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The Northport Beatnik

Aidan Lily Athanasio
Bard College

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The Northport Beatnik

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts and Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Aidan Lily Athanasio

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

Dedication

I dedicate this senior thesis to my Pops.

One of the smartest (and tallest) men to have walked this earth, he always said that:

“Education is the best investment.”

He instilled in me how important getting an education is, and that sentiment drove me to complete my degree and continues to drive me to keep learning as much as I can.

I’ve spent the pursuit of my education trying to make him proud.

I know he will watch over me from above as I walk across that stage and through life.

Acknowledgments

The person and student I am today would not exist without these lovely people.

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To Bard Women's Soccer, I love you all.

To Jack Kerouac, I understand.

To Northport, you're a gem.

A Statement On: *The Northport Beatnik*

By Aidan Athanasio

I have always had a passion for history and have spent my years in school studying ancient and often far-away civilizations, but I have yet to look at the history closest to me. Where I'm from is a massive part of who I am, and discovering that history is just as important as the topics I've learned in class. My research brought me to discover the rich history of Northport, New York, a small town on the north shore of Long Island, and my hometown. My love of history and film initially had me hoping to make a documentary about the history of Northport, so I began my research. However, through this research, my project started to shift. I discovered a couple of high-profile figures who had spent significant time in Northport, and I was intrigued. Clearly, my love for the town was not a sentiment only shared by me if these other figures found themselves drawn to Northport as well. The most notable of these figures was Jack Kerouac. I had not known too much about him prior to my research other than that I knew he was a nomadic figure and that he wrote the acclaimed novel *On the Road*. This distance and unbiased view of him as a person and a writer worked in my favor as I worked through the historical puzzle of why he stayed in Northport for so long and why he only wrote one book during that time.

I've done many research projects over the years, but this one is the crown jewel. I couldn't just rely on journals and books online to conduct my research from the confines of Annandale-on-Hudson. I needed to physically go home to Northport to sort through the archives at the Northport Library and Northport Historical Society in person, as well as film on location. Among my findings included one piece that really struck me, which was the hours of audio interviews that the Northport Library conducted with Kerouac, who notoriously hated being interviewed. It truly was the environment of Northport that opened him up, even though he was facing a lot of personal issues and problems at the time. It's these audios that come alive and what solidified to me that this work needed to be a documentary. Choosing to combine both of my majors into this one documentary work was something I pondered for a while before choosing to do a joint senior project. The power that these audio have paired with actual footage of Northport holds an emphasis that I don't think I could have reached with the written word alone. This project truly felt like it encompassed all the learning I've done these past four years. It was quite a joy to be able to utilize all my skills to culminate in this final work and feel such comfort within the marriage of these two disciplines of history and film. This town, Kerouac, and I exist as the main characters in this documentary. It was my goal to do all three justice.

Aidan Athanasio

Historical Studies

Film Production

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Supplemental Essay

When I decided to complete two degrees while at Bard, I did not do so lightly. There was a lot that went behind my decision to work towards both degrees that would complete in a final joint senior project. Historical Studies was on the table first. My long-lasting love for the subject began with my mom, a history teacher, and continued throughout my education career. My affinity for film came later on in life. The appreciation was always there, but it wasn't something I had considered genuinely devoting myself to until high school and then, more recently and most intensely, in college. My interest in film stemmed from my love of stories and how I devoured book after book growing up. Film and the simple fact that it is visual stories resonated with me in such a fashion that I knew that I had to be a part of it, somehow. These two loves combined, in a loving labor over these past four years and have created the idea for this project: a documentary.

Combining these two disciplines was something that just made sense to me. Visualizing history is something that I feel strongly about. I'm a huge proponent of encouraging people to visit museums to see tangible evidence of history. Reading about history is integral, but I think reading needs to be supplemented with visual components, whether in person artifacts at a

museum or in a visual kind of media. In the same way that we read and appreciate Shakespeare, there is also this acknowledgment that the play we read was meant to be seen on a stage.

In an academic context, history is usually written in extensive books and journals. These specific texts are often meant for other historians or other history students like myself. Over four years, I've developed the unique and crucial skillset to read and analyze these texts. However, I wouldn't say that these texts are accessible, at least not to everyone. This is where film comes into the conversation. As a very visual person, I excel in understanding topics if they are visually given to me. This is a personal learning preference that I have, but it came to be something I wanted to implement in this film, as this film is also slightly personal to me as well.

Film, especially documentary film, allows for information to be presented to an audience in an alternative manner. Documentaries are offered less densely but are still viable for showcasing information. Documentaries also provide ways for video and audio to enhance stories. Primarily during the period that I dealt with in this film, in the 50s and 60s, audio-visual technology was used during that time. This being said, I now have primary source material in the form of audio to be used within my film. It is one thing to utilize visual/audio material in a documentary to prove a point within a film depicting ancient civilizations; there's obviously no media of the time besides that of artifacts, art, and written accounts. The strength in my case is that I utilize audio from the time paired with pictures of the era to depict the information I have successfully. Had my chosen subject for my senior project been of an ancient civilization like the ancient Greeks, for example, I don't think a film would be as powerful because its strength would be in the writing. The specific factors of this project where I have primary source media of the time I'm discussing, paired with the ability to go to the place and film there myself, is a

significant driving motive of my decision to make this joint senior project. The recognition of what avenues I could take or utilize to gain the visual and audio media was an important consideration prior to making this project.

My initial plan was always to create a documentary on my hometown of Northport, New York. The aspect of researching and discovering a historical topic that required me to do specific research into something close to me was attractive to me. I've spent the last four years learning through journals about long-lost empires and civilizations. For this project, I wanted a history that I could touch. There is something incredibly compelling about going to a place, looking in its archives, and doing research that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to do had I picked a different topic. However, I came to a crossroads early into the project: Is this going to be too mundane? I find Northports history fascinating, but that's also because I grew up there, and even just an old picture of Main Street in the early 1900s would excite me. There came to be an issue of how can I get other people to feel the same interest in the form of a film. I could have created a "Ken Burns-esque" film and a detached didactic film. I could have made a fairly interesting piece of media that sprawled from the beginning of Northports history until now. I could have included the start of Northport with the sand mining and shipbuilding, the transition out of a working-class town, the lawbook business that dominated the town for a bit, a brief satanic panic in the 80s, and finally into what the town is now: a calm upper-class beach town. Not only was that far too much to cover with my time and resources, it didn't have the X-factor it needed to be a compelling film. This was the sentiment I had until I started digging deep into Northport's history. Finding out that figures like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Booker T. Washington, and, most interestingly, Jack Kerouac had spent significant time in Northport. As a Northport native, I

knew how special the town was, but discovering that these famous figures who were not natives also found that Northport was special too, confirmed that there was something about this town that attracted people, and that felt significant.

Jack Kerouac spent seven whole years in Northport and moved three times within the town, which struck me as both interesting and significant. I knew of Kerouac, but in the context that he was a writer who wrote about journeys and more of a nomad lifestyle, why he was stationary in Northport for so long was the historical puzzle I wanted to solve. So here is the first significant shift in my project: I would research Northport's history but do it in the context of Kerouac's time there while going into his history and what drew him to reside in the town for as long as he did.

Zeroing in on Kerouac would enable me to tell Northport's story through an alternative angle and on a smaller scale. Cutting down the film's timeframe would allow me to devote more detail, creating a film that would resonate better than the larger timeframe I initially decided on. Additionally, in an odd way, I think the fact that I didn't know too much about Kerouac worked in my favor because it allowed me to be unbiased as I dove deep into him as a person and writer. Having known more about Northport than Kerouac at this point in the project, I started to devote my time to understanding Kerouac. I did this through a biography about him written by a woman who knew him, which helped tremendously. I started off reading his works and articles/books about him and gradually started narrowing down his history to a point where it overlapped with Northport. Late-stage research into the crosssections of Kerouac and Northport included letters he wrote in the town, accounts from others who knew him while in Northport, the only book he

wrote in Northport *Big Sur*, articles about his time in Northport and also interviews with him conducted by the Northport library while he lived there.

Discovering these crosssections where Northport and Kerouac shared the same space was integral to the film. The interview that the Northport library conducted was a couple of hours long and provided tremendous insight into Kerouac. The tape included Kerouac rambling on as he drank with a few friends in one of their apartments. The interviewer tries to ask Kerouac questions, but a tipsy Kerouac dances around these questions and talks about anything and everything else. The few sections where he answers the interviewer are about his writing and why he likes Northport, enabling insight into his character. Although not extremely relevant, these audios still offer a valuable understanding of his personality, which gave me confidence in my discoveries. Just his cadence alone and how he spoke added a much-needed layer or understanding to my research. It was a fortunate and valuable find as a historian; it made all my reading on him come alive. Utilizing the Northport Library and, most notably, the Northport Historical Society was incredibly helpful and integral to the research process. Using the skills I learned as a historical studies major to be physically in the place I was researching truly allowed me to create this work that combines Northport's history with Jack Kerouac's and my own history in a seamless piece.

The execution of this project did come with a fair share of challenges. At the forefront, after deciding that Kerouac had a significant place in the film, deciding my voice was an important hurdle to distinguish. I originally was going to distance my personal voice from this project and take a more didactic route. I thought that inserting myself would be too much and take away from what I was trying to convey with Kerouac and Northport. Further deliberation

proved that the alternative of having myself present was more cohesive. This conclusion came from evaluating why I was doing this project in the first place: my own hometown. My voice and presence needed to be in the film; it became apparent and essential to the success of the final cut relatively quickly. However, I didn't include my voice and self in an overbearing way on purpose; I still wanted to incorporate that I am also connected to this place without making this film about myself. Inserting small side notes here and there alluding to the audience that, as the narration, I know the town and have almost broken the fourth wall by discussing my journey during the film. Finding this balance was a core component of finding the format and voice of this film.

The overarching challenge of finding a film language to tell this story included a deliberation in which I weighed the advantages and disadvantages this film would have in terms of being a documentary as opposed to a paper. The conclusion I came to was that given the period and the emphasis on the visual nature of Northport paired with the audios I could find, a film would be a much more powerful piece of media than a paper. This isn't to say that a paper would not have also had its strengths. A paper definitely would have been able to be more detailed and overarching. I had to work out a condensing of information for this film. Another significant piece that I wanted to highlight was Kerouac and who he was, personality-wise. I think the audio of him talking about Northport being a town of "trees and ghosts" was critical in getting across his demeanor in a way that could not be replicated in the written word. The audios of him speaking paired with current and past photos and visuals of Northport, set the scene and drives home the feeling of this time and place. Being a documentary central to a place needed the impact that the visuals give. Not only do they connect to the content, but they transport the

viewer and listen to this same place that is being discussed. This showcases the power that a film like this can have. In deliberation of whether or not to do a paper or a film, this distinguishing marker of deciding what would be the most impactful and seamless of a way to showcase the information was at the forefront. The audience needs the context of Northport as a town to understand the information I put across. More specifically, they need the visuals and audio of the town and of Kerouac himself to truly get the whole picture.

The final product of my film includes a combination of the past and present with archival photos from the Northport Historical Society and audios of Kerouac from the time, paired with my own narration and footage of Northport in the present day. I chose to take a thematic approach as opposed to a linear timeline. Leading with an audio from Kerouac from when he was interviewed in Northport that ends with him saying, "In life there is no plot", starts the film off in an open manner. The goal there was to lead in with something quite out there that piques the interest of the viewer, to then make more sense as the film goes on. Paired with quotes from *Big Sur*, the theme of the film and what Kerouac was feeling shine through and act as evidence to my claims. Intermittent additions of footage and pictures to describe Northport's history paired with matching narration ease the audience into the essential information. I also added animations of maps to set the scene further and give the audience a further understanding of where Northport is in relation to the state of New York, New York City, and Long Island. As the understanding of location is incredibly important to the discussion of the place in time of Northport. Additionally, I was sure to add B-roll that was less dynamic because I wanted to demonstrate the quietness of Northport and the calmness that the town exudes. The accompanying shots to the narration I do in this film are in place to enhance what is being said but not to completely distract from the

message itself. Lastly, I included written title media and some definitions like what the definition of a “beatnik” is and what the “beatnik generation” was; I included this as writing instead of speaking it to not only add variation but to add accompaniment that enhances the narration and message but in an alternative method. In this film, I attempt to create an immersive experience through the use of Northport visuals, with the use of audio of myself and Kerouac.

My approach to this film was certainly different from other media I’ve made previously, as I am a character in it. The unique topic and the intertwining of the three entities of Kerouac, myself, and Northport enabled me to create a media that truly only I could have made. That is not to say that another Northport resident couldn’t have tackled this subject, but that it was my personal intrigue and history that drove this process.

As I write this post-finishing my film, there are definitely aspects I could have done or would have done. The project, as it stands, is a piece of media that I am pleased with. However, the research portion was both extensive and exciting. If allowed to complete this film in a longer timeframe, I would have delved into other archives like those in New York City or Lowell, Massachusetts. I also would have made a longer film with a much more extensive history of Northport, from the very beginning to the present, a stretch of time I had to condense in this film for senior project guidelines and also for comprehension purposes. Additionally, I would have liked to film Northport over the course of at least a year and capture special festivals and events. As well as include drone footage, a resource I lack as a student filmmaker on a budget. There’s always going to be hindsight after creating works like this one, but mine is in the form of building. As happy as I am with what I’ve created, and in knowing that it is a sound piece of

media, I look back with a positive view, seeing the intricacies of what could be built on top of this work.

In evaluating my experience making this film, I feel like it was the best bookend that a senior in college could have had. I was able to utilize all of the skills that I learned as a historical studies and film student to culminate into one cohesive work. It was encouraging to be in the archive or be behind the camera and feel completely comfortable. One of the main attractive qualities of this project was that it was a puzzle I needed to solve. I wouldn't have been able to find my answers in historical journals; I had to go to Northport and jump into a kind of research that required more than database-based searching from the comfort of Annandale-On-Hudson. I was able to use film as a medium to share my work; as a lover of visual learning, this task was welcomed with enthusiasm. In the way this film is also personal on many fronts, it exists in a unique position where I don't have to leave it. I can always return to Northport and be immersed in this history again. In a way, this project is only the beginning. Whether I choose to use this as a start to further research into Northport or not, this project serves as a jump point to any historical and film endeavors I decide to undertake in the future.