understanding of outsiders. Similarly, Self believes himself to be 'cool with' Felix, exchanging large and frequent sums of money in return for the surface appearance of sympathy, solidarity, and acceptance, paying him to perform the 'negro hand-slapping thing'. He identifies, in keeping with Liu's formula, with the empty position of the outsider without fully engaging with the outsider's identity. In fact, Self's mercenary 'friendship' with Felix does violence to the younger man's identity and autonomy. The 'gestural' coolness Liu describes is encapsulated in the specific gesture Self wants to perform with Felix: the 'hand slap' of insider familiarity and acceptance, an expression of understanding and solidarity, all bought and paid for by the wealthy advertiser.

The 'elastic' blackness that Self is so attracted to is no more than a surface simulation. In a similar vein to Pynchon's negotiations with blackness and cross-racial understanding, Self engages with a racial simulacrum animated by powerful, external, white forces. Felix's 'reluctant black smile' is a response to Self's money and influence, the deployment of which serves to create an animated stereotype straight out of racist comic farce. Spending, in this way, becomes a surrogate for cross-racial

understanding and sympathy. It can buy Self the temporary pretense of insider knowledge, friendship, and acceptance, but its exploitative logic prevents him from any deeper engagement with the simulation it has activated.

Returning to *Money*'s racially charged opening, we can see how it demonstrates the way in which spending insulates Self from a fuller engagement with racial issues. After Self confronts the driver, the cab pulls over at the side of the road. Self declares that he won't pay his fare, so the cab driver threatens to 'drive him uptown twenty blocks' and 'kick him out of the cab right there'.

He said that by the time the niggers were done there's be nothing left of me but a hank of hair and teeth.

I had some notes in my back pocket, from my last trip. I passed a twenty through the smeared screen. He sprang the locks and out I climbed. There was nothing more to say. (*M* 3)

The political limits of this opening scene are clear. Self has nominally denounced racism to the driver, but when faced with the prospect of being dropped into a site of black, urban deprivation, of coming face-to-face with the reality of black inner-city life and the issues that blight it, he balks. Money changes hands and then 'there is nothing more to say'. Self's money insulates him from full commitment to, and understanding of, racial issues. Spending allows him the appearance, the gesture of cross-racial understanding, but it has also cut short the conversation. His affinity with the marginalized remains a trapping, a lifestyle accessory, and a luxury good.

DIVISION TWO.**COOL GESTURES.**

4.1. 'The Cool Girl Never Nags'.



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In late 2013, a cartoon appeared on the popular 'Hark, A Vagrant!' webcomic site run by cartoonist Kate Beaton. More often than not taking her cue from literary and historical sources, in this instance Beaton's cartoon depicts the 'cool girl'. Her coolness comes principally from a denigration of the archetypally feminine, and her participation in a teenage-boy style misogyny that sees femininity, and by extension women, as shallow, frivolous, and vain. The 'cool girl' positions herself in scornful opposition to this stereotype, as 'just one of the lads'. The exaggerated manner in which her uniqueness is affirmed by her male interlocutor ('you alone walk this path') repeats a commonplace criticism of contemporary coolness – namely that its 'uniqueness' is ubiquitous. To see oneself as cool is to assert one's difference, just like so many others.

Is cool gendered? And, if so, how and why does it apply differently to men and women? The influence of sexual politics has made itself felt in discussions of

³²¹ Kate Beaton, 'Hark, a vagrant: 357', webcomic, www.harkavagrant.com. Last accessed: 20 April 2017.

coolness from its earliest days. For Norman Mailer, the primary defining characteristic of the hipster was his status as a priapic figure, whose sexual proclivities and appetites posed, if not a threat to society, then at least a challenge to its governing sexual mores and customs. (WN 285; 291-292) Since then, coolness has been repeatedly formulated as a specifically male type of courtship display.³²² In *Cool Pose*, a sociological treatment of African-American masculinity, Majors and Billson (1992) write that young men ‘actively display a cool pose in the courtship ritual. Distinctive rapping, strutting, cool stance, eye contact, gestures, and putting on the mask of masculinity are conjured up to attract desirable females’.³²³ And ‘Although many black females will argue that they dislike men who act and look cool [...] they often reward coolness. [...] Some women are attracted to the urbane, emotionless, smooth, fearless, aloof, apparently masculine qualities of the cool pose’.³²⁴ But cool behaviours, they argue, especially for urban, young black men, become habitual and ingrained through prolonged, even lifelong performance. They ‘cannot be turned on and off like a light switch’,³²⁵ so the cool pose, with its emphasis on concealing or suppressing emotion, becomes detrimental to relationships that persist beyond the initial moment of passion, encouraging inauthenticity.³²⁶

The essentially masculine terms in which cool is repeatedly cast have, for many, made it a fundamentally masculine phenomenon, defined by and for men, and involving a rejection of the feminine. Feminist scholar Susan Fraiman (2003) describes cool as male individualism modeled on the image of the teen rebel. Building on Peter N.

³²² For example, in Ken Cooper, *Nonverbal Communication for Business Success* (New York, 1979).

³²³ Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York, 1992), p.44.

³²⁴ Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*, p.43.

³²⁵ Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*, p.44.

³²⁶ Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*, p.44.

Stearns's contention that twentieth-century emotional styles bear witness to a trajectory that marks a rejection by the male subject of feminine emotion (more particularly of nineteenth century maternity), Fraiman constructs cool as an 'anxious, self-conscious and theatrical will' on the part of the 'modern adolescent' to separate himself from his mother.³²⁷ Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson, in their study of women authors of the Beat generation (2004), define a coolness that 'prohibits the feminine in both sexes', emotional 'weakness' being conflated with femininity in postwar gender discourses, something they see as having its forerunners in the masculine high modernisms of Hemingway and others.³²⁸

To examine literary sources is to find an extraordinary consistency in female objections to coolness across the generations. But literary sources can also lead us to a more complex picture of cool and coolness than the 'headline' rejection of the feminine and the emotional. The social and literary phenomena that come under the banner of 'the cool' over the decades, and the ways in which readers have responded to them, evidence wide cultural and individual variances, not least with respect to the role played by race. In order to understand the possible gendered nature of cool, all these angles must be explored.

Beaton's cartoon appeared a year after the publication of Gillian Flynn's bestselling thriller *Gone Girl* (2012), and one year before the successful film adaptation of the same name directed by David Fincher. The novel contained one passage in particular that went viral on the internet: the now-famous 'cool girl' monologue.

³²⁷ Susan Fraiman, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (New York, 2003), p.xii; and Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York, 1994).

³²⁸ Nancy M. Grace, and Ronna C. Johnson, *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers* (Jackson, MS, 2004), p.39.

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl.³²⁹

Internet commentators and journalists were quick to pick up on the monologue, some unpacking it in terms of third-wave feminism, while others puzzlingly took it as an opportunity to celebrate what they called the history of cool girls, giving special emphasis to actor Jennifer Lawrence as the current avatar of female cool, a status they conflate with implicit female liberation despite the bitter conclusion of the monologue: 'shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl'. One widely-shared article on BuzzFeed.com rhapsodized about the 'awesome' history of cool girls.

Cool Girls don't have the hang-ups of normal girls: They don't get bogged down by the patriarchy, or worrying about their weight. They're basically dudes masquerading in beautiful women's bodies, reaping the privileges of both. But let's be clear: It's a performance. It might not be a conscious one, but it's the way our society implicitly instructs young women on how to be awesome: Be chill and don't be a downer, act like a dude but look like a supermodel. [...] The Cool Girl never nags, or "just wants one" of your chili fries, because she orders a giant order for herself. She's an ideal that matches the times — a mix of

³²⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (London, 2012), p.210.

feminism and passivity, of confidence and femininity. She knows what she wants, and what she wants is to hang out with the guys.³³⁰

Although spurred by Flynn's monologue, this article, among others, treats the phenomenon as entirely positive. Like Flynn's coolness, it is a performance informed by social expectation. But in this case it becomes automatic, effortless, and entirely beneficial. It accedes with the terms of masculine freedom (giant chili fries) whilst simultaneously reaping the rewards of the pressures of femininity (looking like a supermodel).

On the back of these articles the monologue spread across the internet, suggesting it resonated with a large number of people. In an interview with *Vulture* magazine, Flynn said she wrote it 'in a fugue state' as an exercise in stream-of-consciousness. Commenting on its viral fame, she said:

I like that it's become kind of shorthand. We all know what we're talking about when we're talking about Cool Girl. It's the putting up with machismo bullshit, and smiling and nodding when you know better. That has a lot to do with it. There's the pretending, the pretend aspect, but it's also, "Sure, that's great!" when it's not. It's pretty cool that it's taken off. It's a worthwhile conversation to have, and to continue having.³³¹

The substance of the monologue is that to be 'cool' is, for women, to be excessively compliant with male desire, to smother one's own emotions, aspirations and traits in favour of those one thinks men will find desirable and non-threatening. For all it has generated a lot of comment in recent months and years, this sensibility is not new.

³³⁰ Anne Helen Petersen, 'Jennifer Lawrence and the History of Cool Girls', 28 February 2014, www.BuzzFeed.com. Last accessed: 20 April 2017.

³³¹ Jennifer Vineyard, 'Gone Girl's Gillian Flynn on Cool Girls and David Fincher', 10 June 2014, www.vulture.com. Last accessed: 20 April 2017.

Looking back as far as the Beat Generation, we can see congruent sentiments expressed by women writers on the subject of cool as a gendered phenomenon that puts Flynn, and Beaton, in a tradition of female criticisms of cool and coolness.

We find the prototypical version of these criticisms in Alix Kates Shulman, one of the early activists of second wave feminism, who details the sexual atmosphere of bohemia in her semi-autobiographical novel-memoir *Burning Questions*, published in 1978 but set twenty years earlier at the height of the New York Beat scene. A self-described former 'Beat', familiar with the sexual/social norms of the Beat world, *Burning Questions*' narrator observes that, 'as we now know bohemia had fallen into the hands of misanthropes, individualists, opportunists, and misogynists when the War had ended a decade before'.³³² She begins her section on the fifties Beatnik years by quoting Jack Kerouac: 'I wasn't trying to create any kind of new consciousness or anything like that. We didn't have a whole lot of heavy abstract thoughts. We were just a bunch of guys who were out trying to get laid'.³³³ These sentiments set the tone for her critical account of a deeply misogynist bohemia, where men set the tone of emotional disengagement from sex and relationships, and Beat women were expected to be easily compliant with their desires.

Beneath the surface of ostensible sexual liberation, she perceives the unequal heart of the Beat mode of relationships, in which men are accorded sexual freedom and women are expected to be compliant with male promiscuity - passive, available, and non-possessive, while also performing domestic work and providing light emotional support for men through flattery and praise but getting little or none in return. This

³³² Alix Kates Shulman, *Burning Questions* (London, 1979), p.54.

³³³ Shulman, *Burning Questions*, p.47.

stance, and the punishment of exile from Beat-dom for challenging it, she calls 'The Code of Cool'. When the narrator's lover suddenly leaves for California apparently without regard for her, she lays out the heart of the 'Code' in a passage that has strong resonance with Flynn's protest:

According to the strict code of Cool by which we lived, only weakness moved anyone to extend a relationship beyond the initial passion of the moment. Once a passion peaked, you were supposed to let it go like a poem that had found its form. To 'work on' a relationship as people take pride in doing nowadays was considered a barbarism that would destroy not only whatever feeling might be left but whatever good had gone before. The trouble with women, Marshall [the narrator's lover] used to say, was that they didn't know how to let go, they always tried to hang on after the natural end and drag everyone down to the ground. Just as they wanted to think instead of fuck and talk instead of sleep.³³⁴

In 'The Quarrel' (1961), Diane di Prima highlights a not dissimilar objection on the part of women to cool. The poem's narrator is arguing with her lover, Brad, over the distribution of domestic work. The narrator says:

You know I thought I've got work to do too sometimes. In fact I probably have just as fucking much work to do as you. A piece of wood fell out of the fire and I poked it back in with my toe.

I am sick I said to the woodpile of doing dishes [...]

Just because I happen to be a chick I thought.³³⁵

³³⁴ Shulman, *Burning Questions*, p.105.

³³⁵ Diane di Prima 'The Quarrel', *A Different Beat: Writings by Women of the Beat Generation* ed. Richard Peabody, (New York, 1997), p.46.

The speaker is expected to do the domestic work while Brad plays the role of artist – sketching his friend who is asleep on the couch. He says nothing, sits there ‘innocence personified’ until she capitulates and goes about washing the dishes:

I got up and went into the kitchen to do the dishes. And shit I thought I probably won't bother again. But I'll get bugged and not bother to tell you and after a while everything will be awful and I'll never say anything because it's so fucking uncool to talk about it. And that I thought will be that and what a shame.³³⁶

The enjambed lines run together as the obligations of domestic work (poking the wood back into the fire) run through her stream of consciousness, implying a degree of mental automization as she performs her expected tasks. The gendered norms of behaviour enforced by what is cool, and uncool, have their power in the potential to upset the balance between these people, to cause tension and open discord.

In her 1969 memoir, di Prima called the code the hipsters lived by ‘our eternal, tiresome rule of Cool’.³³⁷ The echo of Shulman’s ‘strict code of Cool’ may or may not be accidental; in any event, the substance of the objections is very close. Grace and Johnson, in their study of women writers of the Beat generation define the ‘tiresome rule of cool’ as a set of implicit rules for comportment that mandates terse expression and withheld emotion, and thus defines the hipster while also signifying hipster status. Grace and Johnson formulate it as a social and literary code ‘that makes women de facto collaborators with their own oppression’, because the essence of cool is the appearance of passivity, indifference, and lack of emotion.³³⁸ For many women, being

³³⁶ Diane di Prima ‘The Quarrel’, p.46.

³³⁷ Diane di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, (New York, 1969), p.94.

³³⁸ Grace and Johnson, *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, pp.38-39.

cool in this way, with its inherent passivity, meant a reinforcing of traditional feminine attributes: passivity and compliance. Grace and Johnson describe cool as part of the cultural materials Beats assigned themselves, and, especially, Beat men assigned Beat women. This ‘colonizing’ discourse could be used to subjugate and pigeonhole women into more-or-less compliant roles.³³⁹

4.2. ‘Cool Sex’ and the ‘Poem that Finds its Form’.

In order to better understand the ramifications and background to the rule, or the code, of cool, I would like to return to a line from Shulman: ‘Once a passion peaked, you were supposed to let it go like a poem that had found its form’. This posits a relationship between the emotional, the sexual and the aesthetic, whereby cool, as a deportment or behaviour in the social and interpersonal arena, and cool as an aesthetic in the arts, inform and support one another. An exploration of what ‘cool’ came to mean in popular discourse of midcentury in romantic-behavioural contexts can, on the basis of this explicit analogy, feed into an understanding of the gendered aspect of coolness in the arts.

The sexual politics debates of the nineteen sixties onward bear witness to one of the central tenets of the ‘rule of cool’, namely the separation of emotion from sex, or, rather, the regulation of ‘undesirable’ confluences of emotional attachment with sexual encounter. The unlikely originator of the calls for a sexual ‘cool movement’ was media critic Marshall McLuhan, who, in 1967, co-authored with George B. Leonard an article entitled ‘The Future of Sex’ for *Look* magazine. ‘In this perceptive analysis of our evolving sexual attitudes’ its defenders and adherents would later say, ‘they

³³⁹ Grace and Johnson, *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, p.26.

created the social myth of “Hot and Cool Sex””.³⁴⁰ McLuhan and Leonard’s article describes how, in ‘the neo-tribal future’, ‘sex, as we now think of it, may soon be dead’. They cite the advent of the contraceptive pill, the increasingly androgynous dress styles of the young and corporate sensitivity training eroding traditional masculinity. But, more importantly, they note that ‘sex is cooling down’ among the young. It is ‘becoming secondary [...] one of many sensory experiences’ and nothing much to get ‘hung up’ on. As a result of this ‘cooling down’, Leonard and McLuhan predict the end of traditional marriage and the likely fading away of prostitution and homosexuality, results, they say, of sexual over-specialization to be made redundant in the new age of sexual coolness.³⁴¹ McLuhan cannibalizes his own idiosyncratic formulations of ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ from *Understanding Media* (1964) in a way that would see his specialized terminology of hot vs. cool misinterpreted or ignored by those who went on to champion the ‘cooling’ of sexuality.

The later popularizers of ‘cool sex’, predominantly Anna K. and Robert T. Francoeur, and Alex Comfort, of *The Joy of Sex* fame, would take pains to specify that McLuhan’s ‘communications-model analogy’ did not necessarily entail the separation of emotion from sex: Writing in 1974, the Francoeurs delineated ‘hot sex’ along the lines of traditional monogamous marriage, which they describe as essentially possessive and depersonalizing, with ‘cool sex’ taking the form of ‘open polyamory’ with an emphasis on ‘personal growth’.³⁴² Their writings on the subject express an almost millenarian sense of expectation, taking the advent of the contraceptive pill and the increasing permissibility of premarital sex as evidence of a coming

³⁴⁰ Anna K. Francoeur and Robert T. Francoeur, *Hot and Cool Sex: Cultures in Conflict* (New York, 1974), p.5.

³⁴¹ Marshall McLuhan and George B. Leonard, ‘The Future of Sex’, *Look Magazine*, 25 July 1967.

³⁴² Francoeur and Francoeur, *Hot and Cool Sex*, p.5.

fundamental change in the overall organization of society. However niche the Francoeurs' expectations of (in their own words) the 'hatching of the cosmic egg' might be, their rhapsodic advocacy for 'cool sex' reached the wider reading public via an approving description in Comfort's bestselling *More Joy of Sex* (1986).³⁴³ Despite the contrary intentions of McLuhan and the Francoeurs, by the middle eighties the idea of 'cool sex' had been digested by the culture as meaning a (positively valued) separation of emotion and sex. In a 1984 piece for *Time* magazine, entitled 'Back again to High Fidelity', one of John Leo's characters asks: 'Didn't Alex Comfort tell us in *More Joy of Sex* that "hot sex" with its "tragic intensities" was far inferior to cool, unemotional sex?'³⁴⁴

The reassertion in the popular imagination of the hot/cool dichotomy in its more familiar form of 'emotional' vs. 'unemotional' was the result of a wider conception of liberation in which cool was the approved deportment of a sexual vanguard exploring the freer emotional terrain that came with the loosening attitudes towards sexual relations after World War II. The young sub-and-countercultures became, in the eyes of wider society, the site of an experimental withholding of emotion from sex. That trend was given apparent credence by the adoption of 'cool' as a self-descriptor. Take, for example, this extract from an interview with influential sixties DJ and rock impresario 'Murray the K' Kaufman, from *The Pierre Berton Show*:

And you find that the teenagers [attitudes] towards sex are much more sophisticated, much cooler. Of course in England, they're very cool, more so than in the United States.

³⁴³ Alex Comfort, *More Joy of Sex: A Lovemaking Companion to The Joy of Sex* (London, 1986), p.152.

³⁴⁴ John Leo, 'Sexes: Back Again to High Fidelity', *Time* cxxiii.xv, 9 April 1984. content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,952405,00.html. Last accessed: 15 June 2017.

PIERRE: What do you mean by “cool” in that context? Unenthusiastic? Not so fervent? [...] Less emotional?

MURRAY KAUFMAN: Well, maybe in any outward showing of emotion.

PIERRE: They’re not wearing their hearts on their sleeves anymore?

MURRAY KAUFMAN: Yeah, and I would think the kids today wouldn’t get broken-hearted very readily, you know, with a boyfriend, etc.

PIERRE: They *wouldn’t*?

MURRAY KAUFMAN: Not as much.

PIERRE: Is this a good thing?

MURRAY KAUFMAN: I don’t know. I don’t think I would like to offer a comment. I think it’s a very personal thing.³⁴⁵

For Kaufman, closely in touch with contemporary youth culture, the primary meaning of ‘cool’ was a low display of affect specifically in regard to romantic attachments. Berton’s question, as to whether or not this can be considered ‘a good thing’ gives voice to the concern that accompanied this apparent loosening of traditional emotional intensity among the young, whilst Kaufman’s caution about generalizing (or prophesying) on the matter would suggest an reluctance on his part to endorse the implicit conservatism of the question.

Stearns, in a similar vein, sees the ‘emotional style’ of later fifties and sixties ‘American Cool’ as the site of a challenge mounted, by the young, to the ‘Victorian’ ideal of romantic love as a location of heightened passions and emotional responsibility. Surveying the literature, especially the fiction, published in the growing genre of men’s magazines (in particular *Esquire*), Stearns describes a

³⁴⁵ Pierre Berton, ‘I was a Teenage Adult: Interview with Murray the K’, transcript from *The Pierre Berton Show, The Cool Crazy Committed World of the Sixties* (Toronto, 1966), p.116.

movement, originating in the nineteen twenties but having its full flowering in the postwar years, that celebrated the disentanglement of strong passions from engagement with women. Stearns portrays the 'New Love' championed (sometimes explicitly but mostly implicitly) by *Esquire* as underwritten by a venomous misogyny, originally coming about as a result of women's encroachment upon traditionally male spheres, and eventually coming to see emotional entanglements with women as getting in the way of men's 'real' desires – mainly leisure, travel, and play. Stearns contrasts this with what he calls the 'sanctification of women' brought about through 'Victorian' passionate ideals, which he sees as being slowly displaced by a more pragmatic approach to relationships that denigrated the emotional by conflating it with the feminine. He details how articles increasingly 'blasted women's lack of creativity – women were "created to be helpers" - and their favouring of instinct over reason. "Feelings, not principles, regulate the typical woman's life"' .³⁴⁶

Christopher Lasch, unsurprisingly, was scathing of 'The progressive ideology of "nonbinding commitments" and "cool sex"', which, in his view, makes 'a virtue of emotional disengagement, while purporting to criticize the depersonalization of sex' .³⁴⁷ He echoes Shulman's assessment of coolness, writing in *The Culture of Narcissism* that 'both sexes cultivate a protective shallowness, a cynical detachment they do not altogether feel but which soon becomes habitual and in any case embitters personal relations merely through its repeated profession' .³⁴⁸ Cool Sex, in Lasch's assessment, amounts to 'sexual separatism', one among many strategies for 'controlling or escaping from strong feeling'.

³⁴⁶ Stearns, *American Cool*, pp. 174-5, and Carlton Smith, 'Woman as Creator', *Esquire* v, March 1936, p.75.

³⁴⁷ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.200.

³⁴⁸ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.194.

The reported increase in single-member households undoubtedly reflects a new taste for personal independence, but also expresses a revulsion against close emotional attachments of any kind. [...] The most prevalent form of escape from emotional complexity is promiscuity: the attempt to achieve a strict separation between sex and feeling. Here again, escape masquerades as liberation through progress.³⁴⁹

Like Shulman, Lasch unites the social phenomenon with the aesthetic. He locates the origins of this 'sexual separatism' in the avant-garde bohemias of midcentury, drawing a parallel between them and their nineteen twenties predecessors by quoting Willard Waller: 'if one falls in love in Bohemia, he conceals it from his friends as best he can'.³⁵⁰ Lasch's criticisms of coolness in the sexual sphere find their closest parallel in his criticisms of avant-garde fiction. Taking the writer Donald Barthelme as an example, Lasch discerns a markedly similar 'flight from feeling' underway in what he sees as the twin progeny of the twentieth-century postwar bohemians – a flattening of affect in the bedroom mirroring the one occurring on the printed page: The genuine revelation of confessional writing is usurped by what he calls the 'anticonfessionalism' of Barthelme and others³⁵¹. Barthelme's playfulness comes at the price of hard won self-knowledge; his metafictional artifice precludes the sincerity which is Lasch's prerequisite for emotional depth. For Lasch, a consequence of Barthelme's 'insincere' experimentalism is that the 'journey to the center' of the emotional life is made impossible, and resolves instead into a posturing affectlessness. In Lasch's estimation, the manner in which Barthelme, Vonnegut, and others dwell on

³⁴⁹ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.200.

³⁵⁰ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.192; and Willard Waller, *The Old Love and the New: Divorce and Readjustment* (New York, 1930), pp.6-7.

³⁵¹ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p.16.

the artificial and formed nature of the text denies both the engagement of the reader as a feeling being, and the presence of the author as a consciousness made manifest and transparent. In his Freudian mode, Lasch posits this escape from emotional complexity in fiction as a product of psychic self-guarding on the part of the contemporary author.³⁵²

In short: Barthelme's experimentalism for Lasch, comes at the cost of warmth and affect. The obfuscation of the inner, emotional life of the author, we are told, springs from the affective consequence of midcentury radical cool: a coolness that expresses itself as a social force (or, for Lasch, a social pathology) and a set of artistic principles. (Incidentally, Barthelme may have at least partially agreed with being characterized as 'cool', having self-consciously cast his literary project as analogous to jazz experimentation, and describing his fictions as attempts to find the 'cool sound' of literature, as had been done for music through modern jazz.)³⁵³

For a multitude of writers and commentators, aesthetic and social 'cool' are inseparable, and mutually supporting. Art critic Piri Halasz, recalling the artistic climate of the nineteen sixties, for example, writes that:

The hallmark of "cool" art was its smooth, clean, impersonal forms and surfaces [...] The glorification of "cool" persisted through the '60s. It was so pervasive that not until after I'd spent over a year writing on art for *Time* did I hear [...] that abstract painting was about feeling. ("Cool" fitted nicely into '60s

³⁵² Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp.16-21.

³⁵³ Donald Barthelme, letter to Joe Maranto, 28 September 1955. Quoted in Helen Moore Barthelme, *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound* (College Station, TX, 2001), p.34.

lifestyles, when many were becoming more open about their sexuality, and less likely to associate it with romantic love).³⁵⁴

4.3. 'Queer' Coolness.

The early, 'hot' Kerouac, as we saw in Chapter One, identified the 'cool voice' with the 'effeminate queer'. Kerouac construed this 'queer voice' as a weak and timid antithesis to the 'rough, hot' masculinity of sincere spontaneity that he saw as the ultimate end goal of his aesthetic. Kerouac loads his description of 'effeminate cool' with contemptuous parody, implying that it is, at bedrock, obfuscatory, indirect, and assumed.³⁵⁵

In similar vein, the student radicals of the nineteen sixties, touched upon in Chapter Two, came to associate coolness with a 'queer' and 'effeminate' procedural liberalism that they saw as the governing ethos of the institutional cultures they opposed. A 'man to man' discourse brought about by a frank and straightforward pledging of emotional sincerity was set against what they saw as the inherently duplicitous nature of the cool stance: 'going-along-to-get-along' within morally compromised institutional frameworks, and concealing deeply held convictions in the name of long-term institutional change. Trask draws attention to the (often overtly) homophobic nature of this language, which united the figure of the institutional liberal with that of the closeted homosexual, whose 'queerness' and 'perversion' were the result of a felt need to conceal his inner feelings and wear a social mask. The counterculture, initially slow to adopt the struggle for gay emancipation, shared with Hoover's FBI a disdain

³⁵⁴ Piri Halasz, *A Memoir of Creativity: Abstract Painting, Politics and the Media, 1956-2008* (New York, 2009), p.370.

³⁵⁵ Jack Kerouac, Letter to Neal Cassady, 6 October 1950, in *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956* ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 1995), pp.230-234.

for, and suspicion of, the spectre of institutionalized effeminacy: it condemned what it saw as a habitual insincerity, and the insidious possibility of institutional abuses which that seemed to imply.³⁵⁶

In both these instances, coolness is construed in terms of the effeminate and the homosexual. This runs contrary to conceptions of coolness that posit it as an inherently masculine display of dignity - a flight from the 'feminine' and 'maternal' world of the emotions into a sort of steely male toughness. It is significant, with Kerouac and the (predominantly white) campus radicals in view, that both construct 'effeminate coolness' vs. 'male sincerity' from a position of relative racial privilege. By contrast, we see a much more consistent portrayal of coolness as masculine and dignified among black authors.

Canadian poet and playwright George Elliott Clarke, for instance, in an essay entitled 'Cool Politics' (1998), reaffirmed a by-then familiar interpretation of cool as, in the case of Miles Davis and, particularly, the nineteen sixties followers of Malcolm X, a chivalric code of honour in the face of oppressive social forces.³⁵⁷ Imani Perry similarly calls Malcolm X's values, namely 'rebellion, intellect, style, grace, strength, the power of personal transformation', a set of 'cool values'.³⁵⁸ Clarke uses 'cool' in relation to X and Davis, as a synonym for 'integrity': 'Perhaps the most important chivalric/cool code enacted by X and Davis is integrity - that is, the ability to act with firm commitment to just principles *as well as the flexibility to adjust them when*

³⁵⁶ Trask, *Camp Sites*, pp.85-119.

³⁵⁷ George Elliott Clarke, 'Cool Politics: Styles of Honour in Malcolm X and Miles Davis', *Jouvert: A Journal of Post-Colonial Studies* ii.i (1998), english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v2i1/CLARKE.HTM. Last accessed: 10 June 2017.

³⁵⁸ Imani Perry, 'Toasts, Jam, and Libation: How We Place Malcolm X in the Folk Tradition' *Teaching Malcolm X* ed Theresa Perry (New York, 1996), pp.171-186, (185).

necessary. X's career affirms this precept'; and again, 'the exalted elements of the discourses of and around X and Davis are, for young black male audiences, likely those which codify masculinity in a manner that might assist survival. That manner, or style, is represented by the sign 'cool'.³⁵⁹ Majors and Billson, situating their discussion on cool as an African-American perspective, affirm its historical and continuing political importance as an evolved survival mechanism in a restrictive society: 'Distinctive rapping, strutting, cool stance, eye contact, gestures' that allow for black youths to 'put on the mask of masculinity' and thereby enact coolness as toughness, resilience, and self-possession.³⁶⁰

A major discrepancy in the gendered construction of cool thus occurs across racial lines. A privileged white masculinity operating from within the European, Romantic literary and political traditions is given to construing sincere emotional intensity as male, vital, and desirable, whilst damning the obfuscatory and 'duplicitous' emotion-control of cool as weak, effete, and dishonest. These men are operating out of the democratic 'surfeit of liberty' that Dave Hickey misconstrued as the essential ingredient for his construction of coolness as the enabling form of the 'plain declaration'.³⁶¹

So where does this tangle of sexual politics leave the cool girl? In the Beat context, the cool girl is in a peculiar double bind. The 'hot' Beats denigrate femininity in their flight from maternal emotion and the restrictions they see it imposing on them via a settled domestic life and romantic attachments. But they do not denigrate emotion entirely. A distinction is made between the 'freeing' and expansive masculine

³⁵⁹ Clarke, 'Cool Politics', my italics.

³⁶⁰ Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*, p.44.

³⁶¹ Dave Hickey, 'American Cool', p.4.

emotional intensities found on the ‘road’ and the ‘confining’ feminine emotions of the domestic. On the one hand, women are expected to conform to the ‘code of cool’ – to control their emotion and not impinge upon the freedom of male self-expression. Within the male sphere, meanwhile, coolness is seen in the 1950s to interfere with the search for a positive ‘rough’, ‘virile’, and, quintessentially, male emotional expressiveness, and thus denounced as belonging to the ‘other’ or the ‘lesser’ – Kerouac’s “queer” or Kesey’s “cool spade” (as discussed in Chapter Two).

The ‘fugue state’ in which she wrote her now-famous ‘cool girl’ monologue, as well as the scathing and invective tone in which it is written, suggest that Flynn reactivates a 1950s and early 60s mode of Kerouacian spontaneity and emotionally heightened plain declaration as a corrective to what she perceives as the stultifying effects of coolness. It is perhaps an irony that the character into whose thoughts she inserts these insights, herself relies on a form of coolness to assert her autonomy and escape the domestic sphere. She ultimately deploys a form of insincere display and emotion-guarding to return to her settled, middle class life on her own terms.

In the nineteen sixties and seventies, poets like Anne Waldman would go on to aggressively reject Beat coolness, embracing outspokenness and stridence over passivity and withheld emotion. Waldman would use a Beat-indebted poetics of style, but in terms of content she would utterly reject cool’s withheld emotion and passivity in favour of affirmative subjectivity and articulate passion. Take for example her poem ‘Fast Speaking Woman’ (1975): ‘I’m a shouting woman/ I’m a speech woman/

I'm an atmosphere woman/ I'm an airtight woman.'³⁶² Here the Beat mode is made to serve the protest movement tone of a book of self-proclaimed 'chants and essays'. In the similar case of Elise Cowen's poetry, as Grace and Johnson argue, the 'code of cool' is inverted and made to serve female subjectivity.³⁶³ This approach parallels, both thematically and temporally, the self-conscious rejection of the labels of cool and coolness by certain African-American writers, who in the same period began to discern in coolness a stance of passivity bordering on complicity with one's own oppression.

4.4. bell hooks and African-American Feminine Cool.

Majors and Billson portray a coolness that is the provenance and domain of African-American men in particular. Women are given less of an active role in the shaping of, and participation in, this version of coolness. Instead, they are relegated to having to deal with the emotional fallout resulting from cool's negative aspects. Helena Andrews makes the case for female cool as carrying the weight of the world, with Thompsonian recourse to Yoruba precursors. This is not the standard reading: most treatments of African-American women give them the status of outsiders, or latecomers, to a coolness formulated by, for, and to the detriment of, men.³⁶⁴

bell hooks, writings in 2003, articulate anxieties about attaining a feminine cool along lines that anticipate Majors and Billson. Cool, she argues, took root outside the domestic sphere, in the late night jazz clubs where women were, at best, the 'backup singers'. 'All males, no matter their color', she says, 'saw the world of cool as

³⁶² Anne Waldman 'Fast Speaking Woman', in *Fast Speaking Woman: Chants and Essays* (New York, 1975), P.257.

³⁶³ Grace and Johnson, *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, pp.25-6.

³⁶⁴ Helena Andrews, 'Reserve', *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* ed. Rebecca Walker, (Berkeley, CA, 2012), pp.29-38, (31).

masculine’.³⁶⁵ She recalls being enthralled, as a young woman, by the (male) avatars of cool in the form of jazz musicians, and moving to California to find ‘the place of cool’.³⁶⁶ Slowly, she recalls, women of the time were beginning to express their own coolness, as well.

The sexual revolution and women’s liberation changed all that. And I was right there on the spot, eager to take my place among the cool. As all the revolutions happened women began to move from behind the scenes in the world of music [...] whether I was listening to early Laura Nyro (with Patti LaBelle singing in the background) or seeing Alice Coltrane jam in a local park, it was for me a moment of arrival; women were there in the art scene, there in the poetry and music worlds, forging their own place of cool.³⁶⁷

As the increasing visibility of black women in the cultural sphere created the ground for feminine expressions of coolness, hooks recalls feeling that ‘[a]ll through the years from my twenties into the forties, I was confident that I possessed the cool that is forever’.³⁶⁸ But she admits to a more circumspect attitude towards coolness, both her own and the phenomenon in general, that began to emerge once she was past her forties. Ageing caused her to reappraise cool as a gendered phenomenon, unevenly manifested among African-American men and women, flourishing in male spheres that for so long refused to admit the feminine. For women to become cool is, she argues, inevitably to enter a sphere defined by male figures and male experience.

In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2003), the gathered fruit of her earlier reflections, hooks delineates coolness as a style of Afro-American masculine attitude

³⁶⁵ bell hooks, ‘Forever’, *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* ed. Rebecca Walker, (Berkeley, CA, 2012), pp.71-80, (72).

³⁶⁶ hooks, ‘Forever’, p.71.

³⁶⁷ hooks, ‘Forever’, p.72.

³⁶⁸ hooks, ‘Forever’, p.72.

and self-presentation (her list of cool women notwithstanding). Throughout the text, the slow entry of women into the cool sphere can be ascribed to the particular way in which coolness expresses itself as patriarchal masculinity. *We Real Cool* delineates a split in coolness, between what could be broadly termed a 'negative' and a 'positive' cool in the cultural lives of African-American men. The 'negative' is defined as an inherently individualistic, even solipsistic stance that arises from the guarding of one's emotions and the pursuit of personal advantage above all. It is, in hooks's formula, an historically-determined response to the hostility of mainstream society towards African-Americans. This form of coolness expresses itself both as an opportunistic individualism, the ethos of 'the hustle, getting over, getting by', and as a domineering aggressivity, to such an acute degree that she terms it 'dominator cool'.³⁶⁹ The second, less widely evidenced as yet, is 'positive' coolness.

According to hooks, the historical factors that created negative coolness were threefold: the first is the historic emasculation of African-American men who, after emancipation, were disproportionately excluded from the workforce whilst African-American women were permitted into service sector occupations in comparatively greater numbers. With women earning the larger proportion of wages, the self-conscious posture of aloof dignity that Afro-American men adopted became, hooks argues, crystallized with a patriarchal disdain for the women who out-earned them. For hooks, this is one part of a wider phenomenon whereby freed slaves and their descendants took on the worst excesses of their former masters as a reaction-formation to their powerless state, which she terms 'plantation patriarchy'.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York, 2004), p.146.

³⁷⁰ hooks, *We Real Cool*, pp.13ff.

The second is the stereotyping of African-Americans by white hipsters who mistook, she says, cool detachment for ‘disassociation, hardheartedness, violence’, a misrepresentation which in turn percolated back into African-American self-imaging as cool.³⁷¹ The third and final factor is the patriarchal culture of the black power movement, which asserted violence and ‘ushered in a politics of cool that was all about dominator culture, asserting power in the very ways righteous black men had criticized from the moment they touched earth in the so-called new world’.³⁷² hooks characterizes this negative cool as ‘death dealing’.³⁷³ It is ‘raging’ as ‘an expression of powerlessness’ whereby black males ‘do not allow themselves to feel’ or give healthy voice to repressed rage.³⁷⁴ The inauthenticity of the stance is underlined by the irony of the phrase ‘keeping it real’, which, hooks insists, denotes in this case anything but realness.

Contrasted with this is her ‘positive’ coolness, which, rather than disallowing feeling, retains its relation to the anger that provokes coolness in the first place, and the humane impulses, including, anger that a frank appraisal of the African-American condition provokes. hooks defines positive cool as an impulse toward community building and cross-gender solidarity that responds to powerlessness not with rage alone, nor with the determination to look out for oneself above all others, but with ‘being well in your soul’ and fostering positive relations with others, and within communities.³⁷⁵ She looks to figures such as Frederick Douglass and early pioneers of black suffrage as avatars of this ‘life enhancing’ coolness.³⁷⁶ For hooks, this is ‘A

³⁷¹ hooks, *We Real Cool*, p.143.

³⁷² hooks, *We Real Cool*, p.146.

³⁷³ hooks, *We Real Cool*, p.145.

³⁷⁴ hooks, *We Real Cool*, pp.88; 90.

³⁷⁵ hooks, *We Real Cool*, p.142.

³⁷⁶ hooks, *We Real Cool*, pp.5; 145.

notion of cool that was predicated upon black males' ability to use their prophetic imaginations to transcend the politics of domination and create beloved community'.³⁷⁷

hooks locates this cool as a tradition that predates the perverting influences of the white hipsters, whose 'unenlightened' reading of black masculinity mistyped it as sexual, violent, and venal. Not least, hooks deploys this 'life affirming' positive cool as a possible restitution and corrective not only for the exclusionary masculine coolness she sees as denigrating femininity, but for the experience of ageing. 'I am often alone among women of my age', she tells us, in my continued obsession with being cool'.³⁷⁸

hooks search for a coolness that expresses values of community and solidarity with women remains underwritten by the cultural prevalence of a coolness that would exclude and dominate them. She appears to concede, through the urgency of her writings, that her concern with her own personal coolness as an African American woman, and one who is growing older, her will to enter into and own cool, is an atypical position: one that, if it is to be other than utopian, will require collective determination on the part of older African American women to reverse the long historical fact of being regarded as, doubly, outliers to society.

³⁷⁷ hooks, *We Real Cool*, p.146.

³⁷⁸ hooks, 'Forever', p.73.

5.1. We Used To Be Cool.

In *We Real Cool*, hooks portrays a contemporary and widespread coolness that has displaced and obfuscated a former, more desirable version of coolness. The ‘death dealing’ cool of present times is, for her, built over a ‘life affirming’ cool-that-was.

The idea that ‘cool was’ or ‘cool used to be’ is a powerful and recurring theme in recent and contemporary discussions of coolness. The ‘true’, ‘real’, ‘or ‘genuine’ cool is held to belong to the past and to have been obfuscated or usurped by a ‘fraudulent’ cool that is somehow domesticated by, or complicit with, the mechanisms of power. Cool’s increasing application to the world of consumer goods and its alignment with the conditions of work are held to have either warped cool into something at odds with its original socio-political function and intent, or occulted the original cool with an inauthentic overlay, a stance of complicity with the powerful that masquerades as ‘true’ coolness.

This nostalgia for a bygone, more desirable cool is a significant feature of contemporary discussions of cool, and its status in the popular imagination. It is, I will argue, the latest in a series of misreadings and misinterpretations that contribute to our shifting understanding of the term.

5.2. The ‘Fallen’ State of Cool.

Denunciations of the cool of present times, more often than not accompanied by the ennoblement of a bygone cool, are found in multiple accounts. Typical examples are Dalzell's insistence that cool, once a term that connoted a particularly stylish form of rebellion and anti-establishment posture, has lost its discernable meaning in its journey towards the mainstream.³⁷⁹ In a similar vein, Pountain and Robins note that cool has 'discovered a preference for winners over losers' and 'loves violence far more than it used to'.³⁸⁰

As a matter of course, the reasons for these shifts are laid at the feet of 'cool' becoming a staple term of the advertising industry, as well as a historic trajectory whereby it moved from the domain of fringe communities towards ever-increasing familiarity with mainstream, affluent society, thereby becoming a byword for consumption rather than deprivation, success rather than failure, and the conformity of mass-society over the perversity of the outsider.

In 1997, Malcolm Gladwell, writing in *The New Yorker*, gave an account of the booming and relatively new industry of 'coolhunters' – corporate agents sent out onto the streets to observe and report on the emergent fashion trends among those young people at the cutting-edge of stylishness. Reporting back to their employers, the coolhunters effectively aid the large fashion conglomerates in anticipating coming marketing trends. Gladwell's presence in the account is a non-judgmental one, on the one hand apparently celebrating this development as a democratization of fashion, which he sees as in the process of becoming something directed organically by trendsetters from below, rather than dictated by designers from on high, while on the

³⁷⁹ Dalzell, *From Flappers 2 Rappers*, pp.80-81.

³⁸⁰ Pountain and Robins, *Cool Rules*, p.13.

other hand noting how this culture gives rise to excessive consumption, as the coolhunters – and the coolhunted – spent enormous amounts of money keeping up with what he calls the indefinable and ever-changing nature of ‘cool’.³⁸¹

Perhaps the strongest denouncement of contemporary cool, and in particular the culture of cool described by Gladwell, can be found in Estonian-Canadian anti-consumerist activist and author Kalle Lasn’s *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge – and Why We Must*, which appeared two years after Gladwell’s article.³⁸² In the book, Lasn outlines the worldview that underwrites his activism, disseminated via *Adbusters* magazine, and taking the form of events such as ‘Buy Nothing Day’ and the Occupy Wall Street movement, with which he was heavily involved. The tone is that of the urgent manifesto. ‘American cool is a global pandemic’, Lasn writes, ‘[c]ommunities, traditions, cultural heritages, sovereignties, whole histories are being replaced by a barren American monoculture’.³⁸³ He tells us that ‘cool is the Huxleyan “soma” of our time’ and that ‘cynicism is its poisonous, paralytic side effect’.³⁸⁴ ‘American cool’, as Lasn defines it, is ‘this month’s rebel attitude’, an ever-changing set of fashions and fads with built-in obsolescence designed to keep the individual in a state of constant consumption. The cynicism he sees as its side effect is a resultant political disengagement, an individualistic detachment from the group concerns of society, environment, and planet, and thus a subservience to the ‘corporate cool machine’.³⁸⁵

³⁸¹ Malcolm Gladwell, ‘The Coolhunt’, *The New Yorker*, 17 March, 1997, p. 78.

³⁸² Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge – and Why We Must* (New York, 1999); Sometimes published under the alternate title *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*.

³⁸³ Lasn, *Culture Jam*, p.xiv.

³⁸⁴ Lasn, *Culture Jam*, p.xv.

³⁸⁵ Lasn, *Culture Jam*, p.xvi.

Like other objections to the present, fallen state of cool, Lasn contrasts this insidious force with a distinctly more positive cool-that-was:

“Cool” used to mean unique, spontaneous, compelling. The coolest kid was the one everyone wanted to be like but no one quite could, because her individuality was utterly distinct. Then “cool” changed. Marketers got hold of it and reversed its meaning. Now you're cool if you are not unique — if you have the look and feel that bear the unmistakable stamp of America™. Hair by Paul Mitchell. Khakis by The Gap. Car by BMW. Attitude by Nike. Pet phrases by Letterman. Politics by Bill Maher. Cool is the opiate of our time, and over a couple of generations, we have grown dependent on it to maintain our identities of inclusion.³⁸⁶

In Lasn's case, the cool-that-was represented individualism over conformity, with contemporary cool offering a simulated individuality which is in reality a sense of belonging to the group. But Lasn takes his objections further than most.

The insidious cool of present times is not, as he sees it, merely the result of marketeering and the mass culture of consumerism. He ends his tract with a call to revolution, and the phrase ‘American cool is now every bit as vulnerable as the Soviet Utopia was ten years ago’.³⁸⁷ The comparison of American cool with Soviet Utopia broadens Lasn's picture of cool from the narrow domain of consumerism to that of a political worldview. Lasn's ‘cool’ becomes a term that describes a synoptic system of global capitalism and corporate dominance. Throughout the book, Lasn makes frequent reference to an alliance between political actors and corporate power.³⁸⁸ The prevalence of ‘American global cool’ as a worldview and world-system to rival the

³⁸⁶ Lasn, *Culture Jam*, p.113.

³⁸⁷ Lasn, *Culture Jam*, p.215.

³⁸⁸ Lasn, *Culture Jam*, p.155.

now-discredited Communist International, for Lasn, relies on the participation of politicians and states working in concert with private interests.

5.3. Cool Workers and The Global Free Market.

In 1992, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, a year before becoming president, appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, a chat show presented by the African-American comedian of the same name. In an unconventional move for a presidential candidate, Clinton appeared wearing Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses (now held in the collection of the Clinton Presidential Library) and played the saxophone, performing Billie Holiday's 1939 'God Bless the Child' and Elvis Presley's 'Heartbreak Hotel'. This was a calculated move designed to cultivate the image of Clinton as an atypical candidate, in touch with a certain countercultural irreverence. Former senior Clinton strategist Paul Bagela would later recall 'A lot of the mainstream media, the established Sunday show crowd, they were aghast and appalled. I'd say the more upset they were, the more we were sure we were right'.³⁸⁹ Author P.J. O'Rourke, who, with Hunter S. Thompson, interviewed Clinton on the campaign trail, (at which meeting 'Hunter Thompson had brought Clinton a present, a saxophone reed of some especially cool and hip type') recalled thinking how Clinton, should he get into office, would represent the first 'of their generation' to attain the presidency, marking the passage of 'cool' into the highest office in the land, despite some uncertainties about both his policy positions, and the genuineness of his cool demeanor and appearance.³⁹⁰

Clinton's presidency would see him embrace a close relationship with Tony Blair, in

³⁸⁹ Danny Spiegel, 'Today in TV History: Bill Clinton and his Sax Visit Arsenio', *TV Insider*, 3 June 2015. www.tvinsider.com/2979/rerun-bill-clinton-on-arsenio-hall. Last accessed: 25 May 2017.

³⁹⁰ P.J. O'Rourke, 'Was Clinton Cool?', *The Atlantic* February 2001, pp.47-49.

whom the British electorate saw a somewhat similar avatar of youth and political renewal. Blair, who talked down his Christianity, so as not to appear gauche, in favour of his fondness for playing the electric guitar, was to court popular opinion in the early days of his premiership with his much-publicized ‘Cool Britannia’ parties. Taken from the title of a 1967 song by the relatively obscure Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, the phrase came to refer to an exaltation of the creative industries and youth culture of 1990s Britain. The parties saw Blair inviting pop-stars and fashion icons to number 10 Downing Street, helping not only to cultivate the relatively young prime minister’s ‘hip’ image, but also to effectively and powerfully ‘brand’ the United Kingdom’s cultural exports abroad whilst attracting foreign investment.³⁹¹

Blair and Clinton shared not only a self-conscious and carefully crafted image as ‘cool’ politicians, but also an economic vision for the world. Representing the abandonment of traditional Labour-Socialist values such as trade-unionism, Blair’s ‘New Labour’ joined with Clinton in the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ that embraced a vision of a free trade, a postindustrial West, and global neoliberalism.

This perhaps gives some credence to Lasn’s admittedly extreme portrayal of ‘global American cool’ as a political world-system on a par with ‘Soviet Utopia’. The Stalinist imagination has an almost eschatological character to it, resting on the Marxist-Hegelian idea of the inevitability of the Communist International. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1990s saw the Washington Consensus emerge to (often forcefully) push for the liberalization of the global economy. Free-market capitalism and the borderless spread of western corporate-consumer interests now

³⁹¹ Katja Valaskivy, *Cool Nations: Media and the Social Imaginary of the Branded Country* (London, 2016).

operated seemingly unopposed, without the serious ideological and geopolitical challenge of communism. In the influential writings of Francis Fukuyama, it also found its eschatological, apocalyptic articulation, with *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) predicting the unending hegemony of free-market consumerism and an end to ideological struggle itself.³⁹²

The attendees of Blair's Cool Britannia parties, self-made rags-to-riches garage bands like Oasis, who had risen from working-class backgrounds to unprecedented success, or supermodels scouted in humble neighborhoods, represented, in a way, the neoliberal vision of society. The Gallagher brothers with their hard-bitten exterior, their eyes constantly hidden behind sunglasses and their expressions perpetually unreadable, had risen from poverty through talent and hard work to make millions in postindustrial Britain. Here, the libertarian character of the 'hard-bitten' and 'rugged' individual, pursuing his own economic advantage, dovetails with the cool persona of 'the hustler'. hooks singles out this aspect of cool as among the most significant ingredients of what she sees as cool's 'degradation' to its present state. She writes about how the 'self-interested' and 'ruthless cool' of the isolated individual precludes both emotional attachment and community organization. hooks' 'death-dealing' notion of cool expresses itself as 'exploitation, the con, the hustle, getting over, getting by', seeking economic advantage for oneself above, and without regard for, the needs of others.³⁹³ This is Lasch's 'ghetto strategy' for economic survival – the 'vicious' attitude he saw moving from the 'ghettos' and into the heart of middle class life not only as a result of the counterculture's legacy, but also as an adaptation to the

³⁹² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

³⁹³ hooks, *We Real Cool*, p.146.

conditions of increased market liberalization.³⁹⁴ The solitary cool outsider, sceptical of all organization and involvement, is, in the views of critics as opposite as Lasch and hooks, perfectly adapted to the world of Thatcherite/Reaganite economics, in which ‘there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women’.

5.4. ‘The Hustle’ and The Office - Cool and Work.

Elmore Leonard’s *Be Cool* (1999) gives us a portrait of cool adapted to the arena of neoliberal work. The novel follows Chili Palmer, a former loan-shark turned Hollywood agent, turned music producer, as he tries to launch the career of a young singer he has discovered. To do so, he must navigate the byzantine web of connections and circumstances that contrive to get in his way, becoming all things to all people, and relying on his inexhaustible reserves of charisma, quick-thinking, and, above all, adaptability, a magnetic quality those in the novel’s world constantly ascribe to him under the term ‘cool’.

Chili, with his long succession of odd-jobs behind him, relies not on a singular skill or area of expertise, but rather on his transferable ‘cool’, the power of his personality. ‘[T]o be cool’, Chili says, ‘is to have punch lines on the top of your head for every occasion. Guy says “are you trying to fuck with me?” You’re ready. You come back with your line’.³⁹⁵ His cool resides in his ability to interact with, and manipulate, violent gangsters and corporate executives with equal ease, and to tailor his approach to any context. He is also at ease with his precarious situation, accepting the lack of security in his life, ever-ready to move from one line of work or project to another, and cultivating the ineffable cool personality needed to adapt to any given

³⁹⁴ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp.67-8.

³⁹⁵ Elmore Leonard, *Be Cool* (New York, 1999).

circumstance.

‘Being cool’ in the novel not only refers to this transferable skill set, but to a fatalistic acceptance of changing circumstances, a constant preparedness to move from one job or setting to another. The adaptability of the worker in a world of maximal job flexibility is a key characteristic of the neoliberal work-world, where insecure employment mandates the frequent movement of labour retained on short-term bases.

Leonard himself has alluded to ‘cool’ as having the specialized meaning in his work of a flexible and pragmatic attitude. ‘Anything that’s just good and works is cool’, he has said.³⁹⁶ Charles J. Rzepka, in his critical work on Leonard’s fiction, makes the comparison between Leonard’s ‘cool’ and Hemingway’s ‘grace under pressure’, the very same comparison R.F. Thompson made in his appraisal of cool. But where Thompson finds unalloyed affinity, Rzepka identifies important distinctions between the two. Chili Palmer’s ability to ‘bullshit’, or fake his way through situations where in reality he is out of his depth, is equivalent to Robert Jordan’s ability to fight in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) inasmuch as it is ‘what they are good at’.

But Hemingway’s “courage” and Leonard’s “cool” differ in important ways. Both require self-control, determination, and prowess – all conventionally masculine virtues. They also involve improvisation, an ability to apply one’s talents or skills to unexpected challenges [...] “Courage”, however, retains a moral dimension, despite Hemingway’s well-known contempt for abstract moral imperatives, while “cool” is essentially amoral. “Courage” trails clouds of existential glory, making human actions meaningful [...] while “cool” connotes

³⁹⁶ Charles J. Rzepka, *Being Cool: The Work of Elmore Leonard* (Baltimore MD, 2013), p.8

a dispassionate disengagement from meaningfulness altogether.³⁹⁷

Furthermore, Chili's focus not on job-specific skills, but on transferable personality traits, recalls Arlie Russell Hochschild's (1979) treatment of the character of postindustrial work. Drawing on the work of C. Wright Mills, Hochschild outlines how, in the postindustrial service-sector, where, as Daniel Bell says, 'communication' and 'encounter' become the worker's new stock-in-trade, specialized personality-types are favoured and fostered in different corporate climates, giving an affective dimension to specific lines of work.³⁹⁸ While Hochschild deals principally with the specialized affective climate of airline flight attendants, other examinations of neoliberal and post-industrial labour furnish us with an insight into the dovetailing of the cool department with the world of work.

In this context, cool takes on a double function in the neoliberal work-world. It is both an affective stance fostered as a consequence of the conditions of such work, and a compensatory gesture toward a personal identity beyond the corporation. Peter N. Stearns's *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* uses the approach of constructivist emotionology to examine shifts in the literature of management and child-rearing throughout the twentieth century. The prevalence of coolness, he argues, persuasively, represents a shift in emotional priorities towards an avoidance of 'negative' emotions such as fear and jealousy, which has served to inculcate newer generations into habits of emotion-guarding to a much higher degree than their nineteenth-century ancestors, as well as habituating them to the 'impersonal, but friendly' emotional style of postindustrial service-work. Especially

³⁹⁷ Rzepka, *Being Cool*, p.8

³⁹⁸ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley CA, 1979), p.9.

among the managerial middle class, new emotional standards began to take hold as employee-management styles began to shift their concerns from behaviour to mood.³⁹⁹ In a similar vein, Liu delineates the emotional and attitudinal style fostered by the postindustrial labour market. He describes a situation where engaged-disengagement allows the cool worker to participate in hierarchical systems with a minimum of emotional investment whilst making a ‘compensatory gesture’ to the position of the outsider and rebel by way of personal style and leisure/spending choices.⁴⁰⁰

Liu’s assessment, and Stearns’ use of Hochschild, draws the discussion close to the territory of Marxist critique. For both Liu and Hochschild, the emotional consequences of this affective characteristic of postindustrial labour can be seen to share a sympathetic heartbeat with leftist ideas of the ‘fordization of the face’, and mark Liu’s gestural cool out as a strategy for dealing with the consequences of Marxian ‘alienation’ in the (post-) industrial labour market.

Cool, in its postindustrial work context can thus be seen to act out the neoliberal ideal of the self-interested individual ‘out for himself’. It is an emotion-guarding strategy that allows for the disengagement necessary to successfully accumulate (through the communication and encounter of service-sector or knowledge-work) whilst mitigating its emotional toll, and a strategy that offsets the subsuming of individuality into the corporate entity via spending and consumption. This synchronization of a nominally, or perceived, ‘rebellious’ attitude with the ethos of powerful institutions, and the prevailing political discourse, is a likely cause for the desire to ‘recover’ or ‘reclaim’

³⁹⁹ Stearns, *American Cool*, p.121.

⁴⁰⁰ Liu, *The Laws of Cool*, p.103.

cool that came to be in these years.

5.5. The Cool That Was.

Nostalgia for the perceived ‘golden age’ of cool appears to have its origin in the long 1990s, in particular. At the earlier end of this period, we find an anticipation of many of Lasn’s concerns about corporate control of cool from a very different source. From the 1970s onward, explicit discussion of cool moves from the decidedly adult fiction of the Beats and others, to children’s literature. The familiarity of cool is attested to by the fact that the age demographic to which ‘coolness’ was marketed had expanded to include, in some cases, the very young. In these books, ‘cool’ becomes shorthand for charisma, social poise, as well as for amazement and wonder, a habitual and reflexive expression covering all levels of reaction to compelling experience.⁴⁰¹ Think, for instance, of ‘Joe Cool’ in the syndicated *Peanuts* comic strip.

Special mention in this genre of cool children’s literature ought to go to Philip Pullman’s 1987 novel *How to be Cool*. Here, the preteen protagonist, Jacob, is steeped in the pursuit of cool and coolness. He and his friends ‘didn’t notice anything unless it had style – unless it was cool. Then it stood out as if it had been spotlit’.⁴⁰² He stumbles on a secret government agency called ‘The National Cool Board’, where fusty tweed-suited men in offices decide what is to become cool and what is to go out of fashion. To combat this co-opting of cool by their elders, Jacob and his friends band together to form a counter-agency and take back cool from the Board’s control. Our heroes create an electronic device called the Coolometer, which measures the

⁴⁰¹ For instance, Margaret Gore, *Play it Cool!* (London, 1976); Adam Hargreaves, *Mr. Cool* (London, 2003); Pete Johnson, *The Cool Boffin* (London, 1988); Leah Komaiko, *Earl’s too Cool for Me* (New York, 1988), to name but a few.

⁴⁰² Philip Pullman, *How to be Cool* (London, 1987), p.3.

coolness of any object or person by detecting ‘cool waves’, described as a fundamental force of the universe, like gravity or electromagnetism.⁴⁰³ Eventually the quantity of cool energy released by the heroes’ activities threatens to engulf the world in a ‘cool vortex’, a disaster they have to work to avert. While it is far from Pullman’s best work, *How to be Cool* shows some of the ideas, embryonic and developing, which would come to be a part of his celebrated *Dark Materials* trilogy: a fundamental force of the universe which has a special relationship with children, the adults who seek to control it, and the potential for this hitherto invisible force to cause a universal catastrophe.

The destruction of the secretive Cool Board by Jacob and his friends, which allows for the democratic reclamation of the criteria of the cool by the children, can, at something of a stretch, be read as a Lasn-esque fantasy of corporate overthrow, and the reclamation of cool by a kind of proletariat of taste. At the very least, it certainly anticipates the tenor of the commentary surrounding coolness that would come in the decade that followed. The 1990s represents a moment of circumspection regarding cool, with much of it happening in response to Cool Britannia. Pountain and Robins note how British newspapers named cool the ‘word of the year’, as the *Independent on Sunday* ran ‘A Guide to Cool’ which proclaimed ‘Cool is important [...] Cool is the summation of all we aspire to [...] it is a way of being’, prompting a harsh reply from *The Guardian*, which printed a response entitled ‘The Myth of Cool’ which opined that ‘cool’ in its modern form was something of a corporate marketing conspiracy, whilst magazines such as *Vanity Fair* began the industry-wide trend of

⁴⁰³ Pullman, *How to be Cool*, p.32.

devoting special issues to ‘cool’.⁴⁰⁴ It is in this decade, and the years immediately following it, that we also see the glut of the nonfiction literature dealing with coolness appear: Stearns in 1994, Frank in 1997, Pountain and Robins on the first day of the year 2000, with MacAdams appearing the year afterwards and Liu in 2004. Whilst some, like Frank, are accepting of the changing and evolving character of cool, implicit in the projects of others, notably MacAdams, is an attempt at reclamation – looking into the past to ‘reclaim’ or ‘rediscover’ a cool unadulterated by its perceived absorption by the mainstream and by corporate culture.

This new reflective analysis of what cool ‘means’ and what its significance is, can be seen, in some cases, as a reaction to not only the prevalence of cool in the popular discourse of 1997’s watershed political events in Britain, but also in response to the perceived cynicism behind it. The manufactured or stage-managed nature of Cool Britannia had many detractors,⁴⁰⁵ and, as a result of the sheer volume of discussion, by the following year, the phrase was out of favour with politicians. *The Economist* reported that people were ‘sick’ of hearing about cool.⁴⁰⁶

The new (if short-lived) adoption of the language and optics of cool by the political class, as well as the new attitude of historical circumspection surrounding it, produced the climate in which the accounts of ‘the cool-that-was’ were written. For Lasn, as for hooks, the ‘positive’ cool of the past is constructed in opposition to the social climate they see around them, and tells us as much about their socio-political preoccupations

⁴⁰⁴ Qtd. in Pountain and Robins, *Cool Rules*, p.25.

⁴⁰⁵ And with good reason. Alastair Campbell refers to Cool Britannia in his diaries as ‘garbage’, recalling that ‘They [the media] loved my Cool Britannia garbage, even though I freely said myself it was garbage purely designed to fill a hole in the Sundays’. Alastair Campbell, *The Alastair Campbell Diaries: Power and The People, 1997-1999*, Vol.2, (London, 2011), p.362.

⁴⁰⁶ Leaders, ‘Cool Britannia’, *The Economist*, cccxvi, London: 14 March 1998.

as it does any historical account of cool that relies on research. For both of these authors, the bygone ‘true’ cool of the past has heavy connotations of community-building and committed social action. It is anti-capitalist in nature, to a greater or a lesser degree, and is strongly formulated against the neoliberal conception of the self-interested individual actor as the fundamental unit of society.

hooks’ appeal to bygone coolness is redolent of Robert Farris Thompson inasmuch as both construct a past cool that is conducive to psycho-spiritual healthfulness, and rooted in traditions that are conducive to the construction and maintenance of communities. Thompson’s, and hooks’, cool, is defined in a specifically African-American context that portrays a cultural tradition of social and psychological merit as having been degraded and warped by the brutalities of African-American history.

Working from, and looking to, the traditions and history of twentieth-century white radicalisms, Lasn’s bygone or ‘unfallen’ cool is somewhat more difficult to pin down. Its primary characteristic is individual self-expression (primarily sartorial in nature) unmediated by the influence of corporate advertising. Lasn also defines cool as ‘rebelliousness’, asking ‘What’s cool now? Same as always: It’s cool to rebel. But a lot of people who think they’re rebelling, aren’t’.⁴⁰⁷ The connection between sartorial spontaneity and rebellion is never fully explored: axiomatic, it remains somewhat unsatisfactory. The only apparent unifying thread is that both have been usurped by an inauthentic simulation – both the consumer choices, and the rebellious attitudes, have been supplanted by corporate-created illusions.

⁴⁰⁷ Lasn, *Culture Jam*, p.114.

Lasn's tenuous linkage of cool-as-style to cool-as-rebellion relies upon the misapprehension that cool is related to midcentury youth activism and its radical politics of total social transformation. This is a fundamental misrepresentation of cool's role in the twentieth century. The strong association of coolness with youth, as well as the fact that it rose to a status of widespread recognition in the decades of the baby boomers' youth ties it, paradoxically, both to youth in general, and to that generation and its politics in particular. This misapprehension is of a kind with O'Rourke's self-confessedly facile belief that, simply because Clinton was born within a certain timeframe, and belonged to a certain generation, his ascension to the presidency marked the triumph of his, and Thompson's, values. Underscoring the facile nature of this position, O'Rourke ends his article by recalling how he thought that, by the turn of the millennium, every presidential candidate would be of that age-range, and, so, by default, would be 'cool', a statement obviously falsified by the election of the conservative, born-again George W. Bush.⁴⁰⁸

The retrospective nostalgia for midcentury commitment and activism mistakenly takes 'cool' as a watchword for rebellion. This fundamentally mistakes correlation for causation. The cool hipsters of the 1940s and '50s practiced nonparticipation, whilst the committed radicals of the 1960s not only rejected cool, but also consciously formulated their agendas against the grain of coolness. The literature and commentary of the 1960s discusses cool in negative terms, such as these remarks by the novelist C. D. B. Bryan, writing in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1967:

A great number of over-30's marched recently in San Francisco and New York to protest the war in Vietnam [...] For many of us, it was the first time we so

⁴⁰⁸ P.J. O'Rourke, 'Was Clinton Cool?', p.49.

deliberately and premeditatedly rid ourselves of our cool. And we are grateful to the under-30's who made us aware how senseless and selfish being cool is.⁴⁰⁹

Bryan was born in 1936, placing him squarely within the 'unlost generation' to which the Beats belonged. The 'under-30's' of the countercultural generation are hailed by Bryan as applying a corrective heat to Beat disengagement as a necessary precondition for social and political action.

The shift in focus to discussing cool in the context of work can be partly explained as a natural consequence of its increasing habituation to the middle-class mainstream.

The hipsters and Beats, after all, were not overly concerned with traditional employment, creating the impression that in moving into an alien territory, cool must necessarily mutate and change. Liu's principal weakness is historical, giving scant attention to the historical development of cool in favour of assessing it in the present context. But what we find in his treatment is a noticeable continuity between the cool he describes in the office cubicle, and the cool Baraka gives voice to in 1940s Harlem, not in terms of their motivations, but, rather, in terms of their characteristics. The cool Baraka outlines is fundamentally a gestural stance, too – a compensatory assertion of limited control in an uncertain and precarious situation. Liu's gesture is 'an attitude or pose' likewise made 'from the belly of the beast' in the form of the monolithic corporate structure that would subsume the individual's identity, 'an effort to make one's very mode of inhabiting a culture express what in the 1960s would have been an "alternative lifestyle"'.⁴¹⁰

The work-oriented cool Liu describes directs itself toward leisure as an arena in which

⁴⁰⁹ C. D. B. Bryan, 'Why the Generation Gap Begins at 30', *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 July, 1967, p.39.

⁴¹⁰ Liu, *The Laws of Cool*, pp.77-8.

the individual can assert his autonomy as recompense for the domination of his or her life within working hours. Whilst Baraka's cool is a stance of nominal compliance with the social system the individual is confined to, Liu's cool nominally complies with the work-world and its dictates, as both make an, ultimately politically impotent, signal of implicit mental or spiritual disengagement, or insulation, from the system in which they are subsumed. Both are fundamentally compensatory in nature, and oriented toward asserting personal integrity whilst participating in a system, rather than affecting change.

That the Kerouac of *The Subterraneans* could see in cool a stifling conformity that came at the cost of individuality and expressiveness in one of cool's prototypical literary articulations, too, gives the lie to Lasn's idealized picture of a rebellious bygone cool. hooks' treatment of the countercultural period is more circumspect, attesting that what she describes as the tough, patriarchal cool of the Black Panthers contributed much to the 'death-dealing cool' of the present moment. Instead she, like Thompson, moves the 'golden age' of positive cool to a time largely before the twentieth century altogether. Both constructions give little regard to the Twentieth Century development of the term and the attitude it connotes. But, in the new millennium, the mythology of an 'original cool' retains a certain power, whether it takes the form of an appeal to a lost ethos of prosocial communitarianism, a sensibility unmediated by cynical corporate-political interests, or a convenient advertising slogan to appeal to 'retro' or 'vintage' interests, cool nostalgia represents the latest in a litany of creative misreadings of coolness that contribute to the

connotative tapestry of the term's contemporary usage.⁴¹¹

⁴¹¹ 'The Original Cool' also happens to be the current slogan of the Dutch tourism board, which invites travellers to rediscover 'the original cool' in the history and culture of Holland.

6.1. The Thaw.

The cultural avatars of Cool Britannia are easily identified in the spheres of popular music and the visual arts – in the personages of the ‘Britpop’ bands of Oasis and Blur, and the ‘Young British Artists’ (YBAs) respectively. In terms of literature, the torchbearers are not so prominently placed in popular consciousness, but Nick Hornby is frequently named in the press as the literary representative of the Cool Britannia moment.⁴¹²

Despite this association, Hornby’s 1998 novel *About a Boy* can be read as a narrative of losing one’s coolness as a way towards living a full and complete life. The novel’s protagonist, Will Freeman, is a trendy urbanite who lives off inherited royalties, fills his time almost exclusively with leisure and grooming, and regards his cultivation of ‘men’s-magazine cool’ as ‘as close as he had ever come to an achievement’.⁴¹³ The men’s magazines he refers to help him itemize and systematize cool to the level of a science, and he obsessively tabulates his ‘coolness level’ using their questionnaires, allotting himself points for various achievements, which include: sleeping with women he does not know very well (five points), spending more than three hundred pounds on a jacket (five points), earning more than forty thousand pounds per year

⁴¹² For example: David Kamp, ‘London Swings! Again!’ *Vanity Fair* March 1997. vanityfair.com/magazine/archive/1997/03. Last accessed: 30 May 2017; Clare Rudebeck, ‘Eight Years Later, How the Party Ended for the Cool Britannia Set’, *The Independent*, 27th April 2005. Both articles, and others besides, name Hornby as a prominent representative of the 1990s cultural moment in Britain.

⁴¹³ Nick Hornby, *About a Boy* (London, 2000), p.16.

(five points), and intending to vote for Tony Blair's New Labour (another five points).⁴¹⁴

Will defines what cool means to him along the lines of fashionability, detached fatalism, wealth and status, the avoidance of gauche displays of sentimentality, and of commitment. The 'point of fashion', Will believes, 'meant that you were with the cool and the powerful, and against the alienated and the weak'.⁴¹⁵ This notion of 'the cool and the powerful' attests to how far we have travelled from the streets of midcentury Harlem, where cool was the provenance of the alienated and downtrodden. In *About a Boy*, we are brought to believe that Will's cool is fundamentally a form of psychic self-defense, deployed to preclude the possibility of appearing in any way vulnerable. But it has taken on strong associations of power and privilege, a deportment that is seen to belong to the wealthy and successful, the new aristocracy of Cool Postindustrial Britannia.

Hornby portrays Will's coolness in tones strongly reminiscent of Gary Cross and similar critics. It takes the form of conspicuous spending and the extension of adolescent irresponsibility into middle age. His journey in the novel is one towards sincerity, responsibility, and commitment, via his friendship with the titular boy, the young Marcus, and his struggling single mother, Fiona. Invited round to their house, Will initially reacts with second-hand embarrassment at Fiona's musical sincerity. As she plays 'Knocking on Heaven's Door' and 'Killing me Softly' on the piano, Will notes with distinct discomfort that she 'meant it'. 'There was nothing between her and

⁴¹⁴ Hornby, *About a Boy*, pp.16-17.

⁴¹⁵ Hornby, *About a Boy*, p.124.

the songs; she was inside them. She even closed her eyes when she was singing'.⁴¹⁶ Her 'excruciating' sincerity, the way in which she refuses to 'send herself up' initially alienates Will. But as the novel progresses he becomes 'ashamed' of his 'cocky and cool' self-presentation.⁴¹⁷ The novel ends with Will's 'maturity', as we are told 'He had flattened out [...] Will had lost his shell and his cool and his distance' but gained meaningful relationships in exchange.⁴¹⁸

The 2002 film adaptation of *About a Boy* takes the idea of 'singing with your eyes closed' as the fulcrum of Will's transformation. The climax of the film sees Hugh Grant's Will Freeman appearing onstage with Marcus at his school talent show, risking 'social suicide' to accompany him on the guitar in his chosen rendition of 'Killing me Softly'. Will realizes he, too, has started to 'sing with his eyes closed' in a public disavowal of his status as cool.⁴¹⁹

Writing in 2009, jazz historian Ted Gioia takes a similar idea of musical sincerity as the key marker of what he sees as the ultimate, and immanent, worldwide decline of the cool. It sometimes seems that cultural commentators cannot resist foretelling the end or the death of something – of ideology, of history, of irony. *The Birth (And Death) of The Cool* makes the case, in a similar mode, for cool being in its twilight years as a cultural force, already in the process of being displaced by a 'new earnestness' Gioia calls 'the postcool'.

⁴¹⁶ Hornby, *About a Boy*, p.91.

⁴¹⁷ Hornby, *About a Boy*, p.187.

⁴¹⁸ Hornby, *About a Boy*, p.259.

⁴¹⁹ *About a Boy*. Dir. Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz. Perf. Hugh Grant, Nicholas Hoult. Universal Pictures, 2002. DVD.

For Gioia, we are witnessing increasing musical sincerity – a new generation of artists who look to a time before ‘the hypertrophied irony developed by Sinatra in the fifties’ to recover the ‘sentimentality’ that was ‘thrown overboard’ ‘when cool came to the fore in the middle of the twentieth century’.⁴²⁰ He points to Nora Jones, film soundtracks such as that of *Titanic* (1997) and the ‘new medievalism’ of classical composers such as Arvo Pärt and John Tavener – artists who ‘sing with their eyes closed’ – as evidence that ‘[t]he dominance of cool has reached a saturation point over the last decade, and a larger and larger portion of the public no longer responds to the message. Cool is increasingly just cultural noise, and people have developed a variety of tools to block it out’.⁴²¹

The shift into the postcool, as Gioia sees it, finds its central articulation in the musical, but will, he tells us, find its way into many different facets of the cultural life of the West. He makes use of Kalle Lasn, not only in associating the coming of the postcool with Lasn’s ‘uncooling’ of corporate brand-identities, but in portraying cool as a broad-spectrum social force, or as he puts it, ‘When historians look back, they may see it [cool] as the pinnacle of what people are already calling the American Century’.⁴²² Cool is, for both of these authors, inextricably tied to American-Western cultural and economic hegemony, as well as the mass-culture it projects worldwide.

The postcool epoch, Gioia prophesies, will involve a shift in advertising styles, which he sees as already underway. It will emphasize the ‘down home and natural’, the

⁴²⁰ Ted Gioia, *The Birth (And Death) of The Cool* (Golden CO, 2009), pp.166-170. Gioia points to Sinatra as the major figure of cool’s entry into popular-mainstream musical consciousness, but his account of its origins as a deportment and aesthetic follow the conventional account, beginning with Bebop musicians and its associated culture in Harlem.

⁴²¹ Gioia, *Birth (And Death) of The Cool*, p.188.

⁴²² Gioia, *Birth (And Death) of The Cool*, p.195.

‘authentic’ and simple.⁴²³ This will be accompanied by an attitudinal shift towards demonstrative emotion and public sincerity. He cites the prominent focus on emotion on the television talent contest *American Idol*, which features prominent and often tearful testimonials from contestants, in which their musical performance is tied to, and held to be indicative of, a personal struggle or tragedy.⁴²⁴ Gioia is mostly silent on literary matters, but his depiction of a musical zeitgeist on the verge of embracing ‘the new earnestness’ is obviously redolent of David Foster Wallace’s ‘new sincerity’, which is taken as a rejection of irony and ‘hip fatigue’, wherein writers will return to ‘plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions’ in fiction, embracing ‘single-entendre principles’.⁴²⁵

There is, Gioia warns, a potentially ‘dark, ugly side of postcool society’. Just as the new advertising culture of simplicity and authenticity will, he concedes, be subject to cynical corporate manipulation, the restored fondness for emotional display will come at the cost of what he sees as one of the positive effects of cool – its unwillingness to countenance ‘infantile rage’ and ‘temper tantrums’. Within the emotional framework of *American Idol*, prominence is given to judge Simon Cowell’s often-fiery outbursts and frank expressions of disapproval. Gioia sees the popularity of such ‘nasty’ personalities as one of the distasteful aspects of the coming postcool age. Among its representatives he numbers television chef Gordon Ramsey, and, then host of *The Apprentice* and now president of the United States, Donald J. Trump, whose ‘bluntness and callousness’ single him out to Gioia as a postcool figure.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Gioia, *Birth (And Death) of The Cool*, p.190.

⁴²⁴ Gioia, *Birth (And Death) of The Cool*, p.162.

⁴²⁵ David Foster Wallace, ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* xiii:ii (1993), 151-194; and Gioia, *Birth (And Death) of The Cool*, p.181.

⁴²⁶ Gioia, *Birth (And Death) of The Cool*, p.162.

6.2. ‘The Cool and the Powerful’.

Whether or not the new sincerity is, in fact, taking place, either in the realm of music or of literature, is a subject that demands more critical attention than can be properly given here. In terms of Gioia’s argument – taken on its own, it seems somewhat unconvincing. *The Birth (And Death) of The Cool* is by no means the first foretelling of the ‘end of cool’ (as we have seen), but it is the most in-depth and sustained funeral elegy cool has received, running to two-hundred-and-twenty-two pages, including a year-by-year timeline of developments or significant events in twentieth-century coolness. Selecting a year from this timeline – for example, 1970 – gives some idea of the selective nature of the history presented. The year in which *Time* magazine proclaimed ‘things aren’t “cool” any more’ saw the widespread success of the mawkishly sentimental film *Love Story*, and the triumph of Dana Rosemary Scallan’s ‘All Kinds of Everything’ at the Eurovision Song Contest. Taken together, could these instances of sincere emotional display be seen as indicative of a general decline of the cultural influence of cool? Instead of admitting such complications, Gioia’s one entry for the year is ‘The water bed, first envisioned by sci-fi writer Robert Heinlein, is commercialized’. The hegemony of cool is held to have continued as yet uninterrupted.⁴²⁷

Furthermore, Gioia’s invocation of Donald Trump as an avatar of the postcool provokes an examination of the continuing, and surprising, relevance of coolness in the twenty-first century. Whilst the bluster and bombast that accompanied Trump’s, ultimately successful, 2016 presidential bid were evident in the (sometimes violent) behaviour of the audiences at his campaign rallies, the behaviour and strategic

⁴²⁷ Owen, ““Right On” is Off and Other Hiplingua News’, *Time* xcvi 17 August 1970, p.36; and Gioia, *Birth (And Death) of The Cool*, p.209.

deportment adopted by one particular segment of his support-base provides an opportunity for the analysis of cool's continuing cultural significance, as well as the continuing change it is undergoing.

The so-called 'Alt-Right' is a somewhat unsatisfactory label for a diverse grouping of reactionary right-wing ideologies that have grown, in recent years, from a fringe online community to a visible political presence that is the subject of intense and widespread debate. Self-professed members appear to run the gamut from anarcho-capitalists to extreme authoritarians, from libertarians to avowed fascists. They are banded together in America by the twin fixtures of support for Trump and an intense opposition to what they see as the institutional supremacy of left-liberals, and its attendant 'political correctness', which they view as an assault on traditional values. The Alt-Right label remains strongly associated with white nationalism, owing to the term's origins in 2008 with Richard Spencer, director of the National Policy Institute, who describes the Alt-Right as a movement concerned with 'white identity', and whose objectives include 'ethno-nationalism', taking feminism, multiculturalism, and immigration as evidence of a cryptic campaign underway by 'global elites', to marginalize 'the white race', and white men in particular.⁴²⁸

The progressive political magazine *Mother Jones* describes Spencer as the 'Alt-right architect' who 'aims to make racism cool again'.⁴²⁹ Spencer's beliefs are not particularly new. His academic work and political worldview lean heavily upon the

⁴²⁸ Daniel Lombroso and Yoni Appelbaum 'Hail Trump!': White Nationalists Salute the President-Elect', *The Atlantic* 21 November, 2016. www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/richard-spencer-speech-npi/508379/ Last Accessed: 30 May 2017.

⁴²⁹ Josh Harkinson, 'Meet the White Nationalist Trying To Ride The Trump Train to Lasting Power', *Mother Jones* 27 October 2016. www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/richard-spencer-trump-alt-right-white-nationalist/. Last accessed: 29 May 2017.

writings of Kevin MacDonald, whose anti-Semitic tracts, most notably *The Culture of Critique* (1998) also influenced the older American Neo-Nazi movement. What makes Spencer, and the Alt-Right in general, different to the Neo-Nazi and skinhead movements that preceded them, is a matter of presentation and novelty.

The descriptor ‘cool’ is not only applied to Spencer. It is often self-adopted by members of the Alt-Right. Paul Joseph Watson, a self-described ‘part of’ the Alt-Right and editor of the conspiracy-theory-focused news organ *Infowars*, describes his political worldview (which includes belief in the ‘Cultural Marxism’ conspiracy theory and staunch opposition to feminism and progressivism) as ‘the new counterculture’, one that challenges ‘the left’s monopoly on cool’.⁴³⁰ Andrew Anglin, owner/operator of the racist ‘Daily Stormer’ website, says of the movement ‘We have become the cool ones rebelling against a tyrannical system’. He pronounces the punk-and-metal-inspired music associated with preceding Neo-Nazi movements no longer ‘hip’, and recognizes, instead, genres like ‘fashwave’ – extremely self-referential and playful electronic music that ‘fits perfectly with the ironic vibes of the movement’.⁴³¹ A portmanteau of ‘fascist’ and ‘synthwave’, the retro-inspired genre recalls the video game soundtracks of 1980s and 90s console platformers. The whole presentation is irreverent and coyly playful, featuring tongue-in-cheek titles such as ‘Galactic Lebensraum’ that suggest the whole thing is not to be taken seriously.

⁴³⁰ Paul Joseph Watson. ‘Conservatism is the NEW Counter-Culture’, *YouTube.com* 9 February 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=avb8cwOgVQ8. Last accessed: 30 May 2017. Watson has disavowed the ‘Alt-Right’ label in recent months, but remains aligned with many of its core values.

⁴³¹ Quoted in: Reggie Ugwu, ‘How Electronic Music Made By Neo-Nazis Soundtracks the Alt-Right’, *Buzzfeed News* 13 December 2016. www.buzzfeed.com/reggieugwu/fashwave?utm_term=.dmLR0Vm7p#.bje7kPIQB. Last accessed: 30 May 2017.

This ironic aesthetic goes beyond the music scene. In the Alt-Right, the traditional iconography of fascistic movements has been displaced. Instead, the group favours a diverse mix of Anime imagery, the postmodern-inspired and highly self-conscious visual aesthetic of ‘vaporwave’, and the much commented-upon ‘Pepe the frog’ memes, all of which emphasize a sense of play and pastiche, and which became a bizarre fixture of the 2016 presidential race.



The “Cool Pepe”

The aesthetic of the Alt-Right fits with the category of cool as outlined by Thomas Frank, as a style of iconography that privileges the playful and the irreverent in favour of an explicit statement or display of information. It is, in a similar mode to Frank’s ‘cool advertising styles’ of the 1960s and 70s, a badge of countercultural belonging that opposes itself to the dominant standard of taste and acceptability via unconventional aesthetic choices. But the Alt-Right’s affinity with coolness goes

beyond the purely aesthetic and brings their behaviour in line with key markers of coolness - strategic deportment and a politicization of affect.

Despite the strong and persistent identification of the Alt-Right with white nationalist ideology, numerous apologists insist that the movement is relatively benign. Typical of these pronouncements is Milo Yiannopoulos's (prominent Alt-Right spokesman and formerly of *Breitbart News*) insistence that their spread of anti-Semitic imagery is no more than transgressive fun. In his words, the Alt-Right are anti-Semitic '[n]o more than death metal devotees in the 1980s were actually satanists. For them, it's simply a means to fluster their grandparents'.⁴³² The ironic nature of the iconography and imagery of the Alt-Right effectively allows its users to disavow any racist position whilst simultaneously displaying it. The comparatively 'approachable' appearance of Pepe the frog acts as a more acceptable alternative to the swastika or the double lightning-bolt, cloaking itself in a countercultural aura of provocation, irony, and play that allows, in the words of journalist Jason Wilson, their fascist ideology to 'hide in plain sight'.⁴³³ The appeal to irony reaches sometimes-ridiculous levels, as when, in 2016, attendees of the National Policy Institute conference responded to the closing words of Spencer's speech ('Hail Trump, Hail Victory') with Nazi salutes, Spencer later claimed it was done in 'a spirit of irony and exuberance'.⁴³⁴

⁴³² Quoted in: John Wilson, 'Hiding in Plain Sight: How the 'Alt-Right' is Weaponizing Irony to Spread Fascism', *The Guardian* 23 May 2017. www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism. Last accessed: 1 June 2017.

⁴³³ Wilson, 'Hiding in Plain Sight'.

⁴³⁴ Qtd. in Joshua Barajas, 'Nazi Salutes 'Done in a Spirit of Irony and Exuberance,' Alt-Right Leader Says', *PBS Newshour* 22 November 2016. www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/white-nationalist/. Last accessed: 1 June 2017.

The Alt-Right's self-description as a 'counterculture' bespeaks their embattled mentality. They see themselves at war with a dominant culture typified by leftist hegemony, institutional feminism, and, in extreme cases, a secret global shadow-government orchestrated by Jews. Their self-described cool aesthetic and ironic deportment serve a double-function in view of this perceived imbalance of power: First, their disavowal of traditional fascist optics, they believe, makes their movement more attractive. In a culture where to call someone a Nazi is, as Spencer says, a thought-terminating cliché, alternative and appealing imagery allows greater opportunities to explain the Alt-Right's philosophy to prospective members.⁴³⁵ Secondly, such imagery and behaviour permit the Alt-Right to plausibly deny (albeit with varying degrees of success) any extreme positions that the 'hegemonic' society finds unacceptable when push comes to shove. In this way, members can avoid running afoul of hate speech laws and the social censure that would attend, for instance, the public wearing of Doc Martens with red laces or other easily-identifiable neo-Nazi signifiers. To adapt MacAdams, this represents a strategy by which Alt-Right members can stay below the radar of the dominant culture, stifling or concealing their beliefs whilst at the same time expressing them.

The politicization of affect is another key feature of the Alt-Right. Its adherents denigrate progressivism (and 'leftism' in general) as associated with, and underwritten by, an hysterical emotionalism. The language of 'triggered liberals', 'safe spaces' and 'special snowflakes' pedaled by Yiannopoulos and others, posits a political spectrum that opposes the 'rational' racist to the 'sentimental' liberal, who refuses to examine or even countenance discussion of 'uncomfortable' subjects such

⁴³⁵ Spencer made this claim on a livestream with Scottish Alt-Right *YouTube.com* user 'Millennial Woes' (Colin Robertson). At the time of writing, the video in question is unavailable.

as the purported connection between I.Q. and race, mass-migration and crime, or Jewish control of the media. The tears of the ‘triggered’ liberal ‘snowflake’ are taken to be the ultimate foundation of the institutional power the extreme right opposes, an out-of-control politics-of-feeling that members believe has driven them underground. Against this exaggerated picture of their opposition, the Alt-Right constructs its own political emotion in the form of the ‘troll’ – witty, aloof, and knowing, whose serene cheekiness makes ‘triggering liberals’ into a public demonstration of opponents’ perceived emotionalism, all the while enacting a nonchalance and dispassion that permits a strategic disavowal of extreme positions when convenient. The Alt-Right slogan ‘fuck your feelings’ is the ultimate expression of this viewpoint, a mantra that was apparently popularized by Yiannopolous, and which appeared on t-shirts and unofficial merchandise under the header of ‘Trump 2016’ during the presidential race.

Taken together, the ironic aesthetic, the strategic deportment, and the politicization of affective markers, gives ground to the Alt-Right’s adoption of ‘cool’ as a label. This is the latest, and the most sinister, testament to date of the distance the term and the concept have travelled from its origins in midcentury Harlem, if indeed we are willing to recognize it now coming into the hands of white supremacists. Whether or not the strange marriage of cool and this fringe ideology will go on to become a significant or lasting cultural force, or just an odd footnote in the history of cool, and of the cultural evolution of the West, remains to be seen. And certainly the Alt-Right’s strategic adoption of cool has yet to produce any contribution to literature. By no means do I suggest that cool has, or will find, some particular or exclusive affinity with this group as we move deeper into the twenty-first century. But the recent marriage of convenience between anti-black racists, and a concept that developed to help African-

Americans cope, in the words of Baraka, with ‘the horror of white America’, certainly marks the potential for a significant and dismaying new departure in the history of cool. (*BP* 213) It would see cool become unstuck from its habitual politics of (often troubled) racial solidarity or understanding, originating with the hipsters and Beats, and the alliance with proto-fascism would mark an extreme reversal of its traditionally anti-authoritarian stance.

To quote Robert Hughes, ‘perhaps the etiquette now demands that I should try and prognosticate about what is coming next’. ‘Well I won’t’, he responds, ‘because I don’t know. History teaches us one certain thing – that critics, when they fish out the crystal ball, are almost invariably wrong’.⁴³⁶ The temptation is, like Gioia, to fall upon one side or the other, and to announce with confidence either the terminal decline, or the perennial renewal, of the cool. The temptation to do either is certainly very great, but I will limit myself to this more modest conclusion:

Cool does not speak readily. Its character is withdrawn, elusive, and often obfuscatory. Those who do speak about cool, and especially those who do so at length, are engaging in uncool behavior. The history of cool has been one of misunderstandings, misreadings, and misinterpretations. This tendency to be misunderstood, or interpreted idiosyncratically and without recourse to a body of historical knowledge, has been allowed and encouraged by the aura of silence that has surrounded cool for so long. The trend for self-conscious discussions about cool, which began in the still-fairly-recent past of the 1990s, and to which this present work belongs, may change that within academic circles, but it seems unlikely it will do so

⁴³⁶ Hughes, ‘The Future that Was’, *The Shock of the New*, BBC/Time-Life, 1980. Television.

much more widely. Despite the best efforts of those of us who think and write about this phenomenon of silence, we risk creating the ground for future misreadings, or representing such misreadings ourselves.

Perhaps the best way to write of cool is with recourse to the reticence, the fundamental ambiguity that cool, by its nature, encodes, and to hope that, if the thaw does come, we will all be cool with it.

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