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Beat and Spoken Word Movements: Beating the American Bandwagon Mentality

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Before literacy was a common ability for everyone interested in poetry, poets were expected not only to be exceptional writers, but competent performers as well, bringing life to their poems so that the poetry was impressive to the literate and illiterate alike. Since then, poetry has gone through an ebb and flow in popularity, thus affecting how its audiences have enjoyed it. For a while, poetry was intended to be a private form of entertainment to be read alone or amongst a close group of friends. Over the past century, the poem has risen from the printed page once more through poetry readings and slams. By the fifties, poetry began to return to its performance tradition, allowing the audience to hear the poets' works, incorporating the content that affected their contemporary audiences. The Beat poets during the fifties used the post-World War II climate as inspiration for their offbeat, free verse poetry. During modern times, spoken word poets use the Iraq-Afghanistan War as a backdrop for much of their poetry.

The focus of my thesis is to understand how poetics are used as social commentary to reflect the cultural trends during the poets' times. More specifically, I'm interpreting how the Beat and spoken word poets comment on American bandwagon mentality during their respective eras. For the Beat poets, they focused on how Americans were concerned with returning to a state of normalcy after World War II. Modern spoken word poets write more about the current hysteria to join several different social causes without having a clear goal in mind or at least a sufficient means of finding out how to effect the change they are so eager to obtain.

In this paper, I examine the role poetry has played in commenting on American bandwagon mentality, using the Beat and spoken word movements as epic frameworks. Both eras are centered on different bandwagon mentalities that arose around a war era, World War II in the fifties and the Iraq-Afghanistan War of the 2000s. I will focus on three main things. First, I explain what exactly those bandwagon mentalities were during the Beat and spoken word movements,

analyzing how societal responses to war eras have been used as inspiration for these movements. Second, I expound upon how the Beats and spoken word poets use their poetry as a commentary, dissecting the content of their poetry as it pertains to social bandwagoning. Third, I discuss the social significance these poets' commentaries have had on their audiences through audience perception and participation.

My methodological approach includes listening to and analyzing ten poems, five from the Beat poetry movement, such as "Revolutionary Letters" by Diane di Prima and "America" by Allen Ginsberg, and five from the spoken word movement, such as "I Want to Be a Revolutionary" by Nico Cary and "Like Lilly Like Wilson Like" by Taylor Mali, exploring the thematic elements of spirituality, sexuality, and politics as they relate to the social norms of their times. I also define the American bandwagon mentality according to the term's literal use and Theodore Roosevelt's figurative use in 1899.

Societies have been built around cultural trends, or bandwagons, since time in memoriam. But what exactly are bandwagons and, more importantly, why do poets use them as an inspiration for their work? The literal definition of "bandwagon" is a band of musicians on a wagon, generally at a public event, such as a political rally or a parade. However, Theodore Roosevelt first used the term in 1899 to describe a group of people supporting a trend, often because they believe that there will be a personal gain if they show their support for that particular person or idea. Herding around a central concept or individual is a basic human instinct and this can be witnessed in various aspects of society. It can be seen in peer pressure, vying for the same promotion on a job, or following a fashion trend that a celebrity started. Therefore, when a war breaks out in a society, there will be some form of bandwagon jumping in the society the war affects.

During the fifties, World War II was coming to a close and America was trying to return to a sense of normalcy that the war momentarily unraveled. Thus, there was a general acceptance of the nuclear family with the two small, if not mischievous and rambunctious, children; the nice house with the manicured lawn; the happy housewife whose only complaint was that she ran out of Wonderbread for her children's lunches; and the husband going to his respectable job in his brand new Ford. The week culminated in a trip to church where they learned good, Christian values and had a picnic in the park afterward. Although political tensions still had a presence with the Cold War and Korean War just beginning, the main combat threat was averted and American culture saw a rise in morale as sons, brothers, fathers, and friends started returning home. The bandwagon mentality of the 1950s embraced the placidity that a post-war social climate afforded them.

Fast-forwarding to the 2000s, there is a 360 degree change from the values of the mid-20th century. The Iraq-Afghanistan War is still in full swing and inciting people toward action to address the issues that war makes societies so aware of in the world. A cause hysteria permeates the youth that sparks an interest in simultaneously helping save the whales with PETA, preserve the environment with Greenpeace, stop starvation in East Africa with UNICEF, rebuild homes

in the Ninth Ward with Habitat for Humanity, and support gay rights with Equality California, all while being completely incensed that anyone would dare not want to do any of these activities while working their way through college. However, all the passion and outrage in the world cannot make a cause worthwhile or the plan of action any more intelligible as many of these causes have proven, often limiting their action to signing a pledge, sporting a sticker, and maybe asking for a monetary donation. Thus, spoken word poets have used this misguided cause hysteria bandwagon as inspiration for their works.

Diane di Prima, of the Beat poetry movement, uses her poem “Revolutionary Letter #7” to inspire her audience to think about the action they would take if their liberty was threatened and revolution was necessary. She starts the poem with, “There are those who can tell you how to make Molotov cocktails / Bombs, whatever you might be needing. / Find them and learn” [2, 1–3]. Immediately, she brings a rallying cry of action to her listeners. She also invokes the idea that these revolutionary skills are meant to be passed down from those who know to those who are hungry for the knowledge. In direct contrast to the modern bandwagon mentality of following a million different causes with no real purpose or goal, di Prima continues, “Define your aim clearly / Choose your ammo with that in mind” [2, 4–5]. Here, di Prima advises those who are interested in revolution to know their struggle and to choose their methods of attack according to their purpose, instead of the other way around. A little later in the poem, di Prima gives a short list of things that will lead to success in any revolutionary’s struggle: “Success will depend mostly on your state of mind. / Meditate / Pray / Make love. / Be prepared at any time to die” [2, 12–16]. The willingness of the revolutionary of di Prima’s time to go against the common complacent status quo of accepting injustice or ignoring problems, to throw their livelihood into the fray, makes success of freedom that much more plausible. She ends the poem saying:

What will win is mantras, the sustenance we give each other,
The energy we plug into,
The fact that we touch, share food, the Buddha nature of everyone,
Friend and foe like a million earthworms tunneling under the structure
’Til it falls [2, 21–25]

The inclusion of Buddhist practices here, such as mantras and the idea that all friends and foes are meant to coexist against one major enemy of suffering to dismantle the repressive structure, helps to define the revolution that di Prima was hoping for in the Beat movement. The revolution in this poem shows how the Beat movement used their poetry to outline how to counter the bandwagon trends that were spreading across American society during the fifties.

Nico Cary, a 2008 Cal alumnus, sums up the modern American bandwagon mentality among youth in his poem, “I Want to Be a Revolutionary.” Illustrating an average day at Cal campus, walking down Sproul Plaza and being bombarded with at least ten tables giving multiple viewpoints on the same three or four causes, using a mocking and, at times, cynical tone, Cary highlights the

inefficacy of the multifaceted cause horse, beginning the poem saying that a person often starts fighting for a cause aesthetically, making sure he or she looks right before actually knowing what the fight is about: “Me and my ten-point plan and a leather jacket, / A Fidel Castro hat from H&M, and fuckin’, fuckin’, army fatigue, hipster tight, emo pants” [1, 3–4]. The revolutionary, in this case, has gotten the look prepared, down to the superficial ten-point plan, but there is no authentic follow through. Cary continues with a short list of causes and steps taken to fight for these causes, the ideas becoming more ridiculous as he continues his walk down Sproul Plaza, crescendoing with, “Shallow feminists along with them, saying, ‘Ha. Put your fists up. Deconstruct male privilege / Stop the gentrification in West Oakland. Don’t live in Oakland, sign this petition, and wear our / sticker’” [1, 28]. As he progresses through campus, surveying the causes that are available for him to get involved in, Cary realizes that the more options he has, the less likely he is to get anything done, finally settling down with the group that is the quietest, albeit the highest out of all of them:

I don’t know which one of these motherfuckers to choose! So, I run
 Oddly, finding solace with the Trestafaris
 A swarm of dirty blonde dreadlocks and bare feet.
 They pass me a blunt laced with hashish
 And say... Nothing
 I... Want to be... A revolutionary.
 But now... I’m high [1, 32–39]

After his misguided tryst with these quiet rebels, Cary finds that his thoughts are constantly distracted by pop culture to the point where he can’t be properly incensed by anything: “And all I can think about is what it would be like to have sex... with Britney Spears... Bald” (41). However, after he finally focuses himself enough to think about the anger-inducing issues at his disposal, going on a rambling tangent about the worldly concerns that could provoke a revolutionary, he finally reveals that the main issue with many youth is that they are so eager to make something important happen that they are wholly ineffectual:

I want to be a revolutionary, but I don’t know what that means.
 I have the aesthetic down, but not the means.
 I mean, it seems the revolution, the all-encompassing, enigmatic,
 undying cause
 The cause itself has struck me actionless. [1, 63–66]

Through humor and personally identifying with the subjects of his poem, Cary exposes an American bandwagon mentality obsessed with social change that ultimately changes nothing because of their convoluted plans and their unwavering emotions that distract them from the goals they may or may not have had in mind.

Poetry has begun to transcend the limits of written scholarship and has once again become the Everyman means of communication and social commentary

between the poet and the audience, allowing the audience to think about and reflect upon the poets' messages. Within this paper, I focus on two mediums of performance poetry. The first medium is poetry reading, as seen in the Beat poetry movement where the poet assumed the teacher role while the audience was his or her apt pupils, listening and ruminating on the words of the poetry. The audience's passive role in listening to the poem gave the poet the opportunity to share his or her opinions with the audience, letting them walk away with new ideas about the bandwagon mentalities they were personally harboring. The second medium is slam poetry, as seen in the spoken word movement, where the poet and the audience share an inherent connection so that the meaning of the poem permeates the words and becomes a shared experience between the poet and the audience. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett describes the connection between the poet and the audience in her book, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, as such:

The key to understanding slam poetry as a body of work has little to do with form or style. Instead, because a range of forms, tones, and modes of address exist in slam practice, such poetry is best understood by what it means to achieve or effect: a more intimate and authentic connection to its audience. [3, p. 9]

Thus, the slam poetry tradition is meant to draw the audience into the poem through scoring, call-response, cheering, and even booing so that the audience is not only able to think about the poetry, but to participate and contribute as well.

In conclusion, poetry as a means of social commentary has been a common practice for millennia. Over the past sixty years in particular, performance poetry has been used as a response to American bandwagon mentalities that people have blindly followed under the guise of receiving some type of gratification. The Beat poets used the stoic, post-World War II trend that was permeating America as inspiration for their rebellious countercultural lifestyle and their poetry mirrored the lifestyle they chose to lead. The spoken word poets write and perform in direct response to the current Iraq-Afghanistan War culture that causes people to become involved in a multitude of issues that have little to no basis or effect in the long run. As each era developed, the poetry grew with it to properly address the bandwagoning that was taking place. This response and development cycle has been poetry's role. As a new generation matures, the question is how they will use poetry to respond to the growing social, political, global, and economic problems that are arising in our world and how their audiences will be able to participate and think about their works in the future.

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