

The Cambridge Companion to the Beats, ed. Steven Belletto (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 297 pp.

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When City Lights published Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956, as volume 4 of their Pocket Poets series, the paperback retailed for 75 cents. Slim, compact, and inexpensive, Pocket Poets books reflected precisely what the series' title promised: they were distinctively designed and portable, as likely to be read in a café as at home and, thus, served as markers identifying readers as members of a small but passionate community of the like-minded. Before the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and the transformation of "Beat" to "Beatnik," these readers would most likely be either writers themselves—think of Diane di Prima's reminiscences in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969)—or, at least, devotees of American and other literatures. While wider interest in Beat had already begun (John Clellon Holmes's *Go* had, for example, been published in 1952, with Holmes, much to Kerouac's chagrin, receiving a sizeable advance), sales were relatively small, and there is abundant evidence of the extent to which the literary-cultural establishment would soon come to dismiss Beat writing as infantile, semiliterate, and transient.

The publication of *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* six decades after *On the Road* brought the Beat Generation to the attention of a wider audience would have come as a surprise both to the authors and their critics. Where Truman Capote once dismissed Kerouac's prose with the line, "That's not writing, that's typing," the original scroll-manuscript of *On the Road* sold for \$2.43 million in 2001. Where Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Shigeyosi Murao of City Lights were arrested on obscenity charges, the court case brought national attention to "Howl" and to the Beats, but the fact that the charges were dismissed because writers and critics testified to the book's literary merit did little to change public perception of the Beats as juvenile delinquents. In the twenty-first century, however, Beat has become institutionalized: many English departments include classes on the Beats. Almost all the texts written by the major (or best-known) Beat writers are now back in print, while many other figures have been added to the Beat canon. The manuscripts and drafts of major Beat texts have been archived in university libraries and are increasingly viewable online. The major academic presses publish a healthy range of studies of individual authors, of the "Beat Generation" itself, or of substrata of the movement.

Bob Dylan's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 2016 marked probably the zenith of such high cultural endorsement. While Dylan—famously posed with Michael McClure and Ginsberg in photographs Larry Keenan took of the "last gathering of the Beats" at City

Lights in 1965 – has explored a multitude of musical genres in his near 60-year career, his self-mythologizing narrative of the lonesome traveler, his early years performing in Greenwich Village coffee shops and bars, his borrowings from Kerouac and association with Ginsberg, and, in recent years, the implication of a life spent on the road in his “Never Ending Tour,” all mark Dylan as an only very slightly belated Beat. The release of *More Blood, More Tracks* (2018), the most recent issue in Dylan’s “Bootlegs” series, serves as a microcosm of Beat’s move from margin to center. On the one hand, Dylan’s narratives of travel, itinerant work, shiftlessness, and lost love resonate with the world of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums* (1958), and *The Subterraneans* (1958). On the other, the beautifully and expensively produced CD-boxed set, replete with illustrations and glossy yet historically meticulous booklets, demonstrates the extent to which Beat has become commodified. Especially have they been marketed for wealthy, aging Baby Boomers reliving their 1960s and 1970s youth from the comfort of the easy chair or the air conditioned SUV, rather than nursing a single hot drink for hours, keeping warm in a coffee shop and reading Pocket Poets.

Steven Belletto begins his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* by calling attention to the “irony” of the oldest academic press in the world, representing the “imprimatur of the academy,” bringing together some of the preeminent scholars of Beat literature in a series dedicated to the study of the literary canon (1). The 18 essays range widely both within and beyond the Beat Generation as it was defined in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It was then that the big three (Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs) were joined by a few others, including Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Ted Joans, Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, and, at times, Gary Snyder, in a broadly shared understanding of the movement’s key players.

Although these authors remain integral to more recent readings of Beat, the *Companion* is representative in both extending a sense of their position within US and world literatures, and in reconfiguring the Beat Generation to include many more writers. Thus, alongside essays on Ginsberg (Erik Mortenson), Kerouac (Kurt Hemmer), and Burroughs (an outstanding contribution by Oliver Harris), there are, among others, wider-reaching pieces on the ongoing counterculture (Jonah Raskin), gender (Ronna C. Johnson), sexuality (Polina Mackay), race (A. Robert Lee), and transnationalism (Todd F. Tietchen). In this respect, the essays pursue themes covered in recent studies with more specific focus: Jimmy Fazzino’s *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature* (2016), Hassan Melehy’s *Kerouac: Language, Poetics, and Territory* (2016), David Stephen Calonne’s *The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats* (2017), Mary Paniccia Carden’s *Women Writers of the Beat Era: Autobiography and Intertextuality* (2018), and Sheila Murnaghan and Ralph M. Rosen’s edited collection, *Hip Sublime: Beat Writers and the Classical Tradition* (2018).

In particular, the *Companion* reflects the turns toward including Beat writing by women and, more recently, the recognition that Beat writing is in transnational dialogue with many literatures across place and time. Awareness of how the women associated with the group of male Beats outlined above were much more than “Girls Who Wore Black” (the title of Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace’s edited 2002 collection on women of the Beat Generation) has been gaining currency since the early 1980s. The more recent transnational turn is, in some ways, even more significant, since it moves the understanding of “Beat” away from familiar accounts of a small group of friends and associates, toward an appreciation of how Beat practice and aesthetics belonged within much wider and longer cultural and genealogical narratives. Thus, for example, Lee’s conclusion that “what we consider Beat lies far beyond white Americans writing about alienation from mainstream culture” effectively summarizes much of the material in the *Companion* (206).

The most interesting moments in the *Companion* occur when this observation is applied to individual authors: Regina Weinreich—drawing here on Melehy—repositions Kerouac as an “immigrant outsider” whose origins and bilingual background help to transform his fictions from narratives representing economic and cultural imperialism into searches for other postcolonial subjects with whom to identify (55). Nevertheless, such allusions also draw attention to the current limits to such an approach: the essays here, along with the works listed above (barring a very short section of Melehy’s book), focus entirely on writing in English. There is no mention of *La vie est d’homage* (2016), the recent collection of Kerouac’s French language writings, although reading these swiftly draws attention to this kind of postcolonial status. Kerouac’s journal differs markedly from standard French in ways that indicate class, region, and the encroachment of English as an imperial tongue. A detailed study of these texts would significantly extend the arguments about how to position and understand Kerouac.

There is much to admire about *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, but there are also moments when it leaves the reader frustrated. At times, these are simply examples of careless subediting, such as the misspelling of Edgar Allen [sic] Poe (70), or the wrong birth year for Ginsberg (93). At others, it is misremembering of plot details, as when Brenda Knight suggests that the opening pages of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* see Diane di Prima “awakening after a seeming orgy” (149), or Polina Mackay’s assertion that the same book is “about the author’s involvement with well-known figures from Beat circles” (179). Elsewhere, it is lack of referencing or explanation, as when Raskin claims, without providing evidence, that Kerouac considered renaming *On the Road* “Rock ‘n’ Roll Road,” or asserts that Richard Brautigan’s suicide “reflected badly on the world of bohemians and their descendants” (45).

Other moments of slippage, however, are more significant in pointing toward a residual tendency to collapse the Beats into a group with a shared vision: Raskin suggests that in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac “famously called for a ‘rucksack revolution,’ for America’s youth to drop out from society by hitting the road” (42). Hemmer goes farther, arguing that the novel was responsible for the “creation of a rucksack revolution,” but neither notes that such a revolution was anathema to Kerouac and that this vision belongs to Japhy Ryder, the character modelled on Snyder (119). Similarly, the desire to see the Beats as radicals leads to criticism of them when their behavior or beliefs do not correspond with revolutionary goals. While such readings of patriarchal, sexist attitudes to women are self-evidently valid, even within the context of hegemonic 1950s America, it seems less useful to condemn Burroughs, as Tietchen does, for his ambivalent attitude to the Istiqlal Revolution in Morocco and for his greater concern with his supply of drugs. This is, after all, a predictable manifestation of how addicts behave.

The Cambridge Companion to the Beats, then, represents the current status of Beat Studies. Perhaps the nature of the *Companion* series limits the opportunities to include radically new writings on particular authors or subjects. By engaging in negotiation with more thematically focused texts, these essays indicate current approaches to the Beats that provide students or nonexperts with detailed introductions to these approaches, while simultaneously helping Beat specialists to identify the dialogues taking place between these texts.