

REINVENT AMERICA AND THE WORLD

Gioia Woods

October 2011

If you have any familiarity with Beat Generation scholarship, you've run across the doyenne of Beat Studies, Ann Charters. Charters built her academic career by laying the foundations for the way the Beats are taught, studied, and written about. No doubt, if you have any interest in Beat Studies—as a casual reader, a student, teacher, or scholar, you've relied on Charters's 1992 anthology, *The Portable Beat Reader*. I am currently using this myself as a required text in the ostentatiously named "Search for Meaning" course I inherited from a colleague in the waning hours before the fall semester was due to begin. My colleague is a philosopher by training, so her "Search for Meaning" class had a certain gravitas I could only hope to fake. Instead, I turned to the literature and culture of the Beat Generation, my understanding of which rests on the notion that they were deeply engaged in searching for meaning in the post-war, mechanistic, consumerist decade in the middle of the American Century. My own reading of Lawrence Ferlinghetti could sustain a class in meaning-making, I thought. I envisioned myself on the first day of the semester opening with a discussion of Ferlinghetti's life and art, including his work as poetry promoter, which embodies a decades-long search for a self uncorrupted by what he saw as a deadened machine world. He gives an account of how he became the poet-philosopher in his poem "True Confessional":

And someone squeezed my heart
To make it go
And I began to go
Through my number.
I was a wound-up toy someone had dropped wound up
Into a world

Already running down.
The world had been running down for a long time already

The narrator rejects a mechanized identity, the only one seemingly available in an absurd world bereft of meaning by making the existential choice of choosing his own freedom. He continues:

It was new it was like new
I made it new
I saw it shining
.....
It was too bright to see
Too luminous too numinous
To cast a shadow
And there was another world
Behind the bright screens

Ferlinghetti plays with the idea of Platonic forms (there was another world behind the bright screens), the mystical (the numinous world, imbued with a sort of divinity), and, as was the case with so many Western intellectuals in the 1950s, with the existential. It's the latter I find most revealing: the poem's narrator posits himself as the maker of newness ("*I made it new*"), thus foregrounding the role of CHOICE. The title of the poem, "True Confessional," prompts me to read it as a reflection of Ferlinghetti's own life's work. City Lights, the bookstore and press he founded, significantly remapped the ideological landscape of the American West. City Lights was a leader in the realm of publishing, reading, and free speech concerns; it was a safe house in which to perform non-normative identities, and it became a global location that changed the political geography of San Francisco and, by extension, the American West.

Ferlinghetti meant to put cheap paperbacks in the hands and pockets of all Americans, and he intended to brew what he called "an international, dissident, insurgent ferment." By insisting on making the work of new, often radical poets available in cheap

quality paperbacks, Ferlinghetti made possible the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Movement. By publishing and defending Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, the fourth book in the Pocket Poets series, Ferlinghetti challenged what's considered fit to print and fit to read (Ferlinghetti City Lights, *Pocket Poets Anthology*, i). For nearly sixty years, City Lights has transgressed cultural, literary, and spatial "rules." As bookshop, publishing house, host of the West Coast paperback revolution, sponsor of the Beat Movement, and home of the Pocket Poets series, City Lights has continuously been at the avant-garde of cultural revolution.

But, I still had a class to plan. As I dusted off my copy of *The Portable Beat Reader* and started to read the introduction, it soon became clear to me that Charters's map of Beat geography retraced a certain nineteenth-century desire for the old, corrupt East to reinvigorate itself in the utopian, edenic West. Charters tells the story like this: Two Columbia students, Allen Ginsberg and Lucien Carr, along with Jack Kerouac and the reformed Midwesterner William Burroughs, were visited by a wild-eyed, fast-talking Neal Cassady. Cassady arrived in New York from Denver on a Greyhound Bus in 1946. Here was a new type of man, Kerouac wrote, who was not a tedious, East Coast intellectual like his old friends, but a "western kinsman of the sun," a "Gene Autry[,] ... a sideburned hero of the snowy West" (*On the Road*). Cassady embodied the potential for literary production unburdened by the weight of tradition.

Charters relies on the ideology of the frontier narrative by explaining that although generated in the East, the Beat ideology found little purchase among New York's avant-garde and the city's conservative publishing tradition. The West beckoned as a potential utopia: San Francisco's cultural territory was furnished with small magazines like *Ark* and

Circle, which both published radical work by local poets. The antiwar and antiauthoritarian *Circle* had first been produced in 1944 on a mimeograph machine in Berkeley. Poets Philip Lamantia and Kenneth Rexroth, the first two San Franciscans to have been granted conscientious objector status, were regular contributors, along with Kenneth Pathcen, Robert Duncan, ee cummings, Henry Miller, and Anaïs Nin.

The magazine editors and its contributors, along with some Spanish and Italian anarchists and a handful of French surrealists, formed a tight community. This group, who called themselves the Libertarian Circle, began to replace communism with mysticism, believing the latter to be a more meaningful, less bloody, ideological frame for their radical politics.

Because of the Libertarian Circle and other like-minded groups, the avant-garde scene in the Bay Area in the early 1950s seemed like a utopia to many disaffiliated and displaced radical writers. Charters describes how the term “Beat” became embodied in the figure of Cassady (that side-burned hero of the West) after the 1952 publication of John Clellon Holmes’s Beat novel *Go*. Values and myths inhere in our literature and in the critical narratives we tell about our literature: the Beat narrative finds in San Francisco a big rock candy mountain, overflowing with poetry readings, literary magazines, and radical politics. A utopia. And you know how one of the central tropes in utopian fictions is the visitor from a foreign land? In 1954, Allen Ginsberg arrived in San Francisco from New York with a letter of introduction to Kenneth Rexroth from William Carlos Williams. Ginsberg observed the way the West Coast literary community encouraged experimental poetry and was more open to and tolerant of homosexuality, probably due in part to the influence of Berkeley poet Robert Duncan’s widely read 1944 essay “The Homosexual in Society.” Duncan’s essay

later made it possible for Ferlinghetti to establish City Lights Booksellers & Publishers as a safe site in which to enact—and indeed celebrate—homosexuality.

The essay was published in a magazine called *politics*, founded by Dwight MacDonald. MacDonald was a co-founder of the *Partisan Review*, which published work by highbrow bearers of culture, who incidentally were often critical of the Beats for their embrace of kitsch. After the *Partisan Review* supported the US's decision to enter World War II, MacDonald left the magazine to found his own magazine called *politics*. Like many East Coast leftists, MacDonald was a reformed Trotskyite and an anti-Stalinist, struggling to find the “proper” expression for left ideology. He called himself an “unallied anarchist” and was as opposed to Stalin as he was to centralized state power and fervent nationalism. I belabor this point to indicate to you the extent of the political and aesthetic infighting among East Coast leftist intellectuals. [There's long discussion I'd like to go into here about kitsch and the potent way Ferlinghetti wielded it at City Lights press ... but in the interest of time, I won't. Suffice it to say, for now, that the very weapon Ferlinghetti chose for his role in the culture wars was the pocket book, the paperback, the ultimate American kitsch. In 1953, the same year Ferlinghetti shook hands with Peter Martin to launch City Lights, the *Saturday Review* ran an editorial calling the paperbound novel “180 ... lurid, sensational, extremely unimportant pages bound in the bosom of its heroine.”] The political and aesthetic battles among the left prompted many, like Ginsberg, to leave New York in the first place.

But back to utopia: Unlike those utopian visitors who view the foreign world from a position of estrangement, Ginsberg almost immediately fell in with other poets of the San Francisco Renaissance whom he called “interesting types.” Other New York Beats followed

Ginsberg to the City on the Bay, mingled with the natives, and gave collective birth to the Beat Generation on October 7, 1955, at San Francisco's Six Gallery, where Ginsberg first read *Howl*. Ferlinghetti was there and had already published three books in his Pocket Poet series and sent Ginsberg an invitation to submit *Howl* as its fourth. "I sent Allen a Western Union telegram that night," Ferlinghetti recalls, "saying, 'I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?'" The telegram echoed Ralph Waldo Emerson's note to Walt Whitman reading an early version of "Leaves of Grass" (but Ginsberg didn't initially catch the reference, Ferlinghetti says). Publishing *Howl* was not an electrifying event—it was Ferlinghetti's arrest on obscenity charges that made the book, the bookshop, and the press famous. It took Lawrence Ferlinghetti to create a material and ideological space that made possible the utopian ideal of social transformation.

I like to think about City Lights Bookstore as a site that, to paraphrase Krista Comer, helped "remap literary convention and social space" and "forced a rethinking of the who, what, where, and why of the West" (246). [By the way, Comer's essay "New West, Urban and Suburban Spaces, Postwest" is collected in the wonderful *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, edited by Nic Witschi. Come see the book, buy it, talk to the contributors at tomorrow night's reception!!). Anyway, in her essay, Comer describes the way New West narratives about the West's receding center neither decry the loss of center or try to reinstate it. Instead, Comer argues, these narratives welcome decentralization "as an opportunity, a reason for hope and for a new social and imaginative geography of 'West'" (250). In this City Lights cultural biography project, I also take cues from recent trends in American studies, which seek to interrogate the way sites reveal how power and competing desire give them shape and how sites come to signify meanings

outside regional boundaries and borders. Janice Radway points out that in American studies, “classic works contextualized canonical fiction and popular literature as encounters between fresh minds and virgin lands,” much in the way Charters does. More recent trends in American studies examine the way sites are shaped through cultural encounters, cultural production, and the material/ideological activities that structure human activity. This biography project is conducted within the latter analytical frame.

Both utopian and heterotopian in this analytic, because they encourage us to examine sites not as THINGS, but as PROCESSES; the processes through which social order (and spatial order) are exerted and challenged. Foucault’s heterotopias are sites that invert the set of relations they happen to signify or reflect. City Lights, especially in the 1950s, was a bookstore that inverted capitalist norms by inviting people to loiter, read, and plot instead of buy. City Lights, like other heterotopias (and unlike utopias), can be mapped and recognized—we know what to expect from a space that announces itself as “bookstore”—but as Foucault says, they are “absolutely different from all the sites they reflect and speak about” (3). City Lights was the first all-paperback bookshop in the nation, thus confounding other American booksellers with an image so like, but unlike, their own. A central component of Foucault’s heterotopia is his discussion of the mirror image, and I believe that City Lights profoundly functioned in this way, too: when you gaze into a mirror, Foucault says, you see yourself where you are not. The mirror causes you to look at yourself from within a space that exists in a different context. From a heterotopia “I begin again,” Foucault explains, “to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am” (3). It is his insistence on “reconstitution” that seems especially applicable to City Lights. The bookstore opened up the possibility for a generation of post-war writers to

pass through the stifling homogeneity of Levittown America into an alternative, Beat space. There is no doubt that City Lights invited people to imagine themselves outside of the dominant cold war context. Within a heterotopic space, you can try on a different context outside your own norm to see how it looks on you, like trying out a different hairstyle on your face. After its inception, and especially after the 1957 obscenity trial for Ginsberg's *Howl*, City Lights might be called a "heterotopia of deviation," a place Foucault identifies for those whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required norm. Last year, I managed to interview Paul Yamazaki, long-time book-buying coordinator of City Lights. I asked him if the bookstore continues to be a space of resistance, a space to practice deviance. "We're still part of that," he answered. "Whether it's the war, or housing, educational things, or class issues." When I asked Yamazaki about the bookstore's relationship to the American West, he told me that too often we consider institutions in isolation from the network of communities in which they function. City Lights was born to tell a different story, he said, one that reveals "the West as a long history of unassimilable people." I appreciate the way Yamazaki foregrounded the idea of a network, implying that City Lights responds to both its immediate urban context and to material and ideological contexts outside region and even nation. To borrow a phrase from Kevin Hetherington's book *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*, the interesting thing about utopias or heterotopias are they provide alternatives to the way society is currently ordered.

I like this story better. Instead of recapitulating the trajectory of East to West and revisiting the ideological violence of traditional utopia, I begin at 261 Columbus Ave on a small triangular corner between North Beach and Chinatown, which allows me to identify a complex network of radical literary and cultural activity. In western literature and culture

studies, we have for a while now been revising the way we examine western places. It's tempting to view City Lights Bookstore, situated as it is about as far west as one can get in the United States in terms of the old narrative that marked western places a "city on a hill" or a "new Eden" or even, as Ferlinghetti often imagines it, a sort of new Greece. City Lights has resisted these master narratives by foregrounding Yamazaki's understanding of the bookstore as a place for and about the West's "unassimilable people." City Lights and other transgressive sites like it are best understood as places of cultural encounter and production, places that operate to meet social needs in times of ideological crises. This fits squarely within what scholars of utopia call "critical" or "transgressive" utopias, an idea I'll return to in a moment.

In 1953, aspiring poet and painter Lawrence Ferlinghetti was coming home up Columbus Avenue from his painting studio on Mission when he saw a sign reading "City Lights Pocket Bookstore." Curious, he got out of the car and met Peter Martin, a San Francisco State sociology instructor. Both men were political radicals: Martin, the son of an assassinated Italian anarchist, was determined to make books affordable for the underclass, Ferlinghetti, a World War II veteran whose tour of duty took him to Nagasaki days after the bombing, was a radical pacifist. On that June morning in 1953, Ferlinghetti offered to match Martin's \$500 investment, and the two became part-owners of a "left-leaning, anti-authoritarian bookshop and publishing house," the first in the nation to sell only paperback books. I'm interested in exploring the way the bookstore made a claim to this space by tying radical political identity, social nonconformity, and experimental literature to 261 Columbus Ave.

The idea of critical utopia helps me do that. Like recent critical conversations about authenticity, it's not whether a thing is utopian or not that is revealing, but how the idea of the utopian is deployed. British sociologist Ruth Levitas's explanation of utopia helps me understand City Lights within that context. Between a society's needs and wants on the one hand, Levitas explains, and the ability of a society to meet those needs and wants on the other, lies a gap. The promise of filling that gap is the central activity of what Levitas calls "critical utopia." That gap-filling activity she calls the "education of desire" (111). In this formulation, utopia is not a good place that's no place (maybe it's not even a place), but an *activity* that arouses in its participants a desire for something different. Peter Martin identified the need for radical literacy on the one hand and the deafening Levittown values that denied even the existence of class privation on the other. It was through his early efforts that City Lights became, by the mid-1950s, a site that generated the desire to reject the "pathology of normalcy."

Before City Lights had a brick-and-mortar identity, however, it was the name of Martin's literary magazine, which published San Francisco Renaissance poets like Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia, and Jack Spicer before it folded after five issues. Martin leased a space in the Artigues building, a triangular building with four storefronts, designed in 1907 in the classical revival style for the French investors who commissioned it. Chinatown at its back, North Beach at its front; an Italian bookseller, A. Cavelli, occupied one of the storefronts, and a flower shop leased the other. Martin's production studio occupied a second-story mezzanine above the florist. Martin named his magazine after the 1931 Charlie Chaplin film *City Lights*, in which the Tramp falls hopelessly in love with a blind flower seller. The flower seller returns the Tramp's affections but believes him to be a

wealthy gentleman. After a series of Chaplinesque comic mishaps, The Tramp lands in jail but not before acquiring the money for an operation to restore the girl's sight. The film's ending is often cited as one of the most moving in American cinema history. The blind flower seller, whose sight is restored only to look upon a Tramp she thought a wealthy gentleman, embodies the potential for social transgression: she can thumb her nose to corporate capitalism, reject the "pathology of normalcy," and choose instead different social values.

It is the moment of choice that makes the film so compelling a namesake for the magazine and, later, the bookshop. The frozen existential moment in which the flower seller must choose, thus creating herself, embodies the hope Martin had for his own *City Lights*. This final scene also calls to mind the popular postwar American experiments with Sartre's existentialism, which urged people to act in good faith by making explicit choices and by being aware of the way we create ourselves through these choices (much in the way Ferlinghetti's narrator in the poem "True Confessional" does). By choosing freedom every day, Sartre explains, we not only choose for ourselves but for others, too. Thus the responsibility for choosing alternative values can lead to collective social revolution—and this is certainly what Martin was hoping for.

The flower shop folded in 1953, and Martin decided to open a small bookshop in it that could help support his literary magazine. Paperbacks had been around for a while, of course, but were not sold in spaces conducive to social transformation: the bus stops, train stations, and drugstores where paperbacks were sold on spinning racks were mostly designed as transitional spaces between one dwelling place and another; it was only a few years later, within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, that these spaces became

targets of desegregation efforts. City Lights imagined itself not as a transitional space, but as a safe house for the practice of non-normative activities. Martin and Ferlinghetti were explicit about inducing in their patrons the desire to seek an alternative set of mid-century values. In its outdoor and indoor paperback kiosks, City Lights stocked books that confounded New Critical values of impersonality, highbrow aesthetic standards, middlebrow media consumption, and, of course, cold warriors' infamous lists and promises to end "corruption and communism." Ferlinghetti recalls, "It was Peter Martin's brilliant idea to have the first all-paperbound bookstore in the country. There weren't any then; there was no place to get quality pocket books." The bookshop sold early alternative magazines and newspapers along with new and used paperbacks. Much of the material reflected Martin's and Ferlinghetti's radical politics, and the store soon became a gathering place for the San Francisco avant-garde, those writers and artists who, like Martin and Ferlinghetti, were disillusioned with social norms and determined to use creative cultural production to generate something new. This is just the kind of activity that comprises a "critical" or "transgressive" utopia: a space which has a dual function, a space from which social critique can be mounted and alternative political spaces can be created.

Kenneth Rexroth believed that the San Francisco Renaissance poets were engaging in utopian activities through numerous, well-attended poetry gatherings at San Francisco State College, in various galleries, and in private homes. In his essay "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," Rexroth argues that the groundswell of writers and readers of the counter-poetries like that by the Beats "means that poetry has become an actual social force—something which has always sounded hitherto like a Utopian dream" (507). But he was reticent to predict the success of City Lights Bookstore: "There's no way they could

ever make a success of that bookstore. Lawrence could stand at the door and hand out paperbacks as fast as he could and he still wouldn't make it." For his reasoning, Rexroth alluded to the unfortunate distance between San Francisco's poetry renaissance and the New York publishing and literary marketplace. While the seeming absence of a literary marketplace may cripple a venture like City Lights Bookstore, it was the very distance from "Rome" that drew many avant-garde poets to San Francisco in the first place. "Each generation," Rexroth acknowledged, saw that "the great Latin poets came from farther and farther from Rome" (508). In Rexroth's utopia, there is hope that the margin will replace the center; he expresses some anxiety about reestablishing a new center of culture in San Francisco. But in Ferlinghetti's vision, margins could be manipulated, and lost centers (the metaphorical Rome; in this case, New York City) became an opportunity which eventually remapped San Francisco and the West. Instead of lamenting his distance from Rome, Ferlinghetti established his own press in 1955, shortly after Peter Martin returned to New York. The press and the inaugural series, the Pocket Poets series, became the central publishing venue for Beat poets (Ginsberg, Corso, Ferlinghetti himself) and for the international avant-garde. Consider some of the early poets published by the press: Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, German poet Günter Grass, and Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky. Beat literature is often rightly criticized as excluding women, but before 1960, Ferlinghetti's press did publish Marie Ponsot, Denise Levertov, and Diane DiPrima. In the anthology celebrating the fortieth anniversary of City Lights Pocket Poets series, Ferlinghetti, who edited the retrospective, calls his press "a little cultural exchange program" that established a "world without walls" that brought together "poets separated by language or geography, coalescing in a truly supra-national poetic voice" (i-ii).

Ferlinghetti's belief in the necessity of City Lights Press and the Pocket Poets Series was influenced by a number of factors. First of all, while a graduate student at the Sorbonne, Ferlinghetti had been inspired by the French tradition of booksellers who were also publishers. Second, Ferlinghetti, who considered himself primarily a painter, was nonetheless moved by Peter Martin's belief in the relationship between literacy, cheap books, and class revolution. Third, Ferlinghetti's poetic imagination and aesthetic values had been largely shaped by his graduate work on French surrealist poet Jacques Prévert. Prévert's 1945 collection *Paroles* sold more than 500,000 copies in France. Ferlinghetti explains this almost unheard of market success by arguing that his poetic hero resonated deeply with a disaffiliated generation: "Prévert," Ferlinghetti wrote, "spoke particularly to the French youth immediately after the War, especially to those who grew up during the Occupation and felt totally estranged from Church and State" (1990 edition of *Paroles*, Ferlinghetti's 1958 translation). Having published translations of some of Prévert's poems in Martin's *City Lights Magazine*, Ferlinghetti knew that the combination of direct language, anarchist sentiment, and nonconformist content interested local San Francisco readers. An avowed aesthetic and political nonconformist himself, Ferlinghetti, finally, shared with his friend Kenneth Rexroth the belief that the avant-garde American poet must reject the idea that "a poem is an end in itself, an anonymous machine for providing aesthetic experience" and embrace the poem as a radical tool for urgent communication. And the rest, as they say, is "New Western" history.