

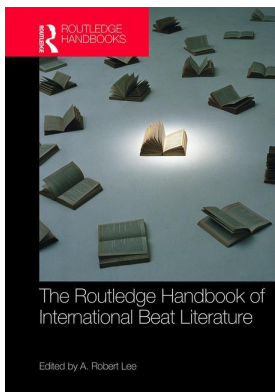
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1

CANADA BEATS

A Complex Legacy

Katharine Streip

Would there have been a Beat generation without Canada? Jack Kerouac, a catalyst for the Beat movement, confessed in a letter to the critic Yvonne le Maitre, “All my knowledge rests in my ‘French-Canadianness’ and nowhere else” (Melehy 2016: 42). In another letter, Kerouac writes, “Canada brooded in the air and haunted me ... Canada was my bosom of God” (Johnson 2012: 21). The opening of the Kerouac archives at the New York Public Library in 2006 revealed the extent to which Kerouac identified himself as French Canadian (Cloutier 2016: 9).

The French Canadian diaspora, a migration of about 900,000 Francophones to the US between 1840 and 1930, shaped Kerouac and contributed to his outsider’s relation to the English language and American culture (Melehy 2016: 10, 12). Kerouac was very aware of how cultures and languages evolve through the contacts and exchanges of migrations and transformations (Melehy 2016:15). Canadian Beat literature reflects Kerouac’s own literary experimentation, responds to his movement between languages and his experience of English as a foreign language (Melehy 2016: 1). It mirrors Kerouac’s thematics of travel, migration, and movements between cultures and territories (Melehy 2016: 1–2). Beat translingual and transnational poetics inform Canadian Beat art as it exposes what is invisible in a dominant culture through aesthetic and thematic preoccupations. A nomadic morality and identity, sentences that embody motion, a poetics of exile and cultural displacement shape Canadian Beat art, from literature to assemblage art to jazz, poetry, punk music, and performance art.

Canada’s relation with the Beat movement is multi-faceted. A desire to challenge national and linguistic boundaries and a wish to escape conformity and explore identity through stylistic innovations in different media mark the Beats’ complex legacy in Canada. Beat themes and aesthetics are influential and antagonistic, a source of inspiration and a potential threat to be overcome through imagination and formal innovation.

Many Canadian writers were inspired by Kerouac’s life and writing. In Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* (1984), the main characters, Jack Waterman and his traveling companion, a Métis woman nicknamed la Grande Sauterelle (the Big Grasshopper), drive from Gaspésie to California in a Volkswagen bus. The novel highlights linguistic and cultural tensions, as we see in a short exchange between la Grande Sauterelle and Waterman: “Is your name Jack?” she asked “That’s what my brother used to call me. When we were little we gave ourselves English names; we thought they suited us much better!” (Poulin 1988:5). The novel reflects Kerouac’s preoccupation with French and English languages and cultures, as the characters not only retrace the journeys of early French explorers but also the wanderings of Beat authors, with many references to Kerouac and his friends (Adams 2009: 173). Waterman’s journey across national borders, his relationship with La Grande Sauterelle,

and his reunion with his brother in San Francisco, suggest that there will be a creative breakthrough in his own writing because of this odyssey.

Other Francophone and Anglophone works inspired by Kerouac's legacy include Jean Babineau, *Vortex* (2001), where an Acadian, André Boudreau, travels from Moncton, New Brunswick, to Mexico and tries to avoid disappearing into the "vortex" of the United States. The novel explores the position of a cultural minority confronted by the cultural and economic power of the United States. The Acadian poet Gerald LeBlanc's autobiographical novel *Moncton Mantra* (1997) describes Moncton's innovative community of artists and writers. Early in the novel, a friend shows up with a car and the narrator, Alain Gautreau, finds himself "on the road, headed for the United States in a delirious stream of words and uncertainties" (LeBlanc 2001: 11). Unlike the narrator, who struggles to write, his care-free friend Gilles Robichaud, in contrast, is "simply and naturally coming up with a poetry that was alive and deeply rooted in reality" in classic Beat fashion (LeBlanc 2001: 25). Jack Kerouac haunts the novel, as the narrator "got to talking about Jack Kerouac, the way he made his places, gatherings, descriptions of music come alive, his highly evocative style and his talent" (LeBlanc 2001: 32). As the narrator engages with Kerouac's legacy,

I reread *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac. In the middle of reading, I had an irresistible urge to take off somewhere. The book was lying on the table while my head was flying away towards my dream-skies: oh California, oh Mexico, oh Louisiana. My dreams of sunny lands lasted a while, and then I finally landed, remembering that I wasn't Jack Kerouac, but Alain Gautreau, that I turned things over in my head without writing them down. This reality brought me crashing down. I hated everything. I knew that even if I left for some other better place, I'd still be carrying my alienation around in my suitcases.

Leblanc 2001: 48

Again, wrestling with Kerouac's writing eventually provides a stimulus for inspiration and claiming one's own identity:

I went back to reading Jack Kerouac and, instead of giving in to dreaming, I started to write about the effect it was having on me. I began to elaborate a plan, to write of Moncton as a theme. I wanted to translate a particular state of mind into prose, search out the meaning that this city had for me. I wanted to inscribe the immediate in an impressionist song full of cadences and flashes.

Leblanc 2001: 49–50

A Canadian Beat author leads the narrator to a eureka moment in the evolution of his own style. When Gautreau discovers Bill Bissett's collection of poems *Nobody Owns Th Earth*, "I began to study Bissett's style myself, his unusual spelling, his writing based on orality. It fascinated me. I got the urge to try the same kind of thing with French, a writing experiment" (LeBlanc 2001: 95). Bissett's fearless experiments with language and his poetics of oral speech inspire the narrator to create his own voice through experimenting with French.

In Ken McGoogan's *Visions of Kerouac* (2007),¹ the hero, Frankie McCourt, is obsessed with Jack Kerouac and travels from Montreal to San Francisco in search of experience in the 1960s. He eventually finds work as a fire lookout at Mount Jubilation in the Canadian Rockies (a tribute to Desolation Peak in the North Cascade Mountains of Washington State, where Kerouac worked as a fire lookout in 1956), where he has lively conversations with the ghost of Kerouac. The ghost and Frankie debate the significance of the *Rencontre Internationale Jack Kerouac*, a four-day controversial celebration of Kerouac's work that took place in Quebec City in 1987. At the end of the novel, the narrator refuses a drink, a "Jack Kerouac Special" at Vesuvio's Bar in San Francisco, acknowledges his own alcoholism, and "broke into a run along Jack Kerouac Alley" to reclaim his life (McGoogan 2007: 284).

Ray Robertson's *What Happened Later* (the title of Kerouac's proposed sequel to *On the Road*), alternates between a devastating portrayal of a final road trip to Quebec made by Kerouac in 1967 in search of his roots and, fifteen years later, the quest of Ontario teenage Roy Robertson to find a copy of *On the Road*. Inspired by Jim Morrison's repeated readings of Kerouac's novel, Robertson decides, "As soon as I got a chance to read *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac was going to be my favourite author" (Robertson 2007: 12). The novel emphasizes how the story of Kerouac's life can be as significant as his work in shaping the Canadian response to Beat mythology—the young narrator reads a biography of Kerouac during the narrative, but his reading of *On The Road* will take place in the future.

George Rideout's play *Michel and Ti-Jean* presents a fictional meeting between the aging Kerouac and 27-year-old French Canadian novelist and playwright Michel Tremblay in a St. Petersburg, Florida, bar in 1969. Tremblay is eager to meet his literary hero, but has only read Kerouac's work in French translation. The play exposes tensions around language, translation, appropriation, and influence, as Kerouac protests, "You haven't read my books. You think *Sur la route* is my book? If I read Molière or Balzac or Proust in English do you think I've read Molière and Balzac and Proust?" (Rideout 2014: 12).

French Canadian ambivalence towards Kerouac and his legacy is beautifully expressed in a few pages of Jacques Godbout's separatist novel *Knife on the Table*:

No Kerouac, for us beat means beaten, wiped out, conquered in war and commerce. You've chosen to sleep in the shadow of the White Capitol, to change the meaning of words, to become a son of Abraham Lincoln [...] The mulatto who managed to pass for white in the halls of the Waldorf?² [...] I know some who are dying of jealousy in this country ... they would have snuffed out your genius, twisted it, wrung it dry. And you, Jack, you've spread it across an entire continent, our misery and your condition as a man. Saint Jack Kerouac, give us jazz, weariness, the desire to love and die exhausted on this great wheel spinning at full speed.

Godbout 1976: 87–88

Kerouac signaled youth, authenticity, nostalgia for the freedom and promise of a cultural revolution at the beginning of the Beat era, as well as shame, ambivalence, and resentment at Kerouac's fate and his position in United States' culture.

The beginning of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* contains a veiled tribute to Kerouac and a sly critique of corruption in the United States with the sentence "I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have sea-planes for hire" (Atwood 2009: 3). Kerouac even casts a shadow in the postmodern feminist novel *Mauve Desert* by Nicole Brossard, where a fifteen-year-old girl races a car across the desert and a motel is owned by Kathy Kerouac (Brossard 2015: 65).

Prominent examples of Beat artists can be found throughout Canada, but because of Canada's size and the complex history of its regions and cultures, this chapter will refer to a few geographic areas and illuminate some exemplary figures who carry the torch of Beat culture in Canada. In Montreal, by the end of the 1950s, "Beat culture, jazz, poetry, and theater created an atmosphere of excitement that spilled out from new avant-garde cafés," such as Le Mas and the Librarie Tranquille (Mills 2010: 40). Canadian Francophone Beat poets such as Patrice Desbiens, Josée Yvon, and Denis Vanier wrote "raw, urban, seedy poetry" and used a "sub-proletarian joul" in their writing.³ In the 1970s and 1980s, Desbiens lived a Beat existence of part time jobs and created music and poetry working in cafes and bars. Alienation, life in two worlds with a Franco/Ontarian identity, is a major theme in his work. This is clearly expressed in his semi-autobiographical piece, "L'homme invisible/The invisible man" (1981), a poem with the French text on one side and the English text on the opposite page, about a man torn between two languages and two identities, searching for an integrated self and a country. Desbiens uses the street language of Franco-Ontarians, which is similar to Quebec joul, in his work. Josée Yvon

and Denis Vanier were among the most provocative writers of the Quebec counterculture. Yvon gave voice to the marginal—prostitutes, drug addicts, homosexuals, transsexuals—in her writing, which mixes poetry and narration. The journal *Steak Haché*, founded by Denis Vanier, promoted Kerouac-inspired poetry. Poet, song-writer and publisher Gilbert Langevin was “l’un de nos plus grands *Beats* québécois” (Vanier 1990: 119). Music inspired by Kerouac include the song *Kerouac* by Sylvain Lelièvre (1978), *L’Ange vagabond* by Richard Séguin (1988) and *Sur la route* by Pierre Flynn (1987).

The Haitian-Quebecois novelist Dany Laferrière is profoundly influenced by Beat style in his first novel *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) (*How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* [2010]) with its frequent references to jazz and an emphatic “American Beat,” evident even in French. Laferrière told his skeptical translator that his novel would be easy to translate because “It’s already written in English, just that the words are in French.” After he started the translation, David Homel called him “to say that I was right. He immediately recognized the American *Beat*. It’s an American book written, curiously, in French” (McLoughlin 2013: 85). As Alvina Ruprecht remarks, “Laferrière rewrites the American road novel in which he appropriates the jazz rhythms characteristic of Kerouac, Ginsberg and the Beat poets” (McLoughlin 2013: 261). Laferrière even names a bar his narrator frequents “Les Clochards Celestes,” a French translation of *The Dharma Bums*.

Laferrière challenges racial stereotypes and draws on many traditions and influences in his writing, rejecting the limited definition of a Quebecois, Haitian, or French language writer (McLoughlin 2013: 81). “When my book came out” Laferrière recalls, “nobody believed it was written by a black man. They said, Whoever wrote it writes *almost* like a black. Everyone was so sure it was written by a white. A black couldn’t write like *that*, they said” (Laferrière 2010: 1). Near the end of this funny, satiric, iconoclastic and outrageous novel, when the narrator is interviewed about his own first novel, he asserts, “To be a traitor is every writer’s destiny. I hope that’s the first cliché in this interview” (Laferrière 2010: 149). It is necessary to both respond to the challenge of Beat originality and circumvent the peril of being derivative, a stereotype, a received idea of a Beat author. The novel ends with a triumphant expression of Beat creativity, euphoria and exhaustion:

When you add it up, I wrote this novel in thirty-six days and eighteen nights, using three ribbons, four jars of liquid paper, five hundred sheets of bond paper, thirty bottles of wine and a dozen cases of beer. I totalled it up in a little black notebook, a gift from Miz Literature. I’m typing like crazy. The Remington is having a ball. Words are squirting out everywhere. I type. I can’t take it any more. I type. I’m at the end of my ribbon. I finish. I crash out on the table next to the typewriter with my head on my arms.

Laferrière 2010: 152

Beat culture in Toronto’s Yorkville neighborhood brought about innovations in art, film, music, and literature. The Isaacs Gallery showcased work by experimental Canadian artists, including painting, sculpture, experimental film, poetry, free jazz, modern dance and music and brought in Beat luminaries from the United States for readings (Henderson 2011: 51–52). David Cronenberg lived in Yorkville as a young filmmaker and has drawn on William S. Burroughs for inspiration, especially for his compelling adaptation of *Naked Lunch*. Just a few blocks away from the University of Toronto, which now houses the world’s largest collection of photographs by Allen Ginsberg, Ginsberg participated in the multi-media conference “Perception 67” and had breakfast with Marshall McLuhan (Henderson 2011: 324, #24).

Allen Ginsberg’s visits to Canada had enormous repercussions. In 1963, Ginsberg was among the speakers at the University of British Columbia Vancouver Poetry Conference. Although there was skepticism among traditional academics about Beat poetry—“The English department faculty have mostly scoffed at Beat poetry, with some members joking that sociology would be the appropriate department to teach it” (Davey 2011: 141)—Ginsberg’s participation at the conference influenced several generations of Vancouver poets, including Frank Davey, George Bowering, and Daphne

Marlatt, key members of the Canadian poetry collective TISH. The conference led to the formation of their famous literary magazine (Davey 2011). Although TISH is not explicitly Beat influenced, it shares in the Beat spirit. Many of the members of TISH were working class, from non-urban backgrounds. As “outsiders,” they broke away from a dominant Canadian esthetic privileging content over language and looked to Black Mountain and Beat writers for inspiration as they developed their open-form poetics (Butling and Rudy 2009: 69). The emerging 1950s/1960s Beat culture, with its resistance to mainstream values, helped bring about what Davey describes as “a shared imagination of what poetry and a place might be. It wasn’t a ‘collective’ in the narrow Marxist sense of a formal assignment of responsibilities and roles. It was much more ... spontaneous—more like a jazz quintet” (Davey 2011: 194). A sense of place or *locus* was crucial for TISH and geopolitics, how “work is informed by the historic cultural, social and personal environment in which one lives,” infused their poetics (Davey 2011: 312). TISH emphasized decentered subjectivity and process rather than a stable self (Davey 2011: 321). Just as a small group of writers and artists set the Beat movement in motion, the original TISH collective inspired alternative magazines and presses throughout Canada.

One Canadian Beat writer, Gladys Hindmarch, a founding editor of TISH, never published in the journal because she wrote experimental prose rather than poetry. Her collection, *The Peter Stories* (1976), five stories inspired by the “Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater” nursery rhyme, featured prose rhythms influenced by Jack Kerouac and by her experience playing tenor sax in a Vancouver Island dance combo (Tallman 1974: 77). Similar to Beat writing, with its acute sense of the corporal body, her work is often described as proprioceptive because it describes the physical body through position and sensation rather than portraying the body as a social construct. Hindmarch’s novel, *A Birth Account* (1976) describes the author’s bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings during a pregnancy, miscarriage, second pregnancy, and birth, and her collection of linked stories, *The Watery Part of the World* (1988), takes on Herman Melville as she describes her memories of being a mess girl and a cook on a small passenger freighter that made stops along the coast of British Columbia.

The multi-media artist bill bissett, who Kerouac described as one of the great poets in *The Paris Review*,⁴ offers a superb example of Canadian Beat spirit. As a child, he ran away from home in Halifax several times, once to join a circus. He wrote a poem about his discovery of Beat culture in 1957:

three uv us wer leeving
 home from Halifax copees uv allen ginsbergs
 howl n yr on th road in th front n back pockits
 uv my breathing mind
 I wantid to leev western civilizaysyun yr
 buddhist north amerikana jazz soulscape n my
 frend as my travelling guides
 n my need to live free

“untitled poem” n.p.; Butling and
 Rudy 2009: 71–72

Familiar tropes, such as going on the road with a copy of “Howl,” friends as travel guides, dismay over Western civilization with its embrace/appropriation of “Buddhist north amerikana jazz soulscape,” gain a new traction through bissett’s typographical spaces which let air into confined ideas, his play with language and orthodox spelling that make rigid concepts new and fluid, his arrangement of words on the page so that “breathing mind” “n my need to live free” shine with luminous clarity.

bissett dropped out of the University of British Columbia after two years and during the 1960s, founded the seminal *blewointment* magazine and press, which became part of the counterculture movement in Canada as it introduced poets who would not have been published in more conventional venues. He was attacked by Canadian politicians for indecency in the bissett Affair and was denied government funding for the arts (1977–1978), was subject to police harassment and

denounced in the House of Commons as a pornographer, but kept writing, continuing the Beat legacy of freedom and resistance.

bissett's poetry features phonetic rather than conventional spelling and challenges grammatical precision and linear readings. His work includes lyric, concrete, sound, and narrative poetry. His poetry shows a profound respect for nature and the possibilities of language and juxtaposes magic with everyday life. In spite of an apparent childlike naivete, his poetry touches on ecology, psychology, sociology, economics, satire, philosophy, eroticism, and what it means to be a visionary in contemporary society (Kuropatwa 2002: 124). See for example, the untitled poem:

there is nothing	the wind	there is much
to know, please		to know, please
don't listen to	a cloud	listen to me
me		
	sun	

bissett 1971: 9

In the collection *Nobody Owns Th Earth*, bissett champions alienation in the poem "christ i wudint know normal if i saw it when" with an introductory eight line refrain "were yu normal today did yu screw society" (bissett 1971: 10), and proceeds to conflate and collapse the concepts of normalcy and rebellion in a witty deconstruction:

...did yu stick to business
and still retain an awareness of yr karmic destiny
like were yu dangerous for just a while so everyone
know yu mean business and know where th business lies.
bissett 1971: 11

Similar to Allen Ginsberg's powerful readings, Jay Ruzesky writes about how "A friend described being at a bissett reading in the 1970s: he had the whole room, maybe a hundred people chanting 'The only reason we are here is to protect the earth' for twenty minutes. Even the skeptics were moved" (Ruzesky 2002: 106).

With his poetry, painting, and drawing, his music and performance art, bissett wants to "invoke a state of mind and being that he calls 'ecstatic yunyun,' the linking of the phenomenal and the transcendental world, the vulgar and the celestial, the earthly and the heavenly" (Reid 2002: 13). Throughout his career, bissett has made drawings, paintings, and collages. bissett says of his own work: "the paintings don't represent aneething outside themselves" (Watson 2002: 115). In a recurring graphic image in his work, a male and a female face turn toward each other in an imminent kiss that is both sexual and spiritual, in a dismantling of contradictions that is characteristic of bissett's writing. Bissett is also an active musician. He collaborated with the experimental rock group The Mandan Massacre, was the lyricist and vocalist in the Ontario band, Luddites, and released a CD in 2012 with Pete Dako, "Nothing Will Hurt."

Al Neil is another seminal Canadian artist who demonstrates multi-modal Beat sensibilities. A wonderful pianist, visual artist, and writer whose work subverts genre boundaries, Neil began playing bebop in Vancouver night clubs in the 1940s. He helped to open Vancouver's first experimental jazz club, a venue for many improvisational artists. At the Cellar, the Al Neil trio played with Kenneth Patchen in 1959 on the LP *Kenneth Patchen Reads With Jazz*. After a two-year withdrawal for reflection in the early 60s, he returned to performing music and, in 1965, began to play in a more personal, freer style. As he explains, he recognized that there were other parameters you could work with, such as Alfred Jarry, the French symbolist author who wrote the play *Ubu Roi* and came up with the idea for 'pataphysics, and the dramatist and poet Antonin Artaud, writers

who could take music up to other regions. He did not want to be identified with conceptual artists such as Karlheinz Stockhausen or John Cage, musicians that he claimed put up a system that only works if you have no emotion, but preferred musicians “playing their hearts out.”⁵ Jazz, eastern religion, and heroin shaped his visual art and writing. In the 1960s, Neil moved from improvisational jazz to sound works, soundscapes, and storytelling. He wrote poems, an autobiographical novel *Changes* (1975), which portrays a musician, artist, and junkie over four years, and also wrote short stories. He organized multi-media performances and created mixed-media collages. Neil is not a “famous” or canonical artist, and unfortunately much of his work has been undocumented and lost (Watson 1989). Whether working with music, visual art, performance arts or writing, he has always included collage and cut-up methods within his work, literally “collaging at the piano” (Watson 1989).

Neil’s partner of many years, Carole Itter, is an artist who works with discarded and obsolete urban refuse in assemblages. For an exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery, she created a 30-foot-long stretch of urban detritus with the title “Where the Streets are Paved with Gold: a Tribute to a Canadian Immigrant Neighborhood,” using hundreds of found objects. Itter writes of her assemblage: “These useless wooden articles, remnants of our society’s determined overproduction, are fake gold and question the splendour once promised to newcomers. My ‘street’ is nothing but junk, cast-offs from a country hell-bent on destroying natural resources” (Ley 2003). Itter reflects on the relation between her art and her neighborhood, Strathcona, a formerly poor older district near Vancouver’s downtown where she lived with Canadian immigrants:

In my Vancouver neighbourhood, I have moved around from one old rented house to another, so often that sometimes I think I’ll throw up the next time I look at a gallon of white latex. But what these antiquated generally drafty places have always provided is a history, a mess, a vast collection of other people’s junk, discarded but not tossed out, just left behind. The more dilapidated the outdoor storage sheds the better. Being a consummate collector, I can’t help but regard junk as material filled with possibilities.

Ley 2003

Itter’s ability to turn her concern for local history, for nature and the environment and her critique of corporate economy and gentrification into thought provoking art shows a contemporary Beat sensibility.

In 1969, Allen Ginsberg visited Montreal for a series of performances and readings as part of the poetry series at Sir George Williams University. In the audience was Stephen Morrissey, a poet and teacher who published two literary magazines. He describes how an article in the *Montreal Star* in 1967 changed his life when he read that Ginsberg said, “Scribble down your nakedness, because it is the nakedness of the soul that people are interested in reading.”⁶ Poet and professor Jason Camlot was an undergraduate at the Liberal Arts College in 1994 when critic and Beat scholar Laszlo Gefin brought Allen Ginsberg back to Montreal to give a reading. Ginsberg had the audience read Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” four times in unison, until they were screaming the verses.⁷ Professor Camlot is now a principal investigator in the Spoken Web project, and among his writings is a collection of poetry which he describes as “Lewis Carroll meets Allen Ginsberg.”⁸

Also at that 1994 reading was a 17-year-old, stoned on hashish, who waited three hours in line in order to get a great seat. When Ginsberg got up on stage to prepare his papers just before the reading, Arish Ahmad Khan went up to him and asked him to sign his copy of “Howl”, not realizing that this was not an opportune moment. Ginsberg looked at him and said, “Not now, I’m busy.” Khan blushed and turned around to see an auditorium full of people. Later Ginsberg did sign his book and drew a big flower around the “O” and the “Ah” in the middle. When Khan asked what that was, Ginsberg replied, “It’s an asshole!”⁹ This illustration prefigures the emergence of the contemporary Beat musician, writer and artist King Khan.

Khan had discovered William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* when he was fifteen, after watching a trailer for Cronenberg's 1991 film adaptation. He asked his high school English teacher about the book, and was advised, "Buy it and read it right away." He believes that initial reading of Burroughs's novel caused him to permanently mutate and changed his life. During this period, Khan's father became addicted to cocaine, a habit that Khan explains as an extreme form of midlife crisis. After Khan's mother found a blackened spoon in the family basement and asked her son what it was, his father began disappearing for days on end. "He would come back and confess to me about the world he had fallen into," remembers Khan. "These addicts he was hanging with were all shooting coke, and hiding blood-filled needles in toilet bowls to shoot later when all the drugs ran out." *Naked Lunch* helped Khan understand and cope with his father's chaotic lifestyle, presenting "an underground world of depravity that was as beautiful as it was fucked up."¹⁰ This constellation of depravity, beauty, and the "fucked up" continues to mark Khan's art. As Khan explains, "Reading *Naked Lunch* gave me a completely different view into addiction that made me sympathize with my father's situation and helped me cope. It made a mutation in my mind and left an ooze in my brain that I still go to for inspiration even 30 years later."¹¹

Like many Canadian Beats, Khan dropped out of university after a few years. He started the punk band Maury Povitch 3 in 1994 and soon joined the Spaceshits, a frenetic garage punk band. He collaborated with many bands in Montreal with names worthy of a Burroughs novel, including the Irritations, Black Lips, and Demon's Claws, while starring in short films by director T. T. Rogers such as *Enchiladas de Amore*, *Teenage Tits* and the unfinished *Count Crackula and the Cocaine Kid*. Khan also wrote articles as a music critic for *Vice Magazine* and the *Montreal Mirror*.

The Spaceshits were banned from many Montreal venues because of their sometimes-violent juvenile delinquent audience antics. After a European tour, Khan decided to remain in Germany. He developed a new act with Mark Sultan, originally called BBQ and Blacksnake (Khan's previous stage name) and then The King Khan and BBQ Show. Khan also founded a nine-piece psychedelic soul and R & B band with members from Germany, France and the USA called King Khan and his Sensational Shrines. Just as Burroughs collaborated with many musicians, such as Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones, Ornette Coleman, Laurie Anderson, Psychic TV and the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, among others" (Cox and Warner 2004: 334), Khan collaborates with artists and musicians he loves, including two live gigs with GZA of the Wu-Tang Clan and on several recordings as the Tandoori Knight (with Bloodshot Bill), the king khan experience, and the Black Jaspers, to name just a few.

Towards the end of his life, William Burroughs recorded an audio version of some of his favorite, most outrageous sections of *Naked Lunch*. Hal Willner and James Grauerholtz accompanied the passages with experimental music by artists such as guitarist Bill Frisell, pianist Wayne Horvitz and violist Eyvind Kang before the project was abandoned and forgotten. More than twenty years later, Willner resurrected the tracks and asked Khan to help him complete the project. Khan recruited M Lamar, the creator of the provocative exhibition "Negrothotic: a Manifesto" and The Frowning Clouds, a band of young Australian boys who play sixties garage punk. The album "Let Me Hang You" was released in 2016. According to Khan, Burroughs's "dissident art ... broke all these boundaries of sexuality and narrative, paving the way for the birth of punk ... The writing in *Naked Lunch* is really heavy and perverse at a time when society needs to be reminded that it can explore these nether regions of life and bring back something really beautiful ... it's hilarious!"¹²

After King Khan and the Shrines' fourth album, "Idle No More," music that supports the Canadian Indigenous rights movement, Khan was inspired through a series of dreams to create a deck of tarot cards that celebrated black power while creating the film score for *The Invaders*, a documentary on a revolutionary black power group from Memphis in the late 1960s. He worked with Belfast designer Michael Eaton (visual artist on TV's *Game of Thrones*) to create the Black Power Tarot Deck, under the guidance of the surrealist filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, who supervised the entire project. Exhibited at GOCA, the University of Colorado's Gallery of Contemporary Art, from January 13

to April 1, 2017, the deck features the likenesses of 26 prominent African Americans, including 22 musicians, 2 magicians, one comedian (Richard Pryor) and one activist. As Idris Goodwin observes,

Arish Ahmad Khan (aka King Khan) is reframing a canon of black entertainers, moving them into the timeless realm of archetype ... Jazz musicians like Sun Ra and George Clinton, novelists like Octavia Butler, visual artists like Kara Walker, hip hop artists like Outcasts and even public intellectuals like W.E.B. Dubois have invoked the future, transporting us to otherworldly realms ... Black Power Tarot is consciously subversive. It co-opts the frame of the 15th Century French *Tarot Maresillus* (and inadvertently all subsequent iterations) and infuses it with a culturally specific point of view, one that regards black icons with the same reverence as a High Priestess or Pope.

Goodwin 2016

Burroughs's influence extends to the Canadian multi-media artist John Oswald, best known for his practice of 'plunderphonics': the sampling and radical re-editing of pop-recordings. Inspired by the cut-up methods of William S. Burroughs and James Tenney's 1961 sampling composition *Collage # 1* ("Blue Suede"), Oswald began experimenting with musical cut-ups in the early 1970s and issuing these cut-up compositions on cassette via his own Mystery Tapes label (Cox and Warner 2004: 131). In 1990, his recording *Plunderphonics*, a sound collage made from existing musics whose cover artwork represented a naked Michael Jackson with a woman's body, was censored by the Canadian recording industry. Since then Oswald has exuberantly continued to compose, create visual art, and release legal "plunderphonics."

As an emblem of Canadian Beat practice, we might look at bill bissett's poem "Th Canadian." It starts with a train ride in Manitoba, as the poet first remembers the second centenary of the founding of Halifax, which, as a child, he commemorated with a sign divided into two halves, one side dedicated to the Mi'kmaq Indians before 1749, the other showing the arrival of a British sailor, "telescope to eye, sailing / into harbor." The poet then recalls his "third or forth pome" where he imagined Canadian society as a train:

its peopuls classd, & sub-
classd, according to th rank & station,
that is, what they cud claim they owned, or,
who they cud claim owned them, its
peopuls cut off from each other by
such coach cars & compartments.

The darkness of a tunnel kept each group in their place. His friends criticized this allegory, but now, seeing that some of his best friends are in jail, and recognizing his boyhood despair, the poet sees the allegory has its uses:

seeing, as th
train rolls thru Manitoba, how it
does seem that still peopul are hungry in
this country, sum of my best friends are
hungry, peopul are hungry, they hunger
for food – outside of this train there is
no food – in it there is good & bad food,
food that will just keep yu strong enuff
to keep yr place – food that is
just good enuff yu dream

of better food – and food that is so good
yu become encouraged to accept
that this train is not going to crash
cannot be changed, from within
or without, is God or Allah's very
handiwork, but where is th food
on this train, this one
to show me, Allah in all things,
for then, in ourselves th best food,
we share the bounty
on this Iron Horse.

bissett 1971: 30–31

“We share the bounty”: through artistic experimentation and the cross pollination of artistic practices, an ability to experience the familiar as foreign and new, through works of art that resist conventions that restrict and limit representation, works that challenge the definitions and institutions of canonical art and its ideological investments, through a sensitivity for the historical, material, social, and cultural dimensions of art, through a refusal to be assimilated into a global corporate culture, through a gleeful pleasure in the outrageous and the beautiful, Canadian Beat art is alive and thriving.

Notes

- 1 First edition 1993; revised and published as *Kerouac's Ghost* 1996.
- 2 The term “speak white” was used by Anglophone Canadians to insult Francophones who spoke French, up through the 1960s. See the poem by Michele Lalonde, “Speak white” (1968) (<http://dormirajamais.org/speak-white/>) and *Les Nègres blancs d'Amérique* by Pierre Vallières (1967).
- 3 See Christian Harvey, “Jack Kerouac: a Wandering Canadian?,” in *Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America*. www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/article-650/Jack_Kerouac_-_a_Wandering_Canadian?.html (accessed January 16, 2018).
- 4 “Jack Kerouac, The Art of Fiction No. 41,” interviewed by Ted Berrigan, *The Paris Review*, Issue 43 (Summer 1968). www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4260/the-art-of-fiction-no-41-jack-kerouac (accessed January 16, 2018).
- 5 For these remarks and more, see the excellent film *Al Neil: A Portrait*, David Rimmer, 1979. <http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/archive/763> (accessed January 16, 2018).
- 6 Interview: Stephen Morrissey, Part 1 – April 22, 2013 <http://spokenweb.ca/oral-literary-history/stephen-morrissey-april-22-2013/>. See also Stephen Morrissey, Poetry and the Shadow, www.stephenmorrissey.ca/articles_reviews/SM_Poetry.html (accessed January 16, 2018).
- 7 Interview: George Bowering – October 12, 2012, <http://spokenweb.ca/oral-literary-history/george-bowering-oct-12-2012/> (accessed January 16, 2018).
- 8 www.dcbooks.ca/AttentionAllTypewriters.html (accessed January 16, 2018).
- 9 Private communication, May 24, 2017.
- 10 “‘Naked Lunch’ Gets the King Khan Treatment,” *bandcamp daily*, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/2016/07/15/king-khan-burroughs-interview/> (accessed January 16, 2018).
- 11 www.nytimes.com/2016/05/24/arts/music/william-s-burroughs-naked-lunch-let-me-hang-you.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&_r=0 (accessed January 16, 2018).
- 12 Joe Coscarelli, “The Dirtiest Parts of ‘Naked Lunch,’ for your Record Collection,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/05/24/arts/music/william-s-burroughs-naked-lunch-let-me-hang-you.html (accessed January 16, 2018).

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