

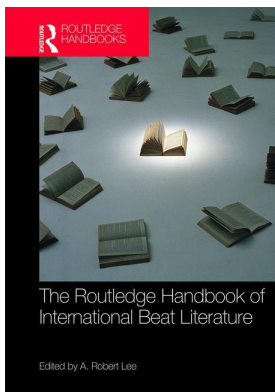
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## **The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature**

A. Robert Lee

### **Beat Australia**

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## 5

# BEAT AUSTRALIA

## Hydra to Balmain

*Nicholas Birns*

### Origins—Hydra and the Hinterland

The poetic “Generation of 68” represented the belated arrival of not just the Beat movement but modernism and Bohemianism themselves to Australian shores. Australia in the 1960s had a notably conservative literary reputation, especially in poetry, where the neo-Augustan Formalism of A. D. Hope held sway. This all changed with the Generation of 68, which made American Beat styles and modes common artistic parlance in Australia. If Australian bohemianism had its headquarters in the Sydney suburb of Balmain beginning in the early 1970s, its earliest moments can be said to have occurred in two very different contexts.

One founding moment occurred in a place at once far away but flashy: the Greek island of Hydra. The expatriate circle centered around the Greek island of Hydra was an early beacon of anti-conformist revolt, with George Johnston, Charmian Clift, and their son Martin combining with Leonard Cohen and other prominent international guests to foment an intoxicating brew of literary innovation.<sup>1</sup> Literary life on Hydra, presided over by George Johnston and Charmian Clift as honorary “parents” of an assortment of younger bohemians, was a forum for Australian writers to flourish in an expatriate environment. But Hydra also represented a liminal space where dissident and international cosmopolitan writers from many lands could flourish. By then, Cohen had (in 1956) met Kerouac, and thought not a formal member of the Beat movement he brought to Hydra the anti-establishment fervor and literary nonconformism that he and Kerouac shared. Allen Ginsberg also stayed with Cohen on Hydra, presumably also meeting Johnston and Clift.

Johnston and Clift expressed their anti-establishment tendencies very differently; Johnston subverted the central myth of modern Australian national identity, the heroism of the two world wars. In *My Brother Jack*, David Meredith, the narrator, has a brother Jack, more conformist and conventionally successful than he is. David suffers from the residual disorientation of his father’s emotional shock after serving in Gallipoli, where Australians fought Ottoman troops in the signature Australian experience of the First World War. That Hydra was, like Gallipoli, in the Aegean Sea, and that both places resonated with the classical literary heritage—especially that of the Trojan War—tied Johnston’s bohemian life and his military themes together. These ties enabled his presence on Hydra to not just be a touristic one of an expatriate author seeking a beautiful site with cheap rent, but a sense that what was outside conventional national space was also that which was at the primal ground of the narrative tradition Johnston inherited.

Clift’s work confronted Hydra more directly in her 1959 autobiographical travelogue, *Peel Me A Lotus*. Her previous book, *Mermaids Singing*, had concerned the Johnstons’ earlier sojourn on the

Aegean island of Kalymnos; in *Peel Me A Lotus* Cliff concentrated on the Johnstons' anomalous status on Hydra—they were not only the first expatriate writers but the first English speakers of any sort on the island—and the daily experience of living a family life in such an exotic place. Johnston and Cliff were not just pleasure-seeking tourists: even as they were finding refuge and succor on Hydra, Greek migrants were seeking out Australia by the thousands, and the writers' expatriation on Hydra was one end of a complex demographic and cultural pulley connecting Australia and Greece. Robyn Ravlich describes a newsreel of the Johnstons on Hydra that “depicted an Australian family living on an exotic island elsewhere, unconstrained by convention and centered on writing. I was captivated by Charmian's beauty and by barefoot child Martin prancing about the village whilst spouting poetry in Greek.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the liberation Hydra offered Johnston and Cliff from conventional literary space was ironically dependent on a certain colonial derogation of the Greek-speaking natives on the island. This also occurred with Paul Bowles's residency in Morocco. In both, a sense of Anglophone privilege that in both cases could not be dispelled by the expatriate writer's undoubted political radicalism and solidarity with the oppressed, even though in Greece Johnston and Cliff were champions of Greek democracy against the threat and later the reality of military dictatorship. There was a strain of self-satire or self-castigation in Cliff's and Johnston's depiction of themselves on Hydra that can also be seen in such later Beat-influenced Australian poets as Michael Dransfeld and John Forbes.

In other words, Cliff and Johnston perceived themselves as anomalies whose way of life, if valued and celebrated, could not be wholly explained or defended. Yet it was out of this feeling of exile and anomaly that Johnston and Cliff constructed their own literary community that included Cohen and his muse Marianne Ihlen—after whom he wrote the famous song “So Long, Marianne”—as if to found a new, experimental, syncretic community, constellated around art, estrangement, and desire. If there were excesses of sex, smoking, alcohol, and drugs, there was also consistent, dedicated creativity, as both Johnston and Cliff were diligent, disciplined, and productive writers. And indeed Hydra, though its expatriate scene was full of people who had made their individual journeys there, was collective: it was about a group of people living in the Beat spirit of a joint literary lifestyle—with a sense of both an individual literary mission and a shared stake in standing outside the accepted literary scenes and offending the conventions of their nations. Hydra was a scene, larger than any one individual. A cauldron of creative, transnational dissident energy was cognate with and co-participated in the Beat spirit. This was true even if Hydra was itself hardly a ‘colony’ of the Beats.

Johnston later wrote *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969), a sequel to *My Brother Jack*, in which David Meredith, the Johnston-like narrator of the previous book, becomes the main character. Written over a period of time when Charmian Cliff died and Johnston himself suffered from tuberculosis of the lung and the effects of his heavy drinking, *Clean Straw for Nothing* depicts life on a clear analogue of Hydra, but, despite celebrating the “good-natured exuberance of the Greek way of life” (295) does not see it as salvific or providing a definitive solution for existential problems. The title, *Clean Straw for Nothing*, alludes to what you get in a pub if you do not want to pay: it is both a sidewise notation of Johnston's own drinking habit and a recognition that not only does no one get what one pays for, but that one does not always get what one wants. The “fatal beauty” (472) of Greece, intertwined with the brilliant but independent beauty Cressida Morley, is an arena for the evolution of David Meredith's consciousness, but not a destination for his soul.<sup>3</sup>

Johnston and Cliff's son, Martin (1947–1990), was present on Hydra as a teenager, and returned in the mid-1970s to the Greek islands with his then-companion, the novelist Nadia Wheatley, as if to try to extend the Hydra scene for a second generation, but it proved less productive, though Wheatley did write a significant literary biography of Cliff. Martin Johnston, though, not only was a member in good standing of the generation of 68 and thus provided a direct pipeline from, to use the conceit of our title, Hydra to Balmain; he also, given his young age on Hydra, managed to be far more “Greek”

than his parents. Thus when the younger Johnston returned to Australia as an adult he was as Greek as Australian, and in himself epitomized the topical radicalism, poetic experimentation, and evasion of strict national identity of the bohemian expatriate writer. Yet Martin Johnston eventually became a part of the Sydney poetry scene, before dying far too early at forty-three. Despite the hospitality it offered for expatriates, Hydra was not a place for intellectuals to be domiciled; they remained unsettled, itinerant, always on the road.

The other founding moment of Beat influence in Australian literature could not be more different from the glamorous expatriate denizens of Hydra. An introverted young man, in the suburban hinterland of Melbourne, of largely Irish background, aspiring to be a Roman Catholic priest, reads Kerouac and finds his life changed. Gerald Murnane, born in 1939, has said that when he was twenty-one—which would place this time in 1960—he would try to live what he thought was the life Jack Kerouac would have lived. Murnane went on to say that Kerouac was his “missing part.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike Johnston and Clift, whose expatriation defined them as Australian writers Murnane has never left Australia, and has lived most of his life within the Australian state of Victoria. Unlike Kerouac, he lived a conventional suburban life; never recorded as using drugs, drinking or smoking excessively, or listening to jazz, he married a woman he loved deeply and had three sons. His writing is not obviously rebellious or iconoclastic, and if there is any subversion it is deeply interior: both in the sense of residing on subjectivity, being in the mind of the soul and participating in the elusive interiority of the Australian landscape. Nonetheless Kerouac is indeed key to Murnane. Without the Kerouac influence, one might see Murnane as a literary snob, a Nabokovian player of games and seeking after a purely aesthetic, a gnomic riddler from down under.

The Kerouacian strain in Murnane is the Australian writer’s Eros. This is true in the more specific sense of the erotic yearnings of Murnane’s chief characters—particularly that of Adrian Sherd in Murnane’s early Bildungsroman *A Lifetime on Clouds* (1976). This character is very closely modelled on the young Murnane just before he discovered Kerouac. Yet Murnane’s depiction of Sherd also pertains to the wider sense of a visionary yearning, a desire to know the unknowable, to participate in a numinous, if religiously heterodox, plenum. *On the Road*, with its lengthy descriptions of traveling across America, also gave Murnane a cognitive way into the American landscape, which, in *The Plains* (1982) and the short story collection *Velvet Waters* (1990), he explores with literary precision and great originality. This is so even though Murnane never went “on the road” like Kerouac did, and certainly did not do so in North America, which he never visited. Parts one and three of *On the Road*, featuring Sal Paradise’s bus trips from and to Denver, are particularly influential on Murnane, as *The Plains* features lengthy references to Nebraska and the Platte River, which is mentioned several times in Kerouac’s novel. Murnane’s Beat influence is internal, subjective, and so idiosyncratic as to be almost private.

As a participant in the global Beat community, Murnane is the reverse, or perhaps better the obverse, of the denizens of Hydra. The arch literary knowingness and the sense of the fragility of a bohemian community that were the downside of Hydra’s exhilarating mixture and imaginative freedom are absent in Murnane, replaced by an abstract, lyrical subjectivity that swerves away from community and comes close to solipsism, saved from this only by the way Murnane, as author, invites the reader into literary community to him. If the Hydra writers felt the Beat influence as a complement to their forging of a dissident middle style out of the mid-century mainstream consensus, Murnane took Beat visionary impulses and forged them into what might be termed a wayward, if intense, Kerouacian high style.

Murnane positioned Kerouac as a harbinger of sexual, affective, and cognitive liberation. For all the differences between Johnston and Clift on the one hand and Murnane on the other, therefore, their prose shared certain traits also found in the works of the Beats: a casualness, a directness even with difficult or challenging subjects, and above all a feeling authenticity, of being real both in thought and action, even if that real sometimes necessarily remains only an ideal.

## The Bohemian Revolt in Australia

Authenticity melded early on with a certain quality of decency and unpretension latent in discourses of the Australian character. One of the aspects of the Beat movement that had particular resonance in Australia is that its affect was rural as well as urban: Charles Buckminster (1951–1972), a Beat-influenced poet who died absurdly young at twenty-one, perceived that “the forest is all-consuming /light falls through gumtips.”<sup>5</sup> Kerouac’s journeys across the land, Gary Snyder’s closely observed and intimate rapport with nature, resonated in an Australia whose erotic eccentrics and mavericks had been as much of rural as of urban provenance. The Beats inhabited urban bohemian space. But they were not entirely confined to it. They thus could intertwine with Australian cultural images of a bush vernacular resisting the imposition of well-behaved, colonial norms. Indeed, many of the traits of the Beat movement—informality, authenticity, experimentation, and what A. Robert Lee terms a sense that “conformity” was a citadel waiting to be stormed, were those of Australian literary nationalism.<sup>6</sup>

This was especially so in its two nineteenth-century golden ages, the 1850s and the 1890s, in which at first the discovery of gold and then the assertion of Australian national identity leading up to Federation in 1901 led to a rousing and rebellious literary awareness. Though these movements, unlike the Beats, were sexually and behaviorally buttoned-up, the later Australian literary masculinity of Norman Lindsay and the *Vision* group put countercultural, if male, sexual behavior at the forefront of its expressive agenda, and both Sydney and Melbourne had flourishing Bohemian scenes in the 1920s. But by the time the Beat writers emerged in the mid-1950s, this had all changed. Australian culture was dominated by conservative gatekeepers, from A. D. Hope, who promoted a return to eighteenth-century neoclassical conventions, to traditionalist Roman Catholics like James McAuley and Vincent Buckley, who resisted modernism’s experimental and rebellious aspects. Avowedly Communist writers, such as Frank Hardy and Dorothy Hewett, were deeply on the political margins in a paranoid Australia governed by a decades-long right-wing administration, largely under Sir Robert Menzies.

The Ern Malley hoax of the mid-1940s, in which McAuley and a collaborator, Harold Stewart, had fooled the editor Max Harris into believing the bizarre poems of a persona concocted by them were in fact the work of a homegrown Australian modernist, seemed to put a seal on Australian cultural conservatism. Although individual bohemian figures stood out against this decorous, traditionalist background—Harry Hooton (1908–1961) was a bohemian anarchist who had connections to American anti-establishment figures such as Tuli Kupferberg—they were few.

The individual gatekeeper role of figures such as Hope and McAuley was matched by even more effective gatekeeping in the form of government censorship. Although Australian authorities claimed they did not censor in the conventional sense, as only books already published were censored, a censorship regime did indeed exist between the 1930s and the 1970s, one which, according to Nicole Moore, prohibited “material freely available in the rest of the world.”<sup>7</sup> Moore has remarked, that, though stereotypes of Australian censorship are far more excessive than those of other advanced nations, there was nonetheless a “severity” in Australian censorship that prompted comparisons to “Catholic Spain and Apartheid South Africa,” and that squelched not only James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence but also George Orwell and Australian leftists such as the aforementioned Hardy.<sup>8</sup>

This combination of both overt and tacit gatekeeping means that the Beat writers did not fully resonate in the Australian literary community when they emerged in America in the mid-1950s; this is not to say that news itself of the Beat movement did not travel. Australian novelty pop songs of the late 1960s, such as Barry Crocker’s “Beatnik Baby” and John Burls and Terry Bissaker’s “The Little Beat Bongoes,” popularized the idea of the Beats, although these saw Beat style as fun, cheery, and hedonistic, and lacked the note of both visionary quest and social dissidence in the American writer’s work: also sex in them remained both heteronormative and safe.<sup>9</sup> Australian media space accommodated popularized image of the ‘beatnik’ propagated by international media, but, as the above examples show, perhaps incompletely understood them, seeing the message as one of more

fun or gratification than a deeper subversion. Nonetheless this shallow influence did change some Australian lives, of women as well as men. A young Sydney woman, Heather Kennedy, was quoted in 1959 as saying, “Being beat consists of more than a passion for jazz and unusual clothes—it’s a way of life.” Kennedy went on to be a journalist who chronicled the early years of the feminist revolution in Australia. Other women, such as the expatriate visionary artist and dancer Vali Myers (1930–2003), who made the Italian island of Positano her own mini-Hydra, were engaged in their creative self-expression by the heterodox and freewheeling aura of Beat influences.

Moreover, the literary establishment was implacably closed to most American influences, let alone Beat ones, and that changed only with the Generation of 68. Of course, this generation did not just spring into existence full-blown in 1968; it had been gathering steam and channeling experience for several years before, even while the Australian establishment seemed to doze on in neo-classicist or neo-Catholic slumber. John Tranter, perhaps the most prominent poet to have emerged out of the Generation of 68, states that he failed “first-year English” at the University of Sydney “because I insisted on reading *The Dharma Bums* and *On the Road* instead of *The Mill on the Floss*. The teachers were afflicted with the delusion that you began the history of English Literature with old stuff, not with new stuff. That is how history worked, to them. They were all losers.”<sup>10</sup> This delay in the sanctioned arrival of Beat influences meant that the generation of 68, as it assumed poetic voice, felt the impact of many American styles all at once that in their home country were more loosely associated: the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, hippiedom, incipient feminism, antiracism. One of the ways in which the Beats most influenced the generation of 68 is in the very idea of a group based on age: as Fiona Scotney asserts, the Beats differed in aesthetics among themselves as did the generation of 68, but what they had in common was a “shared generational experience.”<sup>11</sup> Beat aesthetics challenged an authoritarian tradition. The difference in Australia was that this tradition was largely that of another country, England, and so the influence of the Beat writers became enrolled in an effective if belated, anti-colonialism, a resistance to what A. A. Phillips termed the Australian “cultural cringe,” a sense that Australian art must be inferior to Europe’s simply because it was Australian.<sup>12</sup>

### Dissidence and Dinginess in Balmain

Paradoxically, though, the agent of this decolonizing prompt was itself foreign: American. Frank Moorhouse’s 1972 short story, “The Americans, Baby,” captures this dual sense of resentment and emulation towards the great colossus across the Pacific.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the Australians most sympathetic to the American Beat writers were those who opposed American intervention in Vietnam. This did not present conceptual problems, as certainly Allen Ginsberg made clear his leftist political impulses. But it did present a dilemma: how to oppose US policy while welcoming American dissident cultural influence? The combined effect of all this was to produce a 1970s Australian nationalism at once anti-colonial yet far more permissive of eccentricity and idiosyncrasy than earlier nationalisms had been.

Michael Dransfield (1948–1973) was the embodiment of this new Australian literary style; he was the prince of the Australian 1960s. Dransfield’s short life and his association with drug use and social experimentation—his most famous line, from “Fix,” is “Once you become a drug addict, you will never want to become anything else”—has led him to be seen as the *poète maudit* of his era, laden with a countercultural charisma that attracted in its short fluorescence an admiring throng.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as Livio Dobrez’s critical work and Patricia Dobrez’s 1999 biography have shown, Dransfield was a complex individual whose life and work juxtaposed contradictions of style, sexuality, and stance not necessarily reconcilable in the long term.<sup>15</sup> Dransfield did not necessarily seek to romanticize the nonconformist line.

The key word in the “drug addict” line quoted above is “become”: not that being a drug addict is the final stage of orgiastic fulfillment, but that it is a developmental cul-de-sac. After addiction, no more becoming, no generation, physical or spiritual. Dransfield understood both the exhilarations

and costs of life on the edge, and this percipience made him extraordinarily generous to fellow poets, including Peter Kocan, a young Tasmanian, in jail for trying to assassinate the left-wing politician Arthur Calwell. Dransfield encouraged Kocan's work with compassion and discernment.<sup>16</sup> But Dransfield was not a mindless encourager of rebellion and unconventionality. Dransfield's attitude is as much elegy as eulogy, lament as dithyramb. Moreover, Dransfield's poems are lyrical and center around a subjective "I" that is very different from what Tony Trigilio describes as Ginsberg's "neoromantic humanism as a form of spiritual pastiche," as Dransfield's lyrics emanated from a much more organized, un-ironic subjectivity.<sup>17</sup> In place of Ginsbergian pastiche, though, Dransfield substitutes guilt that suffuses his entire subject-position, unease about the very presence about the land on which he writes.

Though famous for his poems about drugs, Dransfield's most enduring achievement may be his Courland Penders poems, in which Dransfield fantasized himself as owner of a landed estate in the Australian bush with European and aristocratic associations—"Courland" referring to the Baltic duchy. This Cavalier nostalgia does not jive with his sixties liberationism and yet it joins it at a deeper level as a protest against industrial society. But as John Kinsella points out, the very audacity and preposterousness of Dransfield's landed, ensconced Courland Penders persona is also a way to foreground how all white Australians' presence on the land is inauthentic. Though the Beat influence confirmed certain dissident tendencies within white Australia, it also helped Australians question racial priorities, as the Beat embrace of an African American aesthetic and, particularly, Ginsberg's interest in Asian religion and in indigenous cultures throughout the world undermined the country's Eurocentric cultural carapace.

In general, if in the Australian reception of the Beats there is an inevitably second-hand quality, a self-proclamation of writers as liberated about ten years or so after American writers had performed similar rhetoric, there is also a strain of self-criticism or self-knowledge that somehow does not yet totally ruin or rebuke the overall mood of celebration.

The Sydney neighborhood of Balmain was the epicenter of the Australian Beat influence. Many of the 68 poets (Robert Adamson, Tranter, Forbes, Viidikas, Nigel Roberts) lived in Balmain—close to central Sydney, but separated from major transportation links by water—whose working-class ambience made it affordable for a very different bohemian class now coming in. In addition, public readings were held in Balmain that served to propagate the values and practice of the new poetry. The Balmain lifestyle, like the Beat milieu it emulated, was remarkable for its combination of casual deportment, neighborhood and writerly camaraderie, and an aesthetic that insisted on a radically personal and transgressively transcendent purpose for writing. Michael Wilding, in a 2015 article, remembered, "The Balmain readings were inspired by the Beats and the Liverpool poets. They had begun while I was still in England, but on my return I enthusiastically joined with Nigel Roberts, Moorhouse and others in helping organize them. Organizing things like that was all very libertarian and alternative."<sup>18</sup> Balmain was at once a neighborhood, a coterie, a defining aesthetic, and a way of life. It was the vital node of the Australian Beat and counterculture experience. This did not mean all the Balmain poets were acolytes or epigones of Ginsberg: John Forbes, for one, wrote in a very different style—more lyric and ironic. Yet even Forbes exalted the Beat manner of dress and general conduct.

But Sydney had no monopoly on Beat-inspired activity. In Melbourne, Betty Burstall, founder of Melbourne's La Mama Theater, held public poetry readings in the Beat mode there. Ken Taylor, a poet already in his late thirties, became the center of the La Mama poetry scene, and introduced younger writers to poets such as Ginsberg. During all this, expatriate such as Richard Neville (1941–2016) made sure Australians were in contact with the latest countercultural trends worldwide, and introduced an Australian element into this worldwide revolt. The journal Neville edited both in Australia and London, *Oz*, not only popularized the association of Australia with the land of Oz as seen in books and movies, but made expatriate hippie Australia as transnational dissident space, where London became a kind of Hydra writ large. Other Australian writers, such

as Stephen Skinner (1948–) and Nevill Drury (1947–2013), pushed this countercultural exploration more into the realm of magic and the occult. John Forbes’s poem “Europe: a Guide for Ken Searle” shows this humorous, self-puncturing, but dedicated exploration of a world beyond Australia:

Doing their physical jerks,  
a quiet pride permeates the Swedes.  
Denmark is neither vivid nor abrupt  
& Belgians have a ringside seat  
to observe the behaviour of the Dutch.  
The French invented finesse but it’s  
their self-regard that intrigues us.<sup>19</sup>

It was this tie-dyed cosmopolitanism that gave the poets of the generation of 68 a sense of an audience beyond those who attended their readings in Balmain or at La Mama.

Though experimental in form and language, these poets were not opaque or deliberately befuddling the modernist sense: in general, their audience could understand what they were saying even if some there did not always find this content palatable. One of the clearest examples of this accessibility is a poem written about the Balmain neighborhood by Vicki Viidikas (1948–1998):

A hermit dog lives here, in a burnt-out boiler turning orange. He stays inside all day – I’ve seen his eyes glint in the dark, he is huge and black and solemn...Dried weed hangs from a bleached stick, like a dead rat swinging.<sup>20</sup>

But, while embracing the ordinariness of urban life, Viidikas also demanded an overhaul of consciousness, a dislocation of the bourgeois ego, an affirmation of cosmic love and plenitude:

And disobeyed time, wanting a revolution in spirit, the boundaries of the self broken down  
and flooded with joy<sup>21</sup>

*Condition Red* (1973), Viidikas’s first book, combined these strands of the ordinary and the ecstatic in pointing out the often dingy and degraded conditions in which women lived in this era, yet seeking their transmutation and exaltation, often through anger. Yet in Viidikas, as in many of her generation, there is an ironic awareness of both the derivative nature of her aesthetic and the limits of a no-holds-barred nonconformist lifestyle. “So where have the readings left us?” she asks in the prose poem “Listening Backwards.” “From graffiti bandits to mythologized fishing ports in America.”<sup>22</sup> Even addiction—a malady to which Viidikas—who after a stint in Balmain moved to the seedier neighborhood of Kings Cross—more and more succumbed, is seen as not providing the private ecstasies it promised, as in addiction “anything...anything is enough if made public.” Viidikas’s poems seemed to be asking if a bohemian community is sustainable, if Balmain would prove any more lasting than Hydra.

Michael Wilding’s satiric novel, *Living Together* (1974) examines this tense relationship between intellect and instinct:

800K ME. Linear B. Crack me crack me crack me. The dead sea scrolls. Scroll sea. LINESR B  
SUCK ME DRINK ME EAT ME PARTAKE OF MY BODY FUCK ME FUCK ME  
FUCK ME<sup>23</sup>

With over forty occurrences of the word “fuck” in the book, Wilding makes clear that he is a member in good standing of a Beat-insured bohemia no longer fearing the censor’s hand. Yet



the book also mocks its bohemian protagonists, seeing them as empty and fatuous as much as heroic or Promethean. This disillusionment-within-participation in bohemian life-ways is seen in Viidikas's "Loaded Heart," a poem that momentarily depicts personas of a rough and often unsatisfying Bohemia:

Oh boy Ken the smiling mountain is playing his guitar / The beautiful trembling Irene is taking another pill<sup>24</sup>

That these lines were written by the same poet who elsewhere spoke of "blue dragonflies singing in 'clouds of transparent light'" shows Viidikas's range of attentiveness to experiential states apprehended spontaneously.<sup>25</sup> Beneath her free-wheeling, jaunty, confessional ballads is a demand for a more just society and an unhindered sense of imaginative and moral possibility. Her loss first to addiction and then to early death in 1998 cut off the productivity of the Australian poet who arguably most incarnated the honest heedlessness of Kerouac and Ginsberg.

### The Age of Ginsberg and Whitlam

By the time Viidikas published *Condition Red*, though Kerouac was dead, Ginsberg was very much alive, and had indeed visited Australia. In 1972, the director of Adelaide Writers Week, Louis van Eysen, invited Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti to be featured readers. That Adelaide, a staid, British influenced city known as "the City of Churches," would be the place to sponsor the Beat poets shows how thoroughly and seismically Australian culture had changed in a few years. But Ginsberg desired to see more of Australia than Adelaide. Ginsberg was keen to explore the outback and to meet Aboriginal writers and artists with whom he made contact through Adelaide university connections. Ginsberg included "Aboriginal songmen" in his poetry readings, and "learned a little about their chanting forms."<sup>26</sup> Ginsberg was depressed by the conditions of Indigenous Australians, seeing their position as even more "dreadful" than that of Native Americans. But he enjoyed their exuberance and creativity, describing them as "big fat old baby eyed happy giggly old friends, down in Adelaide a couple of weeks, paint bodies and dance like kangaroos with cracks of big bottoms shown forth as makeshift bathing suits are thumbed down for comfort dancing."<sup>27</sup> Although this description contains more than a bit of Orientalism, and although Ginsberg can be accused of collaborating with Australian Indigenous people more or less as he collaborated with Asian artists and performers when in Asia, Ginsberg was an undeniable advocate for Indigenous rights at a time when Aboriginal citizenship of Australia was only recent (granted in 1967) and any serious discussion of Aboriginal land rights still a blip on the horizon. Notably, Ginsberg's most visible Aboriginal collaborator, the Yolngu painter and composer Wandjuk Marika, went on to co-found and subsequently chair the Aboriginal Arts Board. Ginsberg's outreach to Indigenous Australians made the Australian presence of the Beat movement more than a white man's dissidence. Moreover, though Indigenous poets did not partially imitate or emulate Ginsberg, the general style of the Beats—casual, personal, socially minded but not polemical—proved empowering for Indigenous writers.

Ginsberg disappointed some Australian intellectuals. Robert Adamson had looked forward to meeting Ginsberg because (somewhat absurdly) he wanted to discuss the American poet W. S. Merwin with him, and was nonplussed when Ginsberg responded to his entreaties by writing down Robert Duncan's mailing address and giving it to Adamson, stating that, he, Ginsberg, was not really into all that intellectual stuff. Adamson subsequently decided Bob Dylan was far more his inspiration as a poet than was Ginsberg.<sup>28</sup> But some Australian writers, like the Melbourne poet Adrian Rawlins, fashioned themselves as a homegrown Beats. Rawlins, described by an admirer as "poet, performer, organiser, promoter, raconteur, ratbag, stirrer, hipster," was not a great creative talent, but he opened new possibilities.<sup>29</sup>

On his trip north, Ginsberg was accompanied by the partner of the young Pam Brown, eventually one of Australia's leading poets, then just beginning her career. Brown's first book, *Sureblock* (1972), begins by asking:

Who is this guy  
who walks into the house  
with an immediate impression  
of hermann hesse and advice  
on how to cook the rice?<sup>30</sup>

If the character pictured is a Beat interloper, than the insouciance and offhandedness of Brown's persona is also immersed in a Beat sensibility. The poem insists on a counter-sensibility to "android news reports and documentaries." It desires to break out of the "sureblocked," mentally static, condition fostered by conventional attitudes. One of the effects of the delayed "official" arrival of Beat influences on Australian shores was that they thus dovetailed with the emergence of 1970s feminism. Pam Brown describe the mood in this era:

It was an era, evolving from the protest movement against conscription and the Vietnam war, of long-haired pacifist hippies and the widespread use of marijuana and other "mind-expanding" drugs that engendered a profusion of rebellious and high-spirited creativity. Counter cultural happenings like Jumping Sunday, a weekly celebratory afternoon in Centennial Park, Martin Sharp's Yellow House, and PACT theatre flourished. There was the advent of underground printing presses, the UBU group's experimental films, psychedelic music and light shows, of sexual freedom, and women's liberation.<sup>31</sup>

Though writers such as Viidikas, Brown, and Ravlich (1949–) often faced the exclusionary machismo that characterized this generation of Australian poets as it, differently, had characterized its predecessors, they were major participants in the movement from the beginning. Thus Ginsberg's sojourn in Adelaide and the Northern Territory was in general a signal of a changing Australia where maverick cultural currents could now flourish.

In 1972, these maverick cultural currents converged with the election of a Labor government under Gough Whitlam. Whitlam withdrew Australian troops from Vietnam and presided over a left-nationalist cultural revival, not only giving generous funding to the arts but encouraging a distinctively Australian self-expression that did not just try to emulate European precedents. Though, for instance, the Balmain scene was not primarily political in its activities, certainly there was a sympathy of mood between the countercultural activity there and the Whitlam government. When Whitlam fell in 1975 (an occurrence for which some Australian intellectuals blamed the US, particularly the CIA) it seemed a token for the waning of a brief and belated Australian version of "the sixties." Yet, even though the Whitlam moment in Australia was brief, it launched an entire way of being and acting for the Australian intellectual, and the literary careers which had begun in this era were those that dominated Australian culture for the rest of the century and beyond.

John Tranter (1943–) was the galvanizer of the generation of 68. Indeed, he can be credited with the very concept, produced by his anthology *The New Australian Poetry* (1979). David McCooey argues that the generation of 68 might as well be called the "generation of 79"—the year Tranter's anthology was published.<sup>32</sup> By then, what Tranter termed the "breeding-ground for ideas thought, and experiment," characteristic of the readings in Balmain, La Mama, and elsewhere, was ready for the mainstream. Ken Bolton (1949–) has been characterized by Tranter as a writer of "loose discursive poems that reflect on life and art in a quirky way." Bolton is influenced by jazz, which in "Live at Birdland" is interrogated in a mock-joking fashion:

**not liking**

**John Coltrane**

is a silly idea,  
but My Favourite Things  
has always irritated me  
and I wait for  
it to end,  
clean my desk,  
move around the room  
making slightly 'wrong' decisions.<sup>33</sup>

If Bolton's lines are jazzy in their syncopation, some Australian poets took the emphasis on sound much further. Richard Kelly Tipping (1949–), made the saying of his poems part of their content:

First, to begin, let me say  
almost nothing,  
leaving the poems alone,  
shooting from the hip, recorded  
this way, rhythms  
from my own breathings...<sup>34</sup>

Tipping was active as a professor of communication and conceptual artist for many decades: an experimental writer by no means bound to words alone as medium. Robyn Ravlich worked as an innovative ABC radio producer for many years. Like Viidikas—who she knew in Balmain, and was sometimes confused with as two women bearing ethnic surnames with double initials—she faced machismo on the experimental poetry scenes, especially at readings, but persisted to become one of the emblematic poets of her generation. In 2003, Ravlich commissioned the radio feature *Ferlinghetti: San Francisco Locations* from Jim McKee in collaboration with Lawrence Ferlinghetti and his dramatist friend Eric Boursfeld for *The Listening Room*, the innovative ABC program for which she worked.

Ravlich's poems are full of sound effects that ramify and multiply their sense, as is seen in "Elegy for Judy Garland."

The theatre trunks  
should leave traces  
of where you were born  
turning plump  
with rouge & shining cheeks  
in the old Princess Theatre  
I can't hope  
to know you  
*then to hell with it*<sup>35</sup>

The unrhymed tercets and their sonic pauses are phrased as what might be ordinary utterance, pointed but clear, making sure its audience hears the words and feels their impact, their force

I think of you often  
wondering if you know I'm  
crippled on this broken ground

The “O” vowel moves through these lines, always a short “o”, never obtrusive, but conducting a kind of tunnel of sound from line to line. Ravlich has described her radio work as “skywriting” or “writing on air.”<sup>36</sup> Even though these particular poems precede her radio work, her poetry’s tone has an analogous sense of pure sound receiving temporary embodiment. The poem’s dramatic contrast of Garland as dead elevated American icon, received by a self-deprecating Australian admirer—also rings up the tacit contrast of Garland’s spectacle-oriented filmic performance versus the concrete sound of Ravlich, which prizes honesty more than enhancement. There is a certain suspicion of words in Ravlich’s work. In “To Wait upon Him Hand and Foot yet Always Tell Him No” the line, “Your poems amplify/the circuits of your power,” embodies both tribute and sarcasm, bearing in mind that for a radio producer “amplify” and “circuits” are terms of art.<sup>37</sup>

If Tipping and Ravlich display a Beat skepticism about conventional rhetoric, it was Tranter, with his sense of what McCooey terms the “vernacular formalesque,” who exhibited most the Beat flair for the grand gesture.<sup>38</sup> In May of 1979, Tranter visited New York and heard a rhyming contest at the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s between Kenneth Koch and Ginsberg, “Koch’s quick wit and ample rhymes easily defeated Allen Ginsberg’s slower wit and goofy good nature; the winner was really the Saint Mark’s audience, who had the time of their lives, though both poets evidently had a wonderful time as well.”<sup>39</sup> In his account of the event Tranter makes clear his own preference for Koch over Ginsberg as a muse. Yet the very premise of the event could not have been conceivable without the Beats. A wider, more transnational, more capacious, less uptight Australian sensibility was evidenced as much in Peter Carey’s portrait, in *Bliss* (1981), of Honey Barbara—a bountiful countryside nymph who could be out of a Leonard Cohen song and who is the antithesis of the soulless skyscrapers of New York City—as in Tranter’s own pilgrimage to the East Village to hear Ginsberg in person. Indeed, after dropping out and living on a hippie commune, in the late 1970s and early 1980s Carey himself moved to New York. In this light, dropping out seemed a prelude to reaching out; the Beat and hippie postures were a prelude to a vigorous Australian global presence in the late twentieth century.

### The Australian Sixties Legacy

In 1999, Bruce Russell (1943–), a Western Australian writer who had come to fiction only in his fifties, published *The Chelsea Manifesto* (1999). In this novel, Francis, an aging hippie-Beatnik-counterculture male, is upbraided by his daughter Piaf for belonging to a generation full of egotistical, self-centered males such as Bob Dylan, Jack Kerouac, and Leonard Cohen, finally telling them, and her father, to “PISS OFF!”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in his poetic memoir, *Unposted: Autumn Leaves* (2016), Stephen Oliver, a poet who has oscillated between Australia and New Zealand and was friends with Viidikas and other figures on the Balmain scene, depicts the Sixties-generation poet as an egomaniacal sexual opportunist:

let me take you down to the river  
between your thighs  
babe, let my love flow  
& do you see stars in your eyes (ha)  
still?  
(Yeah) so don’t go  
help me up by your love handles  
'cause love is in the air  
& cous cous on the menu  
so I said to Nicole  
'Stay!' don’t go (for the day)  
oh, what a night  
but by then she had split.

These two self-mockeries participated in a general spirit of repudiation of the 1960s at the millennium, such that both Patricia Dobrez's Dransfield biography and John Kinsella's edition of Dransfield earned too-limited acclaim. As the global laurels of London and New York loomed, Australian writers more and more turned to accepted cultural vehicles such as the historical novel. But there were countercurrents. Although Viidikas was an Estonian-Australian, she did not write 'as' a migrant poet: others, though, such as Ania Walwicz and Komninos Zervos, wrote caustic, subversive, experimental poetry that combined countercultural origins with a sense of their ethnic identities and Anglo-Celtic Australia's exclusion of them. Lesbian writers such as the poet and verse-novelist, Dorothy Porter, and the detective-story writer Jan McKemmish (1950–2007) saw the Beats' undermining of traditional gender roles and their trespass on decorum and conventions as enabling. Pam Brown wrote of McKemmish:

Jan  
'taught the Beats'  
to a secular mix  
at Wiley Park  
Girls High School<sup>41</sup>

McKemmish was not alone in promulgating the Beats. The global poetic activism of Kinsella and Louis Armand vouchsafed that Ginsberg's and Kerouac's protests against a meaningless and regimented society still resonates in the twenty-first century. Kinsella, the leading Australian poet born in the 1960s, has praised Ginsberg as a "shaman and soothsayer of the American collective consciousness."<sup>42</sup>

Australian fiction also saw continuing Beat influence, especially in the grunge writers of the 1990s, who included Justine Ettler, Luke Davies, and Andrew McGahan, and who wrote of drug use, youth culture, and the attempt to remain idealistic in a cynical world. These writers were often said to be modelled on Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis. But their work was far more imbued with the spirit of radical experimentation in the mode of the Beats than the opportunism and tacit neoconservatism of the American writers of the 1980s.

Even in the 2010s, the Beats continued to be interrogated by young Australian writers. In Luke Carman's *An Elegant Young Man* (2013), the narrator, an aspiring writer growing up in working-class, ethnic, multicultural Western Sydney—an hour's train ride and a world away from bohemian haunts such as Balmain—looks to Kerouac as an ideal. But he realizes that he cannot *be* Kerouac, that he is too late and too far away for that:

All Kerouac ever did was teach boys that drinking wine and tapping keys is poetry-making and it shits me to tears because you don't realise that Australia, the country you're supposed to be from, doesn't have any-damn-thing to do with Kerouac.<sup>43</sup>

This is as much an indictment of Australia as it is of Kerouac. Australia, despite all the changes since the Generation of 68, is still a refuge for the bourgeois. It would be naive to suppose that at this late date the example of Kerouac alone could counter this, and Carman makes no such gesture. In his knockabout suavity, though, Carman marks one of the insistent aspects of the Australian reception of the Beats: the insistence on an element of elegance, of a touch of the dandy. Perry Meisel has written that the cowboy and the dandy, ostensibly extreme opposites of cultural performance, cross over each other in the transatlantic traffic of influence, fueled by a shared romanticism.<sup>44</sup> Like Gerald Murnane's claiming of Kerouacian ecstasy as a passport to visionary subjectivity, or John Tranter's vernacular grandiloquence, Carman's channeling of Kerouac as streetwise *flâneur* sees Kerouac outside of a narrow band of stereotypes about him. Carman casts Kerouac as a world writer who still matters in a different country and in a new century.

In 2016 Carman lamented the rise of a new generation of gatekeepers. These were people who seek out the word of literature less for artistic motives than a sense of being confirmed as part of a nurturing, conformist community:

Rather than retreating into the fecund vortex of other worlds and parallel realities, these dreamers clench their eyes shut and conjure visions of themselves at play, accepted, affirmed, and celebrated within a “real world” community that already exists: their impossible dream is to be welcomed into the bright and glimmering constellation of the arts industry.<sup>45</sup>

The phrase “arts industry” would be anathema to Kerouac and Ginsberg, Dransfield and Viidikas, and represents all the Beat spirit opposes. Carman captures this in *An Elegant Young Man* when he mentions the Whitlam Centre, a local cultural hub named after Gough Whitlam, and braids the name of Whitlam with its sound-alike Whitman. In today’s Australia, both the spirit of Whitlam and that of Whitman, the muses of both political and aesthetic revolt, might seem on the wane. Carman’s willingness, though, to speak plainly and prophetically, staring down the forces of inauthenticity, bespeaks continuing vital Beat influences. From Hydra to Balmain and beyond, the influence of the Beat writers has given the Australian imagination an ever-present warrant for its own independence and integrity.

### Notes

- 1 Ira B. Nadel, *Leonard Cohen: A Life In Art* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), 56.
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- 4 Candida Baker, “Interview with Gerald Murnane,” *Yacker* 2 (1987), 215.
- 5 Charles Buckmaster, “Waiting Cold,” in Thomas Shapcott, ed. *The Moment Made Marvellous* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1998), 47.
- 6 A. Robert Lee, *Beat Generation Writers* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), 2.
- 7 Nicole Moore, *The Censor’s Library: Uncovering the Lost History of Australia’s Banned Books* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland press, 2012), 3.
- 8 *Ibid.* p. 3.
- 9 “Australia’s Beat Generation,” [www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rarecollections/australia’s-beat-generation/6537720](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rarecollections/australia’s-beat-generation/6537720), June 14, 2015.
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- 15 Livio Dobrez, *Parnassus Mad Ward, Michael Dransfield and the New Australian Poetry* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990); Patricia Dobrez, *Michael Dransfield’s Lives: A Sixties Biography* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1999).
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- 19 Quoted in Ken Bolton, “The Poetry of John Forbes: An Introduction,” <http://jacketmagazine.com/26/bolt-forb.html>.
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- 21 *Ibid.*
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- 23 Michael Wilding, *Living Together* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1974), 14.
- 24 “Fuori le mura.”
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- 26 The Selected letters of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, 1956–1991, ed. Bill Morgan (New York: Counterpoint, 2008), 139.
- 27 Ibid., 139.
- 28 John Kinsella interviews Robert Adamson, [www.johnkinsella.org/interviews/adamson.html](http://www.johnkinsella.org/interviews/adamson.html).
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