

Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics

By A. Robert Lee

Routledge, 2010, 296 pages

\$95.

Reviewed by Jennie Skerl

Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics by A. Robert Lee is an impressive product of many years of scholarship on post-World War II dissident American literature. The book consists of sixteen essays: nine written for this volume, seven previously published but substantially revised, and one reprint. Organized into three parts according to the categories in the subtitle, the essays are a mix of broad surveys and those that focus on one or a few writers, with four chapters on Beat writers, nine chapters on ethnic literature, and three chapters on three writers designated as outriders. Each essay stands alone as a thorough introduction to its subject, beginning with the foundation of historical/biographical and critical background, identifying conflicting assessments or frequently debated issues, then proceeding to Lee's original analysis of specific works. The footnotes for each chapter provide comprehensive critical bibliographies. Thus, the book is a valuable resource for readers who may be interested in a particular author or authors or in the discursive formations of canon or anti-canon in which they are placed.

Lee's discussion of a diverse collection of writers is theorized through the "portmanteau term" of "counter writing," which is defined in a preliminary fashion in the introduction and further developed and complicated throughout the book. Counter writing includes the dissidents, contrarians, bad boys/bad girls/bad subjects who produce counter-texts to America's assumed consensual order or "managed consensus." They are not a unified tradition or group, but a constant presence in American literary history of writers against the grain. Lee's book, however, is testimony to the prominence of counter writers in the second half of the twentieth century, destabilizing not only canon formation in the traditional sense, but also standard literary pigeonholes such as "Beat" or "ethnic." This questioning of labels and canons is one of the book's larger themes. The particularity of Lee's style—avoiding overarching generalizations and defining counter writing through specific analysis of individual texts and suggestive metaphors—encourages the reader to construct her own definitions and to make connections between writers not always seen in relation to each other.

In the four chapters on Beat writers in Part I, Lee works within an expanded definition of Beat that includes women, African Americans, and writers outside the United States. The first essay is a comprehensive overview of the Beat movement which problematizes the canon. He identifies what has become the assumed or de facto canon of Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Burroughs, and Ferlinghetti, based on their first publications from 1955 to 1962 that brought public recognition to the Beats as a movement and installed these authors as the leaders or icons, but at the same time relegating numerous Beat-related authors to a "shadow canon." By focusing on explication of texts, rather than authors, Lee expands the canon to include Holmes, Jones/Baraka, Solomon, McClure, di Prima, Rosenthal, Bremser/Frazer, Norse, Huncke, and

Johnson. (Those are the writers discussed in the chapter; a footnote adds Snyder, Micheline, Meltzer, Clausen, Perkhoff, Lang, and Saijo among others.) Fifteen writers receive original critical analysis of their work. As the reader proceeds through this introductory essay, she participates in exploring a sense of Beat as (in Lee's words) a literary efflorescence, a circuit of texts, an orbit, a diverse archive of voice, an inclusive gallery, a pathway, a web, a register, a signature, a plurality of expressive ways operating across texts, linking life views, and an open idiom. Ultimately, one is persuaded that Beat is a more complex and wider body of constituent authorship than a few of the more famous participants; nor are Beats confined to a particular decade. Most important is a rejection of fixed icons and definitions in favor of an array of Beat-inflected specific works that oscillate and affiliate within a web of plural voices. The initial "opening of the canon" is followed by an essay devoted to three Beat women poets (di Prima, Kyger, and Waldman) which also includes an overview of women's participation in Beat writing, an essay on Ted Joans' body of work, and an essay on "Beat International." This last essay bookends the first, beginning with a survey of Beat international geography, then focusing on three writers: Horovitz (British), Voznesensky (Russian), and Shiraishi (Japanese). In this essay, Beat is configured as live counter voice, Beat-linked voicing, a trace, an affiliation, counter-note, transcultural affinity, an international ripple-effect, a thread of the 1960s counter-culture, and finally a transcultural circuit/counter-circuit (the latter an example of oscillation rather than definition). Within such a configuration of Beat, Voznesensky, a Soviet Union poet of the 1960s, can be accepted as Beat-affiliated.

The nine chapters in Part III on American ethnic writers, impressive in its breadth and depth, display Lee's erudition in this field. (Indeed, he has published five previous books on multicultural American literature.) The first essay, aptly entitled "ethnics behaving badly," is a survey of black, native, Latino/a and Asian American texts selected for their "contrarian verve." Nine authors are discussed in some detail (Ishmael Reed, Darryl Pinckney, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, Oscar Zeta Acosta, Richard Rodriguez, Monica Stone, Max Yeh), and many others are mentioned. The chapter begins with Zora Neal Hurston as an earlier exemplar of the refusal of victimhood, anticipating later writers who complicate, outmaneuver, and subvert stereotypic expectations about belonging to an assumed minority niche. The other touchstone author in this chapter and for this entire section of the book is Gerald Vizenor, whose work regularly challenges social, literary, and linguistic stereotypes and who is known for his neologisms, such as "postindian" and "survivance." The next chapter is a broad survey of U.S. poetry of immigrancy and migrancy, referencing dozens of poets (including Euro-Americans) who reflect this perennial American experience. Three more focused survey chapters are devoted to multicultural Hispanic-American literature of the 1990's, Chinese-American poetry, and Japanese-American literature. The final four chapters each treat one writer: Frank Chin, Jessica Hagedorn, William Demby, and Gerald Vizenor. Part III is a detailed mapping of "ethnic" literature after World War II, which questions the label through counter-texts that establish their authors as American artists against the grain, especially those who write postmodern fiction.

The section on "outriders" (Part II) consists of three chapters, one each devoted to Hunter Thompson, Joan Didion, and Kathy Acker. Again, Lee provides an excellent comprehensive essay on each writer. However, the designation of "outrider" is not presented with the detail provided for "Beat" or "ethnic," so that the selection and placement of these authors in a separate

category is not convincing. Thompson and Acker could easily have been discussed within the penumbra of Beat, especially since each has acknowledged the influence of Beat writers, and their textual homage to Kerouac and Burroughs, respectively, is prominent in their work. Classifying Didion as an outsider/outsider is questionable, since, as Lee himself mentions, she writes from a conservative, even elitist, stance and has had an establishment, or insider, career from the beginning. In this case, Lee's concrete, inductive method does not succeed in establishing a persuasive classification, although certainly the individual essays are valuable—each a thorough comprehensive analysis of the writer's career.

Modern American Counter Writing is the work of a mature scholar whose essays reflect years of research and teaching; it builds on prior research, but is wholly original in its analysis and interpretation of texts, as well as its theoretically sophisticated approach to literary history and canon formation. Apropos of a recent discussion on the Beat Studies Association listserv, this book shows how good scholarship is done. Lee is also a good read: he wears his learning lightly and writes in an engaging style that promotes interest in the writers under discussion, especially those that may be new to the reader.