

Robert Lee, *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics.*

Polina Mackay

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8850>

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

Polina Mackay, « Robert Lee, *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics.* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2011-1, document 1, Online since 05 January 2011, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8850>

---

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

Creative Commons License

---

# Robert Lee, Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics.

Polina Mackay

---

## REFERENCES

New York & London: Routledge, 2010. Pp. 296. ISBN 10: 0-415-99811-5 (hbk).

- 1 One can argue that literary criticism is primarily concerned with categorization. In their first year of study, students on an English Literature BA are asked to think about genre – about the difference between poetry and prose – and about subgenres, ranging from epic poetry to the detective novel. Such taxonomies are very helpful because they enable us to assess individual bodies of work as well as to place texts within the context of an ongoing literary story.
- 2 What makes literature indispensable, however, is its constant questioning of boundaries, genres and canons. Gustave Flaubert's critique of, as he perceived it, the Romantic escapism of early nineteenth-century works led to a literary experiment: his novel, *Madame Bovary*, written in third-person narrative from the point of view of an omniscient and detached narrator whose main aim was to tell the story objectively. Flaubert's book constitutes one of the beginnings of realism, the style of fiction writing which is partly responsible for the success of the novel in the twentieth century. Claude Monet's later mistrust of realistic representation produced some of the finest counter-examples, a tradition now termed as impressionism which, in turn, influenced writers like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D. and Virginia Woolf, the pillars of modernism. And so the story continues.
- 3 The tendency to counter norms is predominant in mid-to-late twentieth-century American arts, which sees the emergence of countercultural literature as a significant

category in its own right. In this grouping one finds Jack Kerouac whose novels *On the Road*, *Vanity of Duluo* and *Lonesome Traveler*, among others, follow Walt Whitman in their call to men to take to the open road, to open up to whatever life throws at them. In this type one also encounters Charles Bukowski, another American, whose central character in many of his novels and other writings is the anti-hero Henry Chinaski (*Post Office*, *Factotum*, *Women*, *Ham on Rye*, *Barfly*), a border-misanthropic misfit. The texts of the counterculture are filled with this kind of sardonic critique of conformity; for visual examples see the comics of Robert Crumb, the artist most associated with the American underground scene of the 1960s and 1970s.

- 4 A. Robert Lee's latest book, *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics* engages with these fundamental questions that should concern every scholar of literature: what are canons and how are they created? What makes a counter-canon and how is its significance measured within the context of literary history? Lee takes this line of enquiry much further by asking: what of the other canons within the counter-canons, of – to use Lee's term – the 'shadow canons' within the counter-canons? For there are plenty of these too. To Kerouac's 'Duluo Legend' (the story of his life as it is told in his fiction), for instance, there are the narratives of his wives and lovers who have also published their accounts (Joan Haverty Kerouac's *Nobody's Wife*, Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*). To Kerouac's, Ginsberg's and Burroughs' Beat Generation of male camaraderie there are the Beat women who wrote as much as the men, who also read their works in poetry events and who had as much to contribute to American letters as these men. Lee's study draws attention to these shadow canons, extending beyond the somewhat short story of the Beats to what the author calls 'outrider' writers and to others of non-white origin.
- 5 It is difficult to speak of canons at a time when the process of canonization is called into question at a time when, after hegemonic discourse underwent rigorous critique in the 1980s and 1990s, the counter-hegemonies now need to be rethought if this process of questioning is to have had any value. Easily one can get caught up in a never-ending cycle of challenging a canon with a counter-canon which is then theorized as a kind of canon in itself.
- 6 Lee avoids this trap by proposing something of true value to the scholar of literature: he suggests we turn to the work itself. Lee rightly does not spend too much time analyzing literary strategies, histories of textual compositions, or circumstances of publication of individual novels or poems. If he had this book would have read as episodic, as a narrowly focused camera angle on a single branch in a vast garden. Instead each chapter places the body of work under study within its chosen tradition but also within the wider context of counter writing.
- 7 The book is divided into three parts, each examining a significant body of non-canonical American literature. Part I is devoted to the Beats, exploring the literature of those who haven't as yet received sustained critical attention: the women of the Beat Generation (with a focus on Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger and Anne Waldman); black Beat Ted Joans; and Beat international writers Michael Horovitz, Andrei Voznesensky and Kazuko Shiraishi. Part II charts three writers who seem not to belong to any one counter-canon, thus the label 'outriders'. Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion and Kathy Acker refuse to conform to the American dream, to any kind of set script, even to revolution as that would involve some form of organization. Part III is entitled 'Ethnics' and showcases work by non-white American authors who choose not to resort to clichés, such as ethnic

victimhood, and instead set out to offer unique versions of America. Lee rightfully places in this category Gerald Vizenor, whose work the author concludes is 'a display of local craft in the service of wholly larger imagining' (246).

- 8 Lee's argument in this book reminds me of John Carey's in *What Good Are the Arts?* Like Carey, Lee shows that the power of literature lies in its ability to create and question, to build and discard, to nurture and counter, to finish and start again. In the hands of a gifted writer and scholar such as Lee, modern American counter writing shines on as we are reminded of what an absolute pleasure it is to read.

---

AUTHOR

POLINA MACKAY

University of Nicosia