Beating the Academy

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Beating the Academy

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I'm concerned with how to teach the Beats when my colleagues don't care why I teach them. My concern is paradoxical, perverse even, since it makes teaching the Beats always odd. The problem is Beat pedagogy's position within pedagogy itself, and my point is that teaching the Beats seems much more problematic to me than it does to my literature colleagues, and that this is an institutional scenario charged with historical irony. It's not hard for me to imagine other academic scenarios in other histories, times when to teach the Beats would have been more than a sign of scholarly specialism. Then again, what's "history" to me may not be to you. When I was putting the finishing touches to this paper I got hold of William Lawlor's *The Beat Generation: A Bibliographical Teaching Guide*, and saw the irony confirmed in his opening remarks: "when one teaches the literature of the Beat Generation, one must justify the material not to students . . . but to colleagues, academicians, and professionals"

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(1998, 2). For me, it's almost the other way around. Tacit but cosy ghettoization suggests that the field is seen as a rather anodyne idiosyncracy. Not inside the canon, perhaps, but not heretical either. Where are the wild margins, the rebel outsiders of yesteryear? The question is one that divides my students: for some, the Beats are indeed history, a past that grew up; for others they are exemplary, a future waiting to happen; for some, a module is a module is a module; for others, this one is different. And their tutor? He's self-divided too. Ginsberg once said of "Howl" that he wanted to bequeath "an emotional time bomb" to contest the authority of orthodoxy (1986, xii), but it seems that the world, or at least the millennium in academe, ends not with a Beat bang but an ambiguous whimper.

My premise is that Beat pedagogy is thoroughly problematic and *necessarily* so. Firstly, and for my purposes centrally, what makes Beat pedagogy problematic is the anti-academicism that is generally held to characterise Beat ideology and aesthetic practice. As the editor of a recent critical anthology admits, Beat writing was "anything but to be studied in the academies" (Lee 1996, 2); a paradox made explicit by the editor of a Beat Culture exhibition catalogue, when she observes that "the Beats have now been historicized and categorized in a way they assiduously worked to avoid" (Phillips 1996, 40). On this basis, there is not just an historical irony but a profound methodological problematic that needs to be worked through and not just as a matter of subject content, but in terms of the actual scene of instruction.

Beat pedagogy is also problematic as a matter of definition, although not so much of the term itself but of how its various compounds relate to one another and to the field of study: Beat Movement, Beat Generation, Beat Literature, Beat Culture, even Beat Cinema. The problematic of definition persists beyond the disputed term and its alternately sociological, literary, and cultural extensions, because these in turn depend on whether or not Beat is understood historically; that is, whether it is or is not essentially a period term. Beat pedagogy, in short, is problematic for want of a coherent and consistently defined Beat ontology. Even accounts that ground this problematic in claims for the heterogeneity, individualism, and anti-ideological bias of the Beats remain trapped in the circular logic of essentialism, of already presuming to know what it is that eludes stable or singular definition.

Teaching Beat Literature is therefore problematic in the same way and for the same reasons that Beat anthologies and canons are problematic: not only have they been subject to regular revision, most recently along lines of gender and race, but so too has the status and centrality of the literary field itself.

What I propose is to articulate this rather dense problematizing of grounding by means of three inter-related accounts, focused through the actual pedagogic encounter: how I teach *Method in the Madness: Texts and*

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Contexts of the Beat Generation as an upper-level unit in a modular American Studies program at Keele University. A word about this institutional context is in order. A campus university, Keele is small even by UK standards—under 5000 students—and unique in its commitment to dual honor and subsidiary programs. That is, all American Studies students read one other principal subject and take a range of courses drawn from other faculties; a typical undergraduate studies equal time in another department, say, English or History or Music, and takes short courses in, say, Computer Science, Psychology, or Russian. The American Studies program itself is multi-disciplinary, built on a first year core of History, Literature, and Political Science, followed by a second year of four 12-week, free-standing modules chosen from any of these disciplines plus Cultural Geography and Popular Culture. By the time they take my final year module, some students—especially those taking English as their other principal subject—will be specialists in literature, others relative ingenues. Finally, while Keele is a new university, modest in size and status, its American Studies Department is the oldest, largest, and, as measured by teaching quality and research rating audits during the 1990s, the most successful in the UK. The upshot is that while my students vary in academic experience, ability, and interest, in relative terms they enjoy small classes (a dozen is the norm), excellent resources, and an air of confidence, at a time when higher education in the UK is subject to escalating financial and vocational pressures.

To return to the three inter-related accounts that make up this paper. The first account retraces the opening narrative of my course: this is a biographical history of the founding of the Beats which has to end by acknowledging both its own constructedness and the constructedness of what follows after and from it; that is, the assumptions and consequences for framing the course in this way. I also spell out the particular pedagogic problems that this narrative signals. This account charts the inaugurating moment of what might be called "phase one Beat": the encounter between Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs in 1944 via Columbia University. This meeting clearly establishes the *university* as a key point of intersection and origin and so equally clearly reaches out to contemporary students of the Beat. This narrative in fact follows an historical overview of the emerging Cold War order which enables students to grasp how a collective Beat identity evolved from social isolations experienced individually: specifically, encounters with the legal, literary, psychiatric, and commercial institutions that punished or excluded those outside a disciplinary consensus. "Phase two Beat" concludes with the publication of key texts in the late 1950s, and the resulting, double-edged, success of mass-media publicity and presages a "phase three" comprising the popular-cultural and critical afterlife of the Beats.

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The second account analyses in outline the various constructions of the field provided by the history of Beat canon-formation and criticism. This analysis establishes ever more visibly the constructedness of my own selected field: in particular it enables students to see its literary emphasis, choice of texts, and periodized limits as problematic.

Finally, I offer an account of the particular teaching strategy I use to make the various problematics work creatively. In brief, this consists in tasking the students to do half the teaching: individually or in pairs, they research and prepare for a one-hour class that they will lead. Relating a chosen topic to the week's set text, students are also required to think through these intersections in terms of how the Beat Generation has been constructed (historically, and within their own present situation). This requirement to "think through" engages students with the module's meta-critical horizon. One of their final tasks is to produce an overview of Beat criticism and reception, in light of their class experience: each student presents an oral report on a specific book (or equivalent), pitched in terms of how its content and approach relates to the module. The "construction of the field" has now become a content in itself, and students know they will be examined on it. My teaching strategy's role reversal has another key aim: to enable students to *experience* as problematic key issues of authority, pedagogy, definition, etc. At least potentially, they are both implicated in and liberated from the construction and teaching of the particular topic and the wider field.

What follows is not a descriptive account of the teaching process or the learning experience, but a narrative that articulates the rationale immanent in the pedagogic encounter presented as a kind of synoptic course guide. In this sense it complements the course's formal handbook—a Module Document that sets out teaching aims and learning objectives, curriculum content, assessment requirements, reading lists and so forth—all according to a standardised template (an instrumentalization which, in another capacity, was my departmental responsibility to design and implement). To contextualize what follows, below is a module schedule indicating core texts and supplementary reading for the first seven weeks. The extra materials are meant to support the particular core texts and introduce students to the range of reading resources. I don't give out samples of current Beat criticism, since engaging with this material is already required as a separate task. I haven't listed resources in other media, but, typically, I screen a number of videos: a clip from John Waters's *Hairspray* showing a comically parodic "Beatnik" scene; a Kerouac documentary; an interview with Ginsberg; sometimes Cronenberg's movie of *The Naked Lunch*. I also ask students to help produce a "soundtrack" for the module, starting them off with tapes of Kerouac reading, some

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Charlie Parker, or a Doris Day number for ironic counterpoint. I don't integrate the music critically; it's more of an informal stimulus.

Week 1:	Introduction I: The Beats and Cold War Culture
	From Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*
Week 2:	Introduction II: The Beats and the Academy
	Podherotz, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians"
Week 3:	Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*
	From Kerouac, *The Town and The City*
Week 4:	Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road*
	From Johnson, *Minor Characters*
	From Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*
Week 5:	Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*
	From *As Ever*: Correspondence of Ginsberg and Cassady
Week 6:	Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*
	From Snyder, *Earth House Hold*
Week 7:	Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"
	Diana Trilling, "The Other Night at Columbia"
	Ferlinghetti *et al*, "Legal history of 'Howl'"
Week 8:	Allen Ginsberg and the Poetry of the San Francisco Renaissance
Week 9:	William Burroughs, *Junky*
Week 10:	William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, *The Yage Letters*
Week 11:	William Burroughs, *The Naked Lunch*
Week 12:	Conclusion

II

In broad terms, the early post-war years can be characterized by an historically unique disciplinary narrowness and conservatism of the domestic sphere and by an equally unprecedented politicization of culture (Whitfield 1991). In context of an ideological Cold War, containment of communism abroad was fought out through forms of personal self-containment, so that definitions of desirable national and individual identity were made to coincide. Consensus was normalized as patriotic duty, and dissent from hegemonic norms was rhetorically figured as deviance: failure to conform to prescribed social and economic roles was read as signs of perversion and subversion that risked the health of the American body politic. At the same time, rising material prosperity meant that the majority of citizens readily consented to the status quo and to the demonization of those who threatened it: the rational instrumentalism and materialism of economic calculus and consumerism sold like ice boxes and television sets to a generation who remembered the Great Depression. Dissatisfactions with suburban and corporate life, and especially with a prescriptive masculinity, were thereby either contained or redirected against convenient Others (Ehrenreich 1983; Corber

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1993, 1997). Cold War discourses therefore represented a thorough penetration of the private world by the public and implicated a range of institutions in the necessary tasks of surveillance, training, reward and punishment.

This is the context for most of the writing studied on this module. However, the mass media phenomenon and public reception of core Beat texts is typically at some remove from the period of production—*On the Road*, for instance: written 1951, published 1957—and coincides with the dawn of a significant domestic thawing of the Cold War icecaps. Equally, the writing emerges from an initial period when the Beats formed themselves as a close circle of internal exiles, and this foundational period, crucial to their later group identity as public figureheads for a generation, precedes the Cold War. What might be called "phase one Beat" begins in New York City during the last years of World War II, and the circle of writers studied under the Beat label predict, and then contest, a continuity of wartime conditions. These histories require specificity because Beat texts are typically read as versions of autobiography, and because the subjective mode itself has a politics of form energised by the particular historical moment (Schaub 1991).

The early Beat circle was formed in and around Columbia University where both Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac were enrolled. As students, each experienced the university as a disciplinary institution, and in ways that would prove formative, providing literal and symbolic instances of the links between the discipline of literary study and a wider apparatus of authority and state power. Ginsberg, for example, was twice suspended from Columbia, and on the second occasion depended on his professors to free him from a prison term by recommending his voluntary treatment in another Columbia—the Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute. Ginsberg's strongly Oedipal relationship with Lionel Trilling was especially significant, given Trilling's status as the pre-eminent liberal critic of his day; this intersection would be highly resonant for the culture wars initiated by the Beats. In terms of Ginsberg's own apprenticeship as a writer, his early experience of educational, criminal, and therapeutic institutions, and their linkages, would shape his development of a poetics and a politics grounded in the personal—especially in those areas of personal life unspoken, or unspeakable, in contemporary American "letters." Making use of the pun, it also becomes apparent why actual letter-writing was so important to the Beats: since their social marginality was also experienced as a cultural exclusion, the likes of Ginsberg and Kerouac invested creative energy in the exchange of personal letters as a private space for sharing otherwise suspect intimacies and incriminating sentiments (see Harris 1999). Ginsberg's poetics came to be grounded in areas of private life most in conflict with social norms and laws: explicit homosexuality, drug-use, madness. Michael Davidson's analysis measures the strate-

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gic significance and boldness of Ginsberg's position: "Just as the government had to monitor Soviet expansion abroad, so individuals had to police their sexual, social, moral, and domestic lives for signs of breakdown" (1998, 272; see also Corber 1993, 1997, and Eburne, 1997). The Beats thereby developed a counter-strategy to the politicization of the personal in mainstream Cold War culture, at the same time as they contested Trilling's elitist definition of an "adversary culture" operating in high aesthetic or intellectual forms.

As aspiring writers, Ginsberg and Kerouac also found themselves in conflict with the curriculum, pedagogy, and critical method of literary study—and again this would exercise a shaping influence. In particular, their works would come to contest the New Critical orthodoxy that privileged formalist analysis of the text as a complex and autonomous artefact and the canon that tended to go with it. Ginsberg recalls that "Whitman was hardly taught and was considered like a creep" (Kramer 1969, 119), while his own apprentice poems, as "college imitations of Marlowe, Marvell and Donne" (Ginsberg 1985, 749), were exercises in traditional form that bore the stamp of a literary self-discipline at odds with his deep desires (Burns 1983). Equally, Kerouac would become involved in bitter disputes with his tutors at the New School for Social Research when draft passages of his debut novel, *The Town and The City*, were subject to formalist scrutiny in creative-writing class. Although he, like Ginsberg, formed unusually close relationships with certain professors, his work and identity as a writer was moving against the grain of both the social order and the academic scene. Most explicitly, Ginsberg would consistently tie his published work's vilification by critics to his experiences at university. To John Hollander, a contemporary of his at Columbia, and author of an attack on "Howl" in *Partisan Review*, Ginsberg wrote a major statement to this effect: "And you're in a position to encourage, you teach, you shouldn't hand down limited ideas to younger minds—that was the whole horror of Columbia" (1986, 166).

There was, however, an extra-curricular education for Ginsberg and Kerouac just off campus: "Almost anything of importance was not taught, and by the time I was suspended I was actually going to Burroughs for all my reading lists" (Kramer 1969, 120). Burroughs enters the Beat scene not only for providing an informal counter-canon of literature, one more contemporary and also less bound by high/low cultural distinctions: Céline *and* Raymond Chandler, but also a counter-canon of off-limit social experience. As an elder mentor figure, Burroughs introduced Ginsberg and Kerouac to situations as well as to books that marked the margins of the official text. Having turned his back on the future mapped out for him at Harvard, Burroughs modelled an autonomy from prevailing American culture and social values that stood against the traditional authority of their educators

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and against prevailing liberal discourses of responsibility. Given the totalizing and paranoid rhetoric of Cold War, able to escalate mundane acts and minor differences into matters of national security, Burroughs helped make visible both the necessity for and danger of alternatives to the post-war order.

To a degree, then, the works of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs would arise from resistance to their experience of the way that literature and its academic study were institutionally defined. Ginsberg's breakthrough as a poet would necessitate overthrowing internalized orthodoxies of both form and subject matter. As late as 1955—the year of "Howl"—his poetry would prompt criticisms on this ground, as when Kenneth Rexroth accused him of having been to "Columbia University too long": "You're too old to be going on with all this formal stuff like that. What's the matter with you?" (Miles 1989, 186). One year later, sending a copy of *Howl and Other Poems* to Trilling, Ginsberg reported on his own experience as a guest educator at San Francisco State College and tied his pedagogic practice to an exemplary subject: "I am a really good teacher, naked half the time with big blue flashes of communication. I read them Whitman aloud" (Ginsberg 1986, 156). If he had found a "total lack of sublime teaching" at Columbia (Kramer 1969, 119), Ginsberg clearly saw his own work as defining a counter-example. On the other hand, the very fact of his dialogue with Trilling suggests how tied Ginsberg's evolving poetic identity was to a figure that represented all he needed to leave behind. It's no coincidence that, only days after starting "Howl," Ginsberg had used his private journal to define his project against the position of his former professor: "We want to read the individual, not his public thoughts," he noted; "Trilling doesn't think the individual is important" (1995, 179).

Similar contradictions are apparent in Kerouac. Identifying with another figure from the previous mid-century, Melville, Kerouac would make his bold breakthrough as a writer in the context of exclusion from critical and publishing institutions. With *On the Road* he committed himself to writing practices that privileged a subjectivity too unrestrained even for an editor as sympathetic as Malcolm Cowley who, again in 1955, would ask him to revise his manuscript by considering the "two sides" to writing: "the unconscious and the conscious, the creation and the self-criticism, the expression and the communication, the speed and the control" (1990, 503). At the same time, Jack Kerouac never took his eye off literary posterity. In the run-up to writing *On the Road* in 1951 he made his crucial creative investment in Neal Cassady materially through an exchange of significant letter-texts, but the act of private devotion—"there is no 'reader,' only you"—never amounted to a renunciation of his public calling, couldn't deny his "secret ambition to be a life-changing prophetic artist." His tirades against becoming "the great American harlot-writer" therefore have a hollow, as well as paranoid, ring to

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them (Kerouac 1995, 274, 248). The contradiction to do with publishing is matched by one to do with pedagogy: when, in *The Dharma Bums*, the narrating protagonist decides that "there was a lot of teaching for me to do in my lifetime," it follows his disastrous failure to educate Rosie, so that his vocation becomes equivocal by being implicated in her suicide (1958, 90). As for Burroughs, like Kerouac with *The Town and The City* (1950), he had one false start—*Junkie* (1953)—followed by years excluded from publication, and indeed from America, in his case resolved only by publishing in Europe, with *The Naked Lunch* (1959). And of course Burroughs's text would make explicit a thoroughgoing critique of authority, forcing recognition of his own complicity in the power of pedagogy: hence his routine satirizing the Professor of Interzone University modelled on his old Harvard tutors Kittredge and Livingston Lowes; and, since he is "hustling himself," hence too the book's final refusal to satisfy a reader dependent on moral and meaning: "No glot . . . C'lom Fliday" (Burroughs 1993, 184).

Finally, what launched the Beats as a public phenomenon, rather than as a coterie of writers, was inseparable from the extra-literary controversies that tied their texts to sociological trends and cultural change. The "Generation" tag upped the ante significantly, so that academic critics responded not only to texts that challenged prevailing literary standards, but ones that became focal points for challenges to social values. The label that brought so much media attention became a liability, however, and was one reason why the major formal innovations of such works as "Howl," *On the Road*, and *The Naked Lunch* tended to be misread or ignored, and why the academic treatment of their authors was limited for so long. Another reason for such neglect was the Beat aesthetic agenda that promoted confessional spontaneity as a key value: their work got trapped in a crude binary of traditionalist definitions and invited, especially in journalistic coverage, sub- or anti-literary readings. The very intensity of their popular impact also identified the Beats as a short-lived cultural fashion, so that writers grouped under the label—especially Kerouac, but also lesser figures on the fringes—found it difficult to escape a reductive and periodized definition. But academic acceptability would in turn prove double-edged when it came, since it risked denaturing works produced not only outside but also against such institutional frameworks. As early as 1961 Ginsberg feared the essence would be lost in translation:

> The problem has been to communicate the very spark of life, and not some opinion about that spark. . . . The brainwashing will continue, tho the work be found acceptable, and people will talk as emptily about the void, hipness, the drug high, tenderness, comradeship, spontaneous creativity, beat

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> spiritual individuality and sacramentalism, as they have been talking about man's "moral destiny." (Allen and Tallman 1973, 329, 330)

III

The narrative sketched here grounds the approach to the set texts by framing them historically and biographically. It insists on the specificity of contemporary social, economic, and cultural conditions as a necessary context, especially in relation to politicized readings, while making limited reference back to a consciously evoked American literary history. Despite a particular focus, it is a familiar narrative chiefly because it is told largely on terms already given by its key figures. As an introductory context it begs two key questions: firstly, how does it relate to other constructions, and second, what particular pedagogic problems does this narrative signal? Since the module's horizon is an explicit meta-critical overview, the most productive way to address these questions is through a brief analytical history of Beat canon-formation and criticism.

The first academic construction of the field, Thomas Parkinson's combined collection of primary materials and commentary *A Casebook on the Beat* (1961), featured nine writers: Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Burroughs, Ferlinghetti, Snyder, Whalen, McClure, and Wieners. Immediately apparent is the size of the field and its unfamiliarity: for most students, name recognition stops abruptly half way through. This poses the central issue of canon-formation, namely disputes over inclusion/exclusion. This in turn is tied here to an unspoken problematic of definition: unspoken because of Parkinson's deliberate refusal to provide an editorial introduction. He incorporates his own text as one contribution among many specifically to negate its potentially "coercive and guiding" force and includes in an appendix of possible class papers precisely the question begged: "Using the material in this casebook, write a definition of the term 'beat'" (1961, v, 324). The significance of Parkinson's tactics is that they model a calculated avoidance of foundational or essentialist grounding, and that this is understood as appropriate to the subject. That is, it is meant to reflect the Beats' own disinclination to toe a programmatic party line, itself a strategically individualistic response to the Cold War politics of binary commitment. Does Parkinson's tactical refusal to editorialize offer a useful pedagogic example? In context of postmodern narrativity, Brian McHale insists that a "canon always implies a legitimating story and, vice versa, a literary historical narrative always implies a canon of texts and authors" (1992, 4). If my introductory narrative sketch is meant to set the scene by giving students background knowledge, does it also model a pedagogic practice that limits the multiplicity of possible alternative or competing stories?

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The first single-authored full-length study, Bruce Cook's *The Beat Generation* (1971), positions itself on the margins of academia by preferring biographical anecdote to textual scholarship, and reduces Parkinson's roll-call of writers by prioritising four: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso, Burroughs. So reduced the literary canon gains a manageable coherence, while now existing as an element within a broader social field. Significantly, Cook's focus retains the first four names from Parkinson, relegating the rest on one of two possible grounds: his definition of Beat or their literary quality/cultural status. The politics of Beat canon-formation become clearer: a definition-led selection risks the undesired effects of promoting lesser writers as more representative and of excluding major writers altogether. When Cook ventriloquizes for Burroughs a mock-Mcarthyite denial of party membership—"I am not now nor have I ever been . . ."—he recognises both the potential liability of inclusion for writers and the contested nature of definition for critics (1994, 165). Five years later, John Tytell's pioneering study, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation*, narrows the field down to a holy trinity—by excluding Corso—and places Burroughs first rather than last. Given Tytell's definition of Beat aesthetics, he has to concede that Burroughs is "the most impersonal of the Beat writers" (1976, 112), an admission that echoes Cook. Indeed, over time, as Burroughs's cultural stock rose, while his work became more evidently independent of the Beat framework, he would be made to dance a kind of critical hokey-pokey, neither in nor out, if only because his exclusion would visibly weaken the field's claims to literary status. In this respect, the Beat canon not only develops in relation to a conservative mainstream canon but also seems at times constrained by the need to compete on equal terms. Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac helped critics like Tytell to advance claims for the Beats as a serious literary movement—Corso is relatively expendable—but at the expense of reproducing traditional valuations of the literary and narrowing the field they supposedly led. Hence Maria Damon: "When reintroducing Beat material to contemporary study and appreciation, it is thus still necessary to repeatedly and actively go beyond the great-minds-and-talents model that often serves as a primitive but necessary foundation for more textured enquiry" (Phillips 1996, 144). In this light, my introductory narrative with its tight concentration on founding major authors, may seem a predictable response to colleagues teaching Hawthorne and Melville, Fitzgerald and Faulkner, Pynchon and DeLillo. Does the inclusion of Burroughs reflect the need to add weight or a wilful decision on my part to teach his texts in the only available context—and, if so, is this justifiable when the price is "more textured enquiry" into the Beat field?

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Ten years after Parkinson, Lee Bartlett's volume of critical essays explicitly follows the original paradigm and so refuses to advance a definition. However, Bartlett's line-up implicitly breaks the mold of monopoly and hierarchy, resurrecting certain writers and adding new ones, while promoting the spiritual ahead of the social: Burroughs, Corso, Everson, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Holmes, Kaufman, Kerouac, McClure, Snyder, Whalen. The drive to expand the field becomes most evident in Ann Charters's two-volume *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1983), as does the equal but opposite danger of open-ended inclusiveness. Her sixty-seven portraits test the limits of coherence, as would her *Portable Beat Reader* a decade later. Although the logic of enriching a field pays dividends, there is a visible and vital contradiction between historicized and transcendent definitions that is allowed to pass unresolved. Which is to say that just as the Surrealists reclaimed predecessors, so too might the Beat project be backdated to, for instance, Rimbaud, or extended indefinitely. Such moves demand a careful negotiation between the specificity of social, cultural, and economic determinants, and a universalising discourse that risks removing the Beats from history and so from the potential for historical change.

The range of alternative canons, critical perspectives, and constructions of the field expanded again in the 1990s starting with Gregory Stephenson's *The Daybreak Boys* (1990), an archetypal analysis focused on nine writers, and Edward Halsey Foster's *Understanding the Beats* (1992), a literary study of Cook's four major figures. These two works reproduce the two chief tendencies in the field, one revising or accenting it: Stephenson by including Richard Farina as a "second-generation Beat" and by demoting history to a transcendent myth-narrative and Foster by consolidating a traditional literary core. Charters's *Portable Beat Reader* (1992) poses problems of a different order. Ironically, these derive from the very status of both editor and publication, since the conjunction of pre-eminent Beat scholar and prestigious mass-marketed anthology was always going to appear definitive. In a field historically so contentious, Charters's selection and editorialising, whatever their merits, become so by default. Her preference for citing the verdicts of Beat writers themselves or their biographers, rather than critics, is symptomatic of the constraints in her compromised position. On the other hand, a meta-critical project is not the responsibility of an anthologizer but of a critic, and what Charters's failings really expose is an enduring failure of criticism. Equally, the heterogeneity of her *Portable Beat Reader* should expose the ideology implicit in effectively making an elitist canon out of three authors. For a literature class, the selection of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs might be pragmatic, allowing in-depth study of oeuvres developing over time, but it also negates

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the key Beat principle of "open-ended inclusiveness" embraced by Charters's anthology.

Steven Watson's *The Birth of the Beat Generation* (1995) succeeds in a different ambition which is to document a broad cultural history in which the main writers emerge as central icons. This is a direction taken further by *Beat Culture and the New America* (1996), a catalogue that shifts the emphasis from the troika of major writers in favor of neglected minorities and the visual arts. The latter emphasis is in turn taken up by two books exploring the relation of Beat culture to filmmaking and film, although in very different ways: Jack Sargeant's *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema* (1997) uses interviews and essays to document points of intersection mainly with Underground Film, while David Sterritt's *Mad To Be Saved: The Beats, the 50s, and Film* (1998) offers a more coherently theorized and interdisciplinary reading. Such different responses to a new and distinct field make especially visible the implications of alternative methodologies. A telling instance is the liability of Sargeant's interviews with the likes of Ginsberg. These offer primary materials with a spark of real vitality; they also expose the paradox of his position which is the likely compact between his book's semi-academic target audience and the anti-academic interviewee. When he mentions queer theory to Ginsberg, it is thrown back at him as so much "intellectual blah!" (Sargeant 1997, 158), and you sense Sargeant's divided sympathies. These books also demonstrate something else: how criticism has come to renegotiate the centrality of literature within the Beat field, and how it can go beyond viewing its major writers in narrowly-defined literary terms.

Finally, the works that require detailed attention here are Robert Lee's essay collection *The Beat Generation Writers* (1996), Mel Ash's *Beat Spirit* (1997), and the two anthologies of Beat women's writing edited by Brenda Knight (1996) and Richard Peabody (1997). The two anthologies represent concerted efforts to revise a canon that could be seen as much more conservative than general canons of American literary history. Given claims for radicalism in the largest sense, there is a clear irony that Beat canon-formation should appear retrograde in terms of contesting definitions of literariness and along race and gender lines. Recent revisionism may confirm the margin-centre dialectic so evident in the expansion of general canons and the truth of canon-formation as a practice—namely that its selectivity is always fixed at current rates of exchange. Peabody's promotion of "Beat Grrrls" (named after the post-punk Riot Grrrl movement) makes a revisionist agenda particularly trenchant. What's clear is that the narrative focused on Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs reflects their literary status against which Lenore Kandel will always fall short. It also reflects their race and gender (in contrast to, say, their religious, social, or ethnic backgrounds) as well as their central roles, first pri-

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vately and then highly publicly, in articulating the Beat identity. In crude terms, the narrative featuring this holy trinity can be understood in one of two ways: either as an ossified orthodoxy of white male major authors, one that should give ground to Phillips's "more textured analysis"; or as an accurate account of the key players in a cultural and political drama, figures whose dissents and marginalities signified so potently precisely because, as white males, they existed *within* the current dominant rather than outside it.

Turning finally to *The Beat Generation Writers* and *Beat Spirit*, these polarize to the limit the possible academic and pedagogic approaches to the subject, and their respective liabilities. Lee's collection of critical essays grounds Beat literature firmly within the field of American Studies as defined in the UK. Here, most visibly, is evidence of the methodological problematic that results from analyzing in an institutional academic framework texts that, as the volume editor emphasises, were not written to be "studied in the academies." Indeed, there is also a particular historical irony here, since American Studies itself, as an educational institution and discipline, was established not only in the same Cold War disciplinary culture that marginalized the Beats but to serve that culture. And so, despite the evident critical value of Lee's collection, given the pedagogic context, it must also serve my students as an exemplary instance of historical change that implicates the present scene of instruction. Because it fails to theorise its own complicities as a teaching aid on my module, the book's chief value may be ironic. Since Lee's volume does openly state its mission as the reconstruction of the field, it invites careful scrutiny as a whole, especially in terms of how directly revisionary essays (on race and gender) relate to more traditional articles. The most literal and telling instance of the politics of canon-formation and promotion is on the front-cover where the table of contents is subtly manipulated. Here Burroughs moves up the Beat hit parade from five to three, while LeRoi Jones, Carolyn Cassady, and Bonnie Bremser are listed as though subjects of individual essays (they are not), as if to compensate for the fact that blacks and women still sit at the bottom of the chart.[1]

Lastly, Mel Ash's *Beat Spirit: The Way of the Beat Writers as a Living Experience* offers itself as not a textbook but an "actual manual, as it were, on how to participate in the living spirit" (1997, 10). And so where Lee's collection serves notice that the Beats have arrived as a serious academic subject, fully grounded in a contemporary interdisciplinary field, Ash's "interactive workbook" challenges the fundamental premise, once expressed by C.S. Lewis, that "the study of water need not itself be wet." On the contrary, Ash flaunts the subjectivity of his own approach and insists on the experiential, on the basis that exercises and activities are the only path to understanding an essentially spiritual and anarchistic project. On the other hand, his truism

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that insight follows experience, while intended to communicate Ginsberg's "spark of life," comes across as a cartoon misrepresentation of the Beat spiritual tradition documented in *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and The Beat Generation* (1995). Equally, the lack of critical analysis and historical particularity results in hagiographic, pop-cultural treatment and in suspect political manoeuvres such as a retrospective updating of Beat gender politics. In contrast, by giving her text a transparently token and supporting role, my module's inclusion of Carolyn Cassady's *Off the Road* may at least make a point all the more telling for being so undesired. But in general terms, Ash's work is distinctive for appealing loudly over the heads of institutionally defined pedagogy and criticism, reversing not only historicist aims of scholarship but both the authority and value of a university framework.

V

To develop from this last point, what distinguishes the pedagogic encounter on my Beat Generation module is the requirement, after the opening sessions, that students take the initiative by leading half of each two-hour seminar. They do this by presenting materials and an agenda for class discussion, circulated in advance, and researched with tutorial support. This entails focusing on a subject related to the week's set text (e.g., gender representations in *On the Road*, the politicization of homosexuality in "Howl") and is intended to initiate whole class discussion that bypasses the controlling authority of the tutor: as both subject "expert" and as academic arbiter, I remain silent. In the past, I asked students to lead their class individually but more recently they work in pairs. Although this change was prompted by larger class size, the by-product is a usefully distinct model of pedagogy. When they literally took "my" place, students could define their own approach in relation to it. They might recognize some of the liabilities of the role such as the temptation to fill a silence with words, to pose closed questions, or feel inadequate to the task, unable to assert authority over their peers even when dialogue was the goal and contesting authority one of the subjects. But by working collaboratively, students demonstrate more about the negotiation of knowledge and interpretation, while seeing even more clearly the dangers of its monopoly. Indeed, since I typically have to work at a furious pace in the second half of the seminar, to clarify issues raised but not resolved and to cover new ground, they can witness their tutor modelling exactly the monologic teaching style to be avoided. When giving feedback to the seminar leaders, I naturally comment on both intellectual content and management of their class, thus making explicit the integration of subject with learning process. And students understand this themselves. After a class on *Visions of Cody*, the students' disappointment that discussion wandered around in cir-

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cles led one to comment that it resembled nothing so much as the tape conversation section of the text: a flash of recognition. Since the introductory narrative grounds claims for the anti-academicism and anti-authoritarianism of Beat writing in the university experience, students are therefore given the opportunity to recognize their collaborative pedagogy as a productive response to the subject itself.

The role reversal has its risks, of course, but more interesting is this potential for students to *experience* some of the issues they articulate. How, for example, does their own construction of a topic negotiate the alternatives available in competing critical accounts or contest the module's assumptions? What, if any, are the parallels between Columbia in the 1940s and Keele in the 1990s as institutions tied into wider social and cultural economies? Does their tutor, as a tenured academic, more closely resemble Lionel Trilling or, as a specialist on his work, William Burroughs? Does their tutor, reading aloud Ginsberg as Ginsberg once read aloud Whitman, model "sublime teaching" or sound like Robin Williams in *Dead Poets' Society*? The pedagogic problematic (introducing students to quondam institutional outsiders from the "inside") reaches towards larger political issues—the role of the modern university sector in the UK—that go beyond the module's horizons but may engage certain students all the more for that reason.

I need to pick up on two issues raised above. First, the selection of topics related to the set texts. When I first taught this module the choice was genuinely open. I had students leading classes on Spengler's morphology of history, on spontaneous composition in writing and other art forms, on the relation between New Criticism and the Cold War, on the legacy of Transcendentalism, and so on. I loved the range of student interests, enjoyed the unpredictable element, and learned a good deal. But lately I've become more prescriptive, giving out a list of topics to students and expecting most, if not all, to pick one. The change has worked well, in the sense that the module develops more coherently and consistently. Why did I make the change? In part because of the odd bad experience, a class topic that "lost the plot" for the other students (Spengler, for example). And partly because the module as a whole risked losing the plot: it took more and more energy to lead students not really enthusiastic about the Beats to rise to the challenge. But there is another, much more fundamental reason: that old C.S. Lewis chestnut about the wetness of studying water. Wasn't it self-deception to think: the wetter the better? So long as academic complicity became an explicit subject in itself, might it not make the point all the more forcefully to expose and enlarge certain contradictions, keeping it dry to safeguard the true quality of wetness?

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To stop talking in riddles, let me develop this line by picking up on the second issue which concerns my own identity as a tutor *vis-à-vis* the larger insider/outsider paradigm. I knew many students got a kick out of the fact that *their* tutor actually knew these mythic figures. Being an academic authority on, say, Melville or Faulkner might be impressive, but this kind of knowledge could really thrill them. In part, this has to do with studying American culture at long distance which exaggerates the value of any direct experience; with such cult figures, a little personal knowledge went a long way. I don't mean that my students put me up there with Burroughs and Ginsberg, but the problem of authority was and remains a real one for me. In particular, I came to hate *The Naked Lunch* class, with my line about Burroughs subverting his own authority as an exemplary act, while there they sat taking notes. Driven on by this paradox of iconoclasts taken for icons, and a teacher taken for an authority on the anti-authoritarian, my own classroom style has become a weird cocktail: one part Ginsberg or Kerouac-style openness, two parts aggressive Burroughsian subversion. "No glot," I end up saying, "Clom Filday." There's no water in this or any class.

And so it is in the coincidence of two sets of expectations—one about the Beats, one about university education—that the module becomes most visibly problematic and meaningful. For some students the bottom line is only this: that the module imposes peculiar demands that aren't rewarded adequately by assessment (there's no recognized credit for taking an hour's class, and a two-hour exam paper doesn't allow much creativity). And yet, at the risk of ending on a perverse note, I am finally more pleased than frustrated that an essential aspect of the module exceeds the scope of what can be examined and given a grade. If Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs shared anything it was a critique of the ever more reductive instrumentalization and commodification of knowledge. From the response of most students, it seems they learn one thing beyond an analysis of certain literary texts and historical contexts—namely the value, pleasure, and (above all) difficulty of what they have taught themselves. And so, while the mutual hostility between Beats and Academy may be history, studying the two together can still render the problematic experience of being *in* history.

Notes

[1] I would like to credit Helen Bailey, a student taking the Masters-level version of my Beat module, with the observation about the presentation of Carolyn Cassady and Bonnie Bremser on Lee's front cover. I would also like to acknowledge here, the most appropriate of contexts, the debts I owe my Beat students over the past five years. To name a few: Natalie Alepée, Robert Clowes, Sandy Drewitt, Dominic McDonagh, Annette Castellaz, Paul Jenner, Andrew Lightfoot, Diana Patrick, Sam Woodcock, Mark Forshaw, Jack Sims, Tom Clark, Kate Penman, Cambi Rollosson,

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Tom Sharp, Brianna Erban, Claire Lovatt, Gemma Masters, Doug Milner, and Frank Reinicke. Finally, in addition to thanking its draft-readers and editors, I'd like to dedicate this essay to all my Beat students, past, present, and future.

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