

WHERE IS THE REVOLUTION?: BEAT LITERATURE AND THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CLASSROOM

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While Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987) offers an extensive historical analysis of the evolution of literary studies within the United States, Curtis White, in 'Writing the Life Postmodern' (1996), provides a more terse and yet theoretically centred outline of the twentieth-century English department in the United States. For White, there exist three distinct educational periods: 1930–1975 known as 'Life Before Theory'; 1975–1982 known as 'The Age of Theory'; and 1982–present or 'The Postmodern Condition' (66–67). During 'Life Before Theory', the English department served an 'important ideological role as the educational apparatus in which one received a proper Eurocentric indoctrination. The canon rules supreme and unquestioned' (66). With the coming of 'The Age of Theory', one's academic 'weight' within the English department rested in his/her potential as a theorist; at this time, 'young faculty all avow[ed] political positions, none of which are friendly to the assumptions of the Time of Tweed and especially not friendly to the canon' (66). Finally, 'The Postmodern Condition', although a moment of opportunity, left one alarming possibility: 'in the time after the end of ideology, literature has outlived its usefulness' and the English department becomes an apparatus in the service of American literacy (67). It is in the years between these last two periods—in the late 1980s and 1990s—that American scholars witnessed the rise of the Culture Wars.

On one side of these 'wars', a definitively right-wing academic response emerged that argued against the politicisation of the contemporary academic and recreated an educational ethos that hearkened back to the more conservative and literacy-centred period of 'Life Before Theory'. Arguments put forth by such commanding voices as Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind* 1987), E. D. Hirsch (*Cultural Literacy* 1987), or Roger Kimball (*Tenured Radicals* 1990) highlighted the major critiques levelled against the influx of multicultural education brought about by the postmodern wave and provided the outline for an academic platform focused on a canonical and Western understanding of literacy. At this same time, and yet from the left end of this social spectrum, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (*Postmodern Education* 1991), Michael Bérubé (*Public Access: Literacy Theory and American Cultural Politics* 1994), Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (editors of *Theory, Pedagogy, Politics* 1991), and James M. Cahalan and David B. Downing (editors of *Practicing Theory in Introductory College Literature Courses* 1991), among others, defended the emergence and necessity of a cultural and

theoretical based education that moved beyond the opposing call for an education based in a return to ‘Life Before Theory’.

While the above voices took contradictory stances in the Culture Wars, they all share a common end goal: the redevelopment of a system of education that promotes and helps to produce intelligent and grounded citizens. But, as both sides tied their responses to more of a political rather than educational platform, they differed in how they believed such a goal can be accomplished and how ‘intelligence’ is defined. The Culture Wars, though their heyday remains in the late twentieth century, continue today as those of Henry Giroux (*The University in Chains* 2007) and Roger Kimball (*Retaking the University* 2008) hold to and yet update arguments similar to those posited at the end of the twentieth century. Amidst these continued voices, however, Curtis White returned to the conversation in 2003 with the publication of *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don’t Think for Themselves*. White acknowledges that while he was ‘as involved and absorbed in this *faux* drama [of the Culture Wars] as anyone’ at the same time he wondered if those ‘characters’ of this war actually stood for things people, i.e. people outside the academic community, cared about (25). For White, the greatest danger of the Culture Wars in the United States is that it serves as an excellent diversion from the real academic issue at hand: the erasure of the imagination and the creation of the Middle Mind. White describes the Middle Mind as

pragmatic, plainspoken, populist, contemptuous of the right’s narrowness, and incredulous before the left’s convolutions. . . . [T]he Middle Mind is still a form of management, and its final purpose, even if it’s not a purpose it’s aware of, is to assure that the imagination is not abroad, not out and about, and certainly not doing its own powerful thinking. (26)

This Middle Mind is thus socially and politically trapped between the opposing sides of the Culture Wars and has become ‘a towering and dominant [mindset] on our national horizon’ (25). And, as the Middle Mind becomes more prominent among American citizenry, the predominant outcome of the Culture Wars becomes the creation of a citizenry without imagination, possibility, or an understanding of responsibility.

Thus, in order to move past the ideological sandtrap of the Culture Wars, White argues for a reinforced effort to substantiate the role of imagination in the American academy. ‘Imagination and thought, art and philosophy, are the things’, White writes, ‘we urgently need if we are ever to confront the performative logic, the imperatives to the efficiency and domination, of our culture’ (23). Specifically, the interconnection between imagination, thought, art and philosophy is found in the creation and study of ‘books without methods, books that begin by beginning, that are not sure what they think, but think

passionately and purposefully nevertheless against the administered world of the automatic' (23–24). As an educator who, like White, found myself a willing participant in the Culture Wars and typically ensconced among the voices of Giroux and Bérubé, I too have found such a venture less productive and instead have reinvested my interests in creating classrooms that, although aware of the past, can move towards a dismantling of the Middle Mind and a reinvestment in American imagination. In doing so, what I have discovered to be one of the most productive arenas for the accomplishment of such goals is in the study and teaching of Beat literature. 'The seed', writes John Tytell, 'planted by Beat literature is an awareness of what is significant in life. While it may be too soon to measure the extent and degree of change, it is certain that the quality of life in America has been profoundly affected' ('Beat' 67). In the early twenty-first century when the American academic and literary world celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of such prominent texts as *On the Road*, *Howl* and *Naked Lunch*, and new discussions arise highlighting the continued impact that the Beat generation has on American popular and social culture, it is strikingly apparent that White's call for a revitalised academic space centring on imagination is one shared with these past voices.

In a 1974 interview with James McKenzie and Maggie Leventer, Beat poet and essayist Gary Snyder referred to the academy as 'one of the most creative and potentially revolutionary structures in this society' (Knight 15). Snyder describes the potential of the university as such:

But, like, universities are valuable as, shrines, like libraries are kind of shrines, and the librarians are priestesses in which an eternal flame is always burning. And you have to learn the rituals to approach the layers of knowledge. . . . Like if you want some information you *can* get it, like that's *right there*; if people would just learn that, then they would have something. And then what goes with that of course is that in the right time, at the right place, a piece of information can move the world. The right piece of information at the right time is a key tool. The other things that libraries do is they can provide learning situations that we cannot provide for ourselves, like we can read philosophy and literature of all sorts, but very few of us can maintain a botanical collection, or a working chemistry laboratory, or any other kind of scientific laboratory. So to have working laboratories available in which once could see how experiments proceed is valuable in the physical sciences. (16)

In redefining the university and library as a sacred place, as opposed to the unwelcoming halls encountered by the Beat writers during their own time, Snyder highlights the fact that there is important information to be found in

literature and philosophy: that Beat literature and philosophy, and that the university, ‘like giant kivas that people descend into for four years to receive the transmission of lore’, can become an experimental laboratory where one can trace the evolution of an idea and its central importance to any cultural movement (15). Regarding Beat literature and philosophy, it may seem as though Snyder’s lab-centred university has come to fruition in the United States through the many academics that have created a Beat laboratory in their own classroom. However, a critical analysis of such pedagogy will highlight how we have fallen short in creating the academic space that Snyder finds most valuable for the teaching of Beat literature. Furthermore, this analysis will display the necessary steps to be taken within the Beat classroom that will accomplish Snyder’s goal of experimentation and White’s call for the reigniting of one’s imagination.

In terms of the current place of Beat pedagogy, Jennie Skerl, in her introductory essay to a special issue of *College Literature* (Winter 2000) focusing on Beat Literature, calls attention to the flourishing development of both critical and pedagogical writing done on the Beat generation in the last fifty years. Skerl’s discussion highlights the innumerable resources available to the teacher of Beat literature and recognises a growing academic respect for the subject matter, but she admits that amidst this scholarly growth and suggested new respect for the field, ‘those who teach and research the Beats know that nothing could be further from the truth’ (2). Support for this qualification comes with Skerl’s recognition that teaching Beat literature is a contested ground that typically begins with a questioning of ‘the legitimacy of the Beats as a subject of academic discourse’ (2). William Lawlor too follows this argument, but believes that the strength behind such academic attacks has dissipated: ‘Now that more than fifty years have passed since the first manifestations of Beat spirit, the academy’s hostility toward the Beats, though still strong, is considerably diminished’ (‘Compact’ 233). For Lawlor, the greater irony of establishing an academic space for the Beat literature within the curricula of higher education is that many of the Beat writers ‘scorned stuffy academics, insisting that the literary establishment was boring’ and antagonistic (232). Yet amidst the back-and-forth discussion of academics, the fact remains that, to a certain degree, these authors have been institutionalised. The danger of this movement is that through such institutionalisation, teachers lose sight of one of the greatest reasons for teaching Beat literature; a reasoning which rests on the concept of encouraging the development of an imagination capable of cultural and personal revolution.

While it would be impossible to synthesise the innumerable ways that Beat writing is brought into the classroom and the goals that different academics hope their students will accomplish through this study, one can surmise, from the critical pedagogy of Beat literature, certain generalities. Overall, these generalities centre on recognising and/or creating an *academic* space for Beat

writing within the traditional and, at times, caonical confines of literary study. I stress the point of academic space for, as Skerl recognises, the central questions that surround the study of Beat literature—‘Who is Beat? When were the Beats? What is the definition of Beat? What is the Beat aesthetic?’—have no definitive answers (‘Introduction’ 3). Thus, the creation of a course in Beat literature offers academics a certain amount of ‘freedom and creativity’ that, Skerl argues, allows one ‘to put into action Gerlad Graff’s suggestion that we teach the conflicts in our discipline and our academic institutions; for a course on the Beats, or even the inclusion of the Beats in a standard course, foregrounds the institutional structures of literature, of the academy, and of social order’ (3–4). In terms of what students may gain from such a course, ‘the Beats can be an accessible ‘port of entry’ to illuminating the culture wars and the theory wars, as well as understanding the problematics of canonicity, and the modernism/postmodernism debate’ (4).

Skerl’s own general synopsis of the purpose behind and the outcomes gained from a course in Beat study is supported more fully in her book of collected essays *Reconstructing the Beats* (2004) as well as in other works like Kostas Myrsiades’ collection *The Beat Generation: Critical Essays* (2002), William Lawlor’s *The Beat Generation: A Bibliographical Teaching Guide* (1998), or such independent works as Robert Holton’s ‘Kerouac Among the Fallahin: On the Road to the Postmodern’ (1995), to name but a few. A great deal of the critical and pedagogical work done on the Beats centres on interpreting these texts in terms of traditional literary study (a type of study much more reminiscent of either White’s period of ‘Life Before Theory’ or ‘The Age of Theory’). While I believe that such work is imperative to the development and academic recognition of Beat Literary Study and that these works along with the writings of such other significant scholars as John Tytell, Tim Hunt, Regina Weinreich, Ann Charters, Ronna C. Johnson, Michael Skau, Nancy Grace and William Lawlor (the list is much more extensive) have created and serve as defence and support for any teacher interested in bringing the Beats into the academy, there is a less developed and explored argument as to how or why one might focus a study of Beat literature on how these works centre on individual and cultural revolution, and how those social, political, cultural and humanistic ideas that are central to the Beat philosophy do not directly connect to students in a post-millennium world. Instead, much academic discussion of this period remains historicised and, when it is connected to contemporary practices, it is done so mainly through a discussion of literary canonicity, theoretical touchstones, or a more generalised cultural debate. What is lost in such a discussion is any recognition as to how Beat literature and philosophy can impact culture; more specifically, using White’s terminology, how this literature can help develop our imagination and encourage one’s responsibility toward and connection to a progressive American future.

At this point, to offer a first-hand example of the concerns expressed above, I turn to my own experiences in teaching Beat literature. Since I began teaching at my current institution, I have had the opportunity, several times, to teach a course focused on the Beat Generation. Having studied the work of the Beat period and the critical and pedagogical work that has emerged, I have typically geared these courses towards answering many of Skerl's early questions. The common outline for such a course, whether offered at the graduate or undergraduate level, followed the pattern of: (1) working to understand the general concept of being Beat as it might be seen as emerging from transcendentalist thought and moving to a grey area between modernism and postmodernism; (2) a more focused study on several of the major authors of the period; and (3) a student-centred reclamation of the female voices of the period. As noted, while I have taught such a course at both the undergraduate and graduate level, I would like to focus my discussion here on one particular set of experiences I had with undergraduates, for the reason that the occurrences to be discussed here explicitly highlight the consistent issues I have encountered when teaching Beat writers.

Upon entering this specific undergraduate class, I had decided that the focus of our study would be traditionally academic and literary and thus follow the outline provided above. While I also wished to incorporate a more open study that would highlight individual engagement with the texts and encourage discussions that would recognise the original nature of the ideas presented to a contemporary American citizenry, thus encouraging my students to recognise how the texts and ideas explored in this class might help to reignite their individual imagination, I did stray from this set of goals for two reasons. Firstly, as minor comments centring on the literary value of these authors were raised by several colleagues, I feared that if this class focused too much on the revolutionary Beat spirit and not enough on the 'literary' study of the texts, I would be, in a manner of speaking, chastised by my colleagues. Secondly, I believed that the students would recognise these larger revolutionary and imaginative ideas on their own and raise them in class.

In terms of my second belief, my hopes were quickly lost and shown to be quite naïve. At the beginning of the semester, I quickly learned that many of the students enrolled in the class had little prior knowledge of the Beat generation. The reasons for students taking this class could be placed into two categories: students either took this class because they were encouraged to do so by faculty mentors and professors who remembered the generation, or they took the class owing to an interest in the generation that was founded on a troubling and problematic cultural mythos. Upon becoming aware of these facts early in the semester, I did work to historicise the generation and offer contemporary connections to the ideas espoused within the Beat writings. However, a majority of the students seemed to distance themselves from making any personal or cultural connections. One possibility for this is that as students engaged with the

readings of Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* served as our concluding text, connecting the Beat generation to the next social movement of the 1960s), they did so with a sceptical eye. Many times, the students discovered some interest in the literature, but saw little connection to the authors or their ideas due to the fact that they became quite disillusioned, distanced and at times dismissive of the open drug-use and sexual practices written about and/or embraced by the authors. The extreme point of this type of response came about in one class when a student openly acknowledged his refusal to read *Naked Lunch* and yet felt quite comfortable in dismissing the purpose and style of the text. As I struggled with such responses, I finally came to some understanding as to why so many students fought the larger ideas present within these texts. At the end of the semester, one student, in his final exam, suggested that readers are always looking to relate to literature, to find some connection, and that readers can still connect with literature that is centuries old. However, this student did not find this to be the case in Beat writing.

With the Beat, it is much more difficult to discern where they were coming from. Their writings center on drugs and the beliefs or feelings of their time, a time in which many of us today never saw. . . . The Beats were on top of what was hip in their day, but their day has come and gone, and they just do not relate well anymore. In literary terms, they did what they set out to do, but they are become less and less prominent in today's culture. Someone is going to have to introduce newer generations to the Beats and show them how they are important. (*sic*)

What caught my interest in this student's response was the success and failure of the course. As the student recognises, 'In literary terms they did what they set out to do'. The student then went on in his essay to analyse the differing authors and works in an effort to highlight their place within the literary canon. Thus, in one sense, the class can be seen as a success in that this student, along with a majority of his/her peers, developed strong responses that provided, at times, complex analyses of the literary period. Therefore, in one sense, Snyder's belief that the university be a laboratory was a success. As many students noted in their class evaluations and during discussion, this was a new area of literary study never before offered to students, they were able to further their knowledge of the American literary canon, and they were able to interconnect Beat literature within the larger theoretical paradigms of American literature.

However, time and again, I came across similar notes that suggested the more imaginative and cultural ideas found within these same valuable writings had little connection to the world of today; in terms of helping to create or ignite

a student's imagination and his ability to move beyond the Middle Mind, this class was less than successful. Thus, in relation to Snyder and White's shared view of education as a kiva to create imagination, one must strive to understand what contributed to the 'failure' of this course. Why were students, though cognisant of and desirous for literary connection, unable to connect to this writing and discover any personal resonance?

One potential possibility is that the students may have been correct to note that the 'revolution' begun by the Beat generation ended with the same generation and has no contemporary connection. Such a response has support. In a 1965 article printed in *The Nation*, Hunter S. Thompson wrote that while some students may refer to President John F. Kennedy as a phony liberal, few would deny that Kennedy set the fire that got most Americans excited about changing social reality as opposed to quitting it. Thompson goes on to remind his readers that it was the Beat generation who had simply dropped out (qtd. in Klinkowitz 19). Or, one may look at Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* where, while in New York, the Pranksters meet the 'king' of the Beats.

Kesey and Kerouac didn't say much to each other. Here was Kerouac and here was Kesey and here was Cassady in between them, once the mercury for Kerouac and the whole Beat generation and now the mercury for Kesey and the whole—what?—something wilder and weirder out on the road. It was like hail and farewell. Kerouac was the old star. Kesey was the wild new comet from the west heading Christ knew where. (102)

Finally, one may turn to Kerouac's piece 'After Me, the Deluge' (1969) in which he contemplates his own role and that of the Beat generation in American culture and questions what will happen to those ideas espoused by the Beats after the 'Hippie-Yippie' generation has taken centre stage. It is evident that by the end of Kerouac's life, he was consternated by the fact that he now stood between the socio-political right and the radical left and seemed to struggle with understanding the social outcomes or ideological consequences of the Beat movement.

While such comments and events may suggest the lack of or failing nature of the Beat revolution, Gary Snyder sees the Beat revolution in a different light. In response to a question comparing the revolutionary movements of the 1950s with that of the 1960s, Snyder sees the purpose of the Beat revolution as something much greater than a failed revolution ending in disillusionment: 'the difference between the people of the 60s and us is that perhaps they expected things to happen more easily and more quickly, whereas we were more seasoned, really. But our commitment to a vision of a different America is older and like it's deeply rooted, and we're willing to see it won't happen tomorrow' (*sic*: Knight 12). This commitment of the Beat generation, according to Snyder,

helped to move the world ‘a real millionth of an inch’ and while it may not seem as grand as people like to envision it, it ‘was real, and so, like, that much is possible, and the fact that much is possible is what gives us a certain amount of confidence. If you can move it a millionth of an inch, you’ve got a chance’ (Knight 12–13). For Snyder, the Beat movement was not a failed movement, but a movement that maintained imagination and understood a better future would not come immediately. Thus, if it can be acknowledged or understood that a student’s lack of connection to the material is not supported by the suggestion that the Beat revolution was or is a failed revolution, might the answer instead be discovered in how the purpose of education is explained or provided to American students?

Quite often and, according to White, owing to the Culture Wars, the academic world is discussed using the terminology of political discourse. In a country with, to a certain degree, a two-party system, the American academic world tends to be denounced or supported in the conceptual and problematic terms of either liberalism or conservatism. However, education should not be defined in terms of political discourse or alliance with a political party, but in academic terms of empowerment for all. At the end of the twentieth century, however, this sense of empowerment, according to Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, has been lost. ‘Education history’, write Aronowitz and Giroux, ‘of the later 1970s and 1980s can be told in terms of student disempowerment’ (5). During the last decades of the twentieth century, in terms of educational requirements and elective options, ‘neoconservatives have turned the wheel at least ninety degrees’, with the result of ‘eliminating or sharply reducing the number and extent of electives, especially at the secondary and preprofessional undergraduate levels’ (5). A reality all-too apparent in a nation that has witnessed a number of state systems of higher education reduce required degree hours to 120 and thus eliminating or, at the very least, discouraging individuals from academic exploration through elective hours. This change in educational philosophy led to the reality that ‘[o]ppositional or alternative goals such as student empowerment, individuation, creativity, and intellectual skepticism embodied in art and music, student participation in curriculum and school governance and unconventional learning styles and subject matter are to be excluded from approved pedagogical or curricular mandates’ (9). The lack of individuation and desire for academic exploration and achievement has continued into the twenty-first century where President George W. Bush (43), an individual who has touted himself as an ‘education President’, noted, with a degree of humour and yet sincerity, in an address to the Yale undergraduates of 2001, ‘And to the C students—I say, you, too, can become President of the United States’ (‘Commencement’).

Thus, an alternative view as to why we have failed to achieve the full potential of the university, as defined by Snyder and many of the Beats, as a revolutionary structure of imagination can be traced to the manner in which the

educational system is run and understood in the United States. As such, what then can the educator do to help foreground the nature of Beat revolution in this system of education and in the Beat classroom? The answer can be found in how one defines such a term as Beat revolution and recognise how this definition can fight the current sense of educational disempowerment.

To define the term Beat revolution, one can simply work to define what it means to be Beat. While this definition is quite contested and entire courses can be developed around answering this one question, for the purpose of this essay I will work with Jack Kerouac's own, sometimes contradictory, definition(s) as espoused in such essays as 'About the Beat Generation' (1957), 'Lamb, No Lion' (1958), '*Beatific*: The Origins of the Beat Generation' (1959), and 'After Me, The Deluge' (1969). According to Kerouac, Beat

never meant juvenile delinquents, it meant characters of a special spirituality who didn't gang up but were solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization—the subterranean heroes . . . prophesying a new style for American culture, a new style (we thought) completely free from European influences (unlike the Lost Generation), a new incantation. ('About' 559).

Kerouac's own prophecy for the Beat generation is that 'it is going to be the most sensitive generation in the history of America and therefore it can't help but do good' ('Lamb' 564). The wrong that will emerge in America will be due to 'evil interference' and that is opposed to the strongest quality of the Beat generation, 'the spirit of non-interference with the lives of others' ('Lamb' 564). Recognising a life of non-interference, Kerouac argued that he wanted to speak for things, not against things. The world he would speak for was the world of the crucifix, of the Star of Israel, of Bach, of Mohammed, of Buddha, of Lao-tse. As one can see, Kerouac saw Beat as embracing all. 'This is Beat. Live your lives out? Naw, *love* your lives out' ('*Beatific*' 566). Finally, in defining the generation, Kerouac offers a warning against what it is not, 'But yet, but yet, woe, woe unto those who think that the Beat Generation means crime, delinquency, immorality, amorality . . . woe unto those who attack it on the grounds that they simply don't understand history and the yearnings of human souls . . . woe unto those who don't realise that America must, will, is changing now, for the better I say' ('*Beatific*' 572). While this a quick summation and only a selection of the differing descriptions offered of what it means to be Beat, one can see the commonalities within each, specifically the recognition of participation and individual distance. For the students who study this generation, they seem to become enmeshed in the ideas of separation and thus cannot connect the revolution of this generation to culture. However, what one must also see is that within this distance and separation, there is also a call for participation. This collapse of distance and connection can be made clear

through returning to Snyder's view of the Beat generation. Snyder notes that the Beat point of view in the 1950s was that 'you can't do anything about it [political and social culture], but you don't have to participate in it—sort of Thoreauvian really. But we had little confidence of transforming; that's why I say when we said we were going to be working for the rest of our lives, we believed it' (Knight 11). As one can see, in an attempt to offer insight to the Beat notion of non-participation, Snyder turns us to Thoreau and thus a more complex understanding of non-participation.

On the surface, one may see that Thoreau did choose to retreat from his world, opting instead to spend two years alone living on the shores of Walden Pond. However, in an essay by E. B. White on the seminal text to come out of Thoreau's life on the pond, White argues that if Thoreau had simply written an account of one man's time in the woods, or opted only to record his complaints about society,

'Walden' would probably not have lived a hundred years. As things turned out, Thoreau, very likely without knowing quite what he was up to, took man's relation to nature and man's dilemma in society and man's capacity for elevating his spirit and he beat all these matters together, in a wild free interval of self justification and delight, and produced an original omelette from which people can draw nourishment in a hungry day. (791)

In this description, White highlights that Thoreau never did abandon society or choose the traditionally understood road of non-participation. In fact, through the writing and publishing of *Walden*, Thoreau interacted with society in a manner of non-interference similarly to Gary Snyder's belief; while there is no direct interaction or disruption of the mass culture around him, Thoreau's own chosen lifestyle and personal decisions allowed him to impact and, in a certain manner, interact with his own society and that of future individuals and cultures. For example, in turning to Thoreau's 'Resistance to Civil Government', more commonly known to American readers as 'Civil Disobedience', it is important to understand how this text gained renewed strength in the mid-twentieth century as it came to serve as a central touchstone to the philosophies of such Civil Rights leaders as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. 'Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* and *Walden*', according to Manfred Stegner, 'gave Gandhi the needed impulse to put his political and ethical conviction into action' (201). In terms of the text's impact on America, Evan Carton argues, 'More than any other piece of American writing, "Civil Disobedience" inspired and authorised the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War protest movement, and the student unrest of the sixties' (105). As Thoreau first explained and Gandhi, King, and the Beat generation came to understand and embody, personal responsibility is always connected to the political and cultural world. As such, civil disobedience

or non-interference does not mean disassociation, but instead demands recognition of one's constant involvement in and impact upon his/her own world.

Thus, it is this idea of non-interference that can be seen as the backbone of the Beat revolution and intercultural connection. While the writings of many Beat authors have been defined as self-interested, confessional or highly autobiographical, and thus been read in a closed academic space that focuses on literary stylistics, there is a different and just as important avenue one may take to reading, studying and responding to this generation; an avenue that will relight the American imagination; an avenue that will allow for cultural connection and personal engagement. Through non-interference, the Beat generation did not align themselves with any one particular political movement, nor did they force their philosophical, social, cultural or personal beliefs on the world in which they lived or on to the individuals they encountered. Instead, this generation shared with that world a sense of individual responsibility, action and option for change and involvement. This sense of personal responsibility is as apparent as anywhere in Allen Ginsberg's 1956 poem 'America'. At the start of the poem, Ginsberg questions the many failures and dubious practices happening in America with a driving series of questions:

America, when will you be angelic?
 When will you take off your clothes?
 When will you look at yourself through the grave?
 When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
 America why are your libraries full of tears? (9–13)

Upon asking these questions, Ginsberg interweaves descriptions of his own actions and beliefs with his concern that America—referring both to the greater mythos of America and the more specific idea of American citizenry—is losing sight of its own greater purpose, no longer connected to those individuals who have been questionably disenfranchised, and controlled and run by such popular media giants as *Time*.

Interestingly, however, while offering this critique and, in a sense, putting the nation on trial, Ginsberg comes to an important realisation: 'It occurs to me that I am America./ I am talking to myself again' (58–59). With the realisation that he is both a part of and being indoctrinated by the same America he is critiquing, the poem gains a certain momentum and Ginsberg offer his 'holy litany' to America, responding to such social and political issues as the fallout of Tom Mooney, Spanish Loyalists, Sacco and Vanzetti, and the Scottsboro boys (74–84). In calling for America to right its wrongs and yet fearing that his call will remain unheard due to such 'greater' concerns as the Russian 'problem', Ginsberg concludes:

I'd better get right down to the job.
 It's true I don't want to join the army or turn lathes
 in precision parts factories, I'm nearsighted and
 psychopathic anyway.
 America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel. (112–16)

Through his own realisation that he is a part of the culture which created these problems, Ginsberg concludes that he has an individual responsibility to right these wrongs and puts himself to work using his own imagination to develop responses and poems that beg individuals to find their own role in the creation of an American culture they want to see. Ginsberg thus returns to Kerouac's own visions of what it means to be Beat and the revolution of the Beat artists, the 'perennial artistic creed: revolution is revelation!' (Tytell, *Naked* 65). The revolution discovered in these texts is then a revolution that the individual must discover within the self. As such, if the revolution exists and remains, to a certain degree, individual, the final question that this essay must attempt to answer is: How can the teacher bring this revolution (as it is connected to imagination) to light in the classroom and infuse students of a new millennium with it, when these same students believe only in their distance from this purpose or revolution?

The first and most obvious response to this question is that one can engage students through a reading and analysis of the texts of this revolution. As this essay began by noting, the amount of Beat literary criticism that exists continues to grow each year and with such growth comes productive discussion. However, as has been raised throughout this essay, developing an individual connection with the Beat revolution and philosophy must move beyond this traditional notion of literary study. I would suggest that those involved in the field of Beat literature and teaching move beyond relegating these writers and their own sense of cultural criticism to an arena beyond our own 'self-interested professionalism or obscure and self-defeating jargons', and into an arena of non-interference (White, *Middle* 19). This can be accomplished through developing assignments and projects, in addition to those assignments that are centred within traditional literary study, that begin to break out of the academic enterprise and enter the cultural enterprise.

For example, in his short but beneficial discussion of the different approaches adapted to teach the Beats, William Lawlor calls attention to one assignment devised by Bob Jordan of Northeast Louisiana University. As Lawlor comments, since Jordan does recognise the Beat writers as social activists who embodied a certain conviction to speak to the social hopes and failures of the American enterprise, Jordan requires students 'to send a one-page letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine on a subject of political or social interest to them' (qtd. in Lawlor, *Beat* 12). The student must also submit a copy of this letter to Jordan in order to earn credit. One can see Jordan's assignment

as only the tip of the iceberg of the myriad of assignments (for example, have a student write a similar letter to a local or national politician) that a teacher can give to students to encourage each individual to connect the Beat spirit of revolution to his/her times.

Another possibility rests on the inclusion of what I define as a photo essay. As Lawlor notes in his discussion of the differing teaching practices, there are innumerable collective texts and individual photos that have either captured members of the Beat generation during their time or events of the time that displayed Beat values. One excellent classroom project may be to have students devise their own photo books of the Beat philosophy in the contemporary moment. For example, instructors can assign this project at the start of the semester and encourage students to purchase a disposable camera that they carry on their person throughout the semester. Then, as Beat ideas, individuals and philosophies are discussed and investigated in the classroom, students would be encouraged to pay attention to their surroundings outside of the classroom. The goal of this project would be for students to photograph images of their own culture that they believe correspond, respond, argue with, and/or dismiss those ideas explored in the classroom. At the end of the semester, it would be the responsibility of the student to collect these photos in an album of sorts and develop a written introduction that may either explain how the students see the photos connecting to the class readings or to explore how this project highlighted the continuance of the Beat spirit in a cultural world that is nearly fifty years past the Beat heyday. While I have yet to incorporate this assignment into a designated Beat course, I have incorporated it into my teaching of American Literature and I believe that the student responses to this project highlight my desired outcome. In a recent set of course evaluations, students regularly commented that not only was the photo project their favourite assignment because it allowed for a certain amount of creativity in the academic class, but also because this project allowed the student to find a personal connection with the literature being studied and thus, to a certain degree, both revitalised the literature and made the classroom learning situation connect with one's individual life.

Finally, a third option may be the inclusion of making the Beat moment come to life. In recognising that the study of Beat literature may cross over into the arena of creative writing, Lawlor suggests that an instructor may choose to have the class develop a coffeehouse reading. However, as Lawlor does recognise, without a set plan, the coffeehouse reading can 'degenerate into something rather tedious, but with some planning and some room for freedom and improvisation, the open reading can create a natural reflection of the spontaneity and performance art that were essential to Beat creativity' (*Beat* 10). In order to avoid the possibility of such degeneration and to further encourage an individual's interconnection with the Beat spirit, I might suggest the following plan for such a reading. Firstly, while the class would encourage

any individual to attend the reading (faculty, administrators, fellow students, the local community), the only individuals to read would be those enrolled in the class. Secondly, hold such a reading only at the end of the semester when the students enrolled in the class have been exposed to as much Beat literature as possible so they understand not only its themes but its form. Thirdly, ask each student to choose a particular selection or shortened selection to read. Finally, ask that each student not only read his/her chosen selection, but then, after completing the literary text, each student would be responsible for providing a several minute discussion as to why s/he chose the work and how s/he sees it as connecting to current culture.

As one can imagine, the possibilities for developing such classroom exercises are endless. However, the realisation of the importance of such exercises and how they may interweave the ideas of the Beat generation with our current generation of students is much less developed. As this paper has highlighted, the tendency of the academic is to develop an institutionalised space within the American university for this generation of writers, but in doing so, we are also at fault for ignoring the greater aspirations of their art and, in a larger context, the greater aspiration of the American university. While the Beat generation and their works should be studied from a literary perspective and deserve a place in the canon of American literature, we cannot forget that one of the many purposes behind these writers and their works was to comment on and possibly change their world. As the American system of education threatens to move into a world where it is less connected to the individual's responsibility to his/her own culture and becomes a system tied to the achievement of attaining a degree based solely in literacy rather than in cultural understanding, we must heed Curtis White's recommendation. With the closing of the imagination and the threatened disconnection between education and the social world, it is time we 'fashion tools to facilitate the revival of the social imagination' and thus, potentially, create a culture that can share in Ginsberg's messianic cry at the end of *Footnote to Howl*: 'Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent/ kindness of the soul!' (40–41).

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