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Véronique Lane. French Genealogy of the Beat Generation: Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac's Appropriations of Modern Literature, from Rimbaud to Michaux. Bloomsbury, 2017.

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Abstract

Review of Véronique Lane. *French Genealogy of the Beat Generation: Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac's Appropriations of Modern Literature, from Rimbaud to Michaux*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Keywords

Kerouac, Beat Generation, French Modernism

Véronique Lane. *French Genealogy of the Beat Generation: Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac's Appropriations of Modern Literature, from Rimbaud to Michaux*. Bloomsbury, 2017. 264 pp.

From the renowned photograph of Allen Ginsberg posing beneath a picture of Rimbaud in the Paris “Beat Hotel” to John Chellan Holmes’s designation of the Beat generation as “postwar Sartrean Existentialism,” Beat writers’ admiration of French culture is well known. Yet critical reception has done little to establish the actual development of such influence. All too often critics gloss over the French lineage and focus instead on the American qualities of Beat author identity, embedding them in American literary traditions. Véronique Lane reveals these blinders in *The French Genealogy of the Beat Generation* by grounding the aesthetic developments of Beat literature, from its inception, in the Hexagon. “French culture did not merely inspire or engage the so-called founders of the Beat Generation; it shaped their works” (214). Lane argues that there probably would not have been a Beat generation without French literature and that each of the “big three” (Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs) owe their individual aesthetic developments to that tradition. Particularly important were French writers who expressed rebellious otherness, allowing their American counterparts to discover and construct literary individuality in an environment of progressively narrow national identity. In order to underscore these French sources, and move beyond the narrative of Americanness that has dominated Beat scholarship, Lane employs close textual analysis, convincingly demonstrating that the Beats appropriated cinema, literature, and posthumanist modernism from France.

Lane’s book proceeds chronologically, each chapter exploring a different text and, for the most part, a specific author in the Beat canon. In her first chapters, she focuses mainly on Kerouac and in so doing enters into the conversation on Kerouac’s relationship to the French language and culture. In this debate, Lane comes down squarely on the importance of France over his French Canadian origins. While Kerouac might have grown up speaking French and referred to himself as a Canuck, Lane points out that he cites only texts from France, not Quebec. In these three opening chapters, Lane traces a decidedly “French-from-France” genealogy for Kerouac through careful readings of his journals, letters, and early writings. She begins in chapter 1 with a close reading of *And the Hippos were Boiled in their Tanks*, the first novel of the Beat Generation, co-authored by Kerouac and Burroughs. Lane establishes which author wrote which parts and finds in Kerouac’s contribution a literariness that manifests itself in attention to detail, lengthy descriptive passages, and numerous literary references. In particular, she points out the first example of Kerouac’s “bookmovies,” a key aesthetic breakthrough whereby the author renders his writing cinematic. In opposition, she finds in Burroughs’s contribution a decidedly intentional, anti-literary stance,

which she argues anticipates his 1960s cut-ups, where the Beat writer literally cuts up the texts of other authors to then rearrange the fragments into new narratives. She pursues her analysis of Kerouac's contribution in chapter 2 and argues that these early writings show that Kerouac's artistic sensibility developed through his self-education in French works and specifically the idea of poetic realism from French cinema, not from his Quebecois heritage. She bases her case on Kerouac's rewriting of two specific scenes from *Hippos*, which reveal how French visual culture offers Kerouac a sense of self-awareness. Chapter 3, Lane's last chapter on Kerouac, reveals parallels in the narrative structures, styles, and existential qualities of Kerouac's *On the Road* and Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, illuminating Kerouac's attempts to combine Céline's postwar nihilism with Dostoevsky's "hope for humanity." His failure to do that, she argues, inspires a turn to Proust, something he revealed in his journals.

While Lane continues to trace a decidedly "French-from-France" genealogy for Ginsberg and Burroughs, the fact that Burroughs did not keep a writer's journal limits her analysis. As a result, she focuses in particular on Ginsberg's self-edited 2006 republication of his poem "Howl." Even though there are relatively few clear markers of French literature in this variorum edition, she focuses on the central place of French poets—specifically Apollinaire and Genet—in its genealogy. And she goes on to provide convincing reasons for the absence of more copious allusions to France. For example, Ginsberg's desire to create an openly gay literary poetic tradition as well as the requirements of his aesthetic technique of cutting and juxtaposition, a poetics that sought to create gaps in understanding, both contributed to masking and reshaping otherwise obvious French references.

Burroughs, who did not write in journals like Kerouac nor leave behind a variorum edition like Ginsberg, also challenges Lane's attempts to find concrete textual evidence that would outline the material appropriations of French literature. Lane argues nevertheless that the act of name-dropping in Burroughs is so rare that when it does occur, it is "*never* mere name-checking and *always* function[s] on several levels of meaning at once"(95). She finds, for example, "resonant echoes" of Gide and Cocteau in Burroughs's *Queer* and traces how the Beat author's use of Genet changes over time.

In her concluding chapter comparing Michaux's *Meidosems* to Burroughs's Mugwumps (fictive creatures from *Naked Lunch*), Lane brings back her focus to the import of the Beats' engagement with French culture, showing that each of the Beat writers, in their own way, sought to engage questions of aesthetic and ethical values that span the spectrum of literary to non-literary, humanist to post-humanist. Grounded in a comparative literature tradition, Lane's convincing text is engaging and would be of interest to Beat scholars and readers of French modernist writers alike.

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