The Cubalogues: Beat Writers in Revolutionary Havana
Todd F. Tietchen
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010
$29.95; hardback

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"Now if in Korea we hear there is continual killing,
now if we rightly have no longer faith in our nations, now if we tire of futile decisions,
we are at home among stranger relations."
—Robert Duncan, "Writing at home in history"

For a brief two-year period following the 1959 revolution, the arts in Cuba were opened to new and daring currents that offered alternative ways of imagining the long and vexed relationship between that tiny Caribbean island and its northern neighbor. Likened by one of its participants to the Weimar era in Germany, this vibrant artistic renaissance coalesced around the Guillermo Cabrera Infante-edited literary journal *Lunes de Revolución* and was decidedly different in its revolutionary outlook than the "authorized" version of the Cuban Revolution its detractors sold to the American public. "We are not part of a group, neither literary nor artistic . . ." announced *Lunes de Revolución*'s editors. "We do not have a definite political philosophy, although we do not reject certain systems which approach reality—and when we speak of systems, we are referring, for example, to dialectical materialism or psychoanalysis, or existentialism" (41-42). At the peak of its popularity, *Lunes de Revolución* had a circulation of 250,000 and championed the work of a new generation of revolutionary Cuban artists, writers, and film-makers, some of whom produced works—like *P.M.*, the 1960 Albert Maysles-influenced "free cinema" exploration of Havana nightlife directed by Infante's brother Sabá and Orlando Jiménez Leal—that soon ran afoul of the authorities.

But just as quickly as it had begun, this era of improvisation, experimentation and openness ended. On June 30, 1961, Fidel Castro announced in his address "A True Social Revolution Produces a Cultural Revolution (Words To The Intellectuals)" that henceforth, "the most revolutionary artist will be that one who is prepared to sacrifice even his own artistic vocation for the Revolution" (*LANIC*). Cuban artistic and cultural life would from now on be subordinated to the ideological demands of national revolutionary policy. Shortly thereafter, *Lunes de Revolución* was shut down, its editor exiled, and by 1965 those engaged in the artistic underground had become "los infermos"—"the sick"—a dismissive term that reveals what little use the new revolutionary leadership had for art and literature that fell far outside the purview of orthodox revolutionary cultural praxis.

Todd Tietchen's *The Cubalogues: Beat Writers in Revolutionary Havana* is a densely argued study of those first-person narratives he terms "Cubalogues," a group of texts that constitute an "explicitly political subgenre of Beat travel narrative" (2). At the heart of the book are broadly contextualized readings of eyewitness Cubalogue accounts from the period 1960-61 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti ("Poet's Notes on Cuba"), Amiri Baraka ("Cuba Libre"), journalist Marc Schleifer ("Cuban Notebook"), and Harold Cruse ("A Negro Looks At Cuba"), along with a later Cubalogue-related prose piece by Allen Ginsberg ("Prose Contribution to Cuban Revolution"). Collectively, these narratives function for Tietchen as "acts of counter imagination" that challenge the parallels between the normative rhetoric of United States military and foreign policy and a public discursive sphere firmly under the sway of "long entrenched imperial tropes and the bifurcating rhetoric of Cold War politics" (155). Tietchen argues that these narratives imagine the relations between peoples, histories, politics, and art in ways that prefigure the culture and ethos of the New Left and its associated liberation movements.

If the Cubalogue is a form of "gone South" Beat travel narrative, it is one that unfolds within a decidedly more progressive political context than that traditionally afforded Latin American spaces in the U.S. literary imagination, long a series of libidinal contact zones for the Anglo Beat fantasies of figures such as William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac (9). By positioning his study firmly within the transnational and globalized approaches to Beat scholarship that have emerged in the last decade and that eschew the single-author literary-biographical model long familiar in the field[1], Tietchen effectively challenges our understandings of what constitutes Beat canonicity and why. He does so by enlarging the category "Beat" and by shifting his frame both spatially and historically, in the process successfully undermining the stereotype that Beat modes of subjectivity equate to an existential disengagement from collectively imagined political praxis. The five chapters at the heart of the book draw evidence from writers who have long been a part of the recognized Beat orbit (Baraka, Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg), while including others less obviously so (Cruse, Schleifer). Tietchen argues that all were shaped by their own direct, everyday experience of the Cuban revolution, an encounter that caused them to fundamentally reimagine their own relationship to art and revolutionary politics.

The book is organized around the metaphor of "stranger relations," which Tietchen draws from Robert Duncan's poem "writing at home in history." "Stranger relations" are mobilized throughout the study as a way of reimagining the relationship between the exclusionary and disciplinary modes of subjectivity demanded by the corporate liberal Cold War state—what Daniel Belgrad terms "the rationalization of mental attitude" (4)—and the alternative perspective of the excluded "stranger" who lurks at the margins of the national imaginary but who also shares affinities of outlook with other excluded groups. This relationship is imagined *across* national, cultural, and temporal boundaries in new networks that come to define a transnational oppositional culture that offers a broad and horizontally-configured alternative to a public sphere ordered by the "high seriousness" of Cold War pieties.

In his first chapter, for example, Tietchen explores poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's involvement with issues of domestic censorship (a 1952 campaign against censorship, the "Howl" obscenity trial in 1956), anarcho-pacifism (his involvement with the Kenneth Rexroth Circle), regional politics and aesthetics (his International Writer's Conference

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trip to Chile in 1959 with Ginsberg) and the forging of transnational rhetorical spaces (the 1956 City Lights publication of the Rexroth-translated *Thirty Spanish Poems of Love and Exile* containing poems by a selection of persecuted Spanish and Latin American writers) as evidence of Ferlinghetti's "stranger relations" within and across the local and regional spaces and histories of underground and countercultural politics. In this way, Tietchen not only recuperates Ferlinghetti from historian Van Gosse's charge that the poem "1000 Fearful Words for Fidel Castro" marks *the* pivotal moment of Ferlinghetti's political awakening, but also resituates and historicizes the broader question of Beat political engagement within a transnational perspective. Ferlinghetti, Tietchen argues, brought these progressive networks of relations to visibility a full decade before the New Left movements of the 1960s and 1970s reimagined them within a "Third World" context.

Similarly in his chapter on Amiri Baraka, Tietchen argues that Baraka's evolution from Beat-fellow traveler and civil rights integrationist to an uncompromising advocate for the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism emerged directly from the experience of revolutionary forms of seeing and collective action that he captured in "Cuba Libre." The lived praxis of a revolutionary poetics that was also a *politically* engaged poetics pushed Baraka away from an earlier identification with existential modes of Beat disaffection, captured in his earlier work, such as the poem "Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note," and towards the "stranger relations" of avant-garde forms such as jazz. Reimaging these forms post-Cuba, Baraka saw them as capable of "moving" oppressed peoples in the U.S. too, if framed with the same kind of revolutionary "attitude" or "stance" that had "moved" Cuba and her people during his visit. Thus, Baraka's story "The Screamers" firmly rejects a view of jazz that treats it as a vehicle for individual (and whitened) aesthetic awakenings. Instead, jazz offers Baraka a rhetorical space for an "ecstatic, completed" (80) and *collectivized* form of African-American cultural expression that stands in stark contrast to the repressive forms of self denial embodied by the white jazz critic and the Black Church.

For Tietchen, then, "stranger relations" reconfigure connections made through political expression and belonging. They offer "a convergence of marginalized and differentiated human subjects across horizontal points of contact," throwing into sharp relief the limitations placed on political expectations by adherence to the so-called "reasonable" and "serious" (and hierarchically-organized) modes of Cold War argumentation represented by figures such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and *The Partisan Review*'s Norman Podhoretz (14-15). As Baraka points out at the end of "Cuba Libre," far from offering a neutral political space, such modes are "always the historical manifestations of politically interested justifications" (73). In a compelling argument that echoes Daniel Belgrad's emphasis on the politically radical subjectivity promised by avant-garde forms of his "culture of spontaneity," Tietchen recasts stranger relations as *discursive* understandings. The bifurcated Cold War mindset shaping the U.S. public sphere led to a rhetorical blindness that foreclosed on the meaning of the Cuban Revolution ahead of time, rendering its networks of "strange relations" invisible and unutterable in the orthodox public sphere, a fact journalist Marc Schleifer discovered to his dismay: "What I'd stumbled upon was the problem of dealing with the faulty powers of American perception" (114). By broadening their understanding of liberation and possibility beyond the terms established by the Old Left's traditional labor-centered metaphysic, Tietchen argues that the Cubalogue writers were able to move past traditional loyalties and into positions that afforded a critical perspective on what became, after 1961, the increasingly authoritarian character of the Cuban Revolution. By 1965, Che Guevara was calling for a form of revolutionary masculinity he labeled the "New Man" that opposed the decadent and cosmopolitan tendencies of "literary escapism and aesthetic avant-gardism" represented by organs such as *Lunes de Revolución*.

For Cubaloguer Marc Schleifer, this increasing inflexibility was evidence of reactionary sexual blind spots in the revolutionary imagination, lacunae highlighted by the plight of workers in the Cuban sex industry who faced inequity, poverty, and a Party leadership unconcerned with broader understandings of sexual freedom. For Allen Ginsberg, the Revolution's heteronormative turn evoked a characteristic response; to his Cuban hosts, he wondered aloud about Castro's childhood experiences with homosexuality, and said of Guevara, "I would very much like to go to bed with him" (121). Instead, of course, Ginsberg went on to become a spokesperson for the emerging counterculture and for what Tietchen terms the "Dostoyevskian strange": that "sense of personal genius and acceptance of all strangeness in people as their nobility." Ginsberg describes this as [. . .] a "sort of Dostoyevskian-Shakespearean *know* [. . .] of things as mortal, tearful, transient, sacred"—a mode of awareness that, "realizing the relativity and limitation of all judgments and discriminations," challenges orthodox political classifications (136). By the mid-1960s, Ginsberg could criticize the Revolution for failing to live up to its early open promise of the "acceptance of all strangeness." By these gestures, too, he was expressing his own "strange relations" within emergent networks linking activist queer politics and his own personal poetic struggles against heteronormative domestic politics and foreign policy expressed in *Howl, and Other Poems*.

Then too, by 1965 Kerouac's retreat into a reified conservatism led him to condemn Ginsberg for his "pro-Castro bullshit and [. . .] long robe Messiah shot" (145). As I read Tietchen's account and the handful of intriguing references to Kerouac's take on Cuba, I wondered about the tensions *within* the Beat cohort over the meaning of the Revolution, and I was left wishing Tietchen had explored these tensions more fully. For instance, along which particular lines of identification did the Beats fracture over the Cuban question? How would a full accounting of these breaks change the ways we understand the wider category of "Beat" itself? And what happens to the term if we rethink it through Tietchen's "stranger relations," within broadly connected fields of affinities linking the socialism of the Old Left, the liberation movements of the New Left, and the crossing of regional and temporal boundaries? What of the relationship between the Cubalogues themselves and the much-vaunted Beat emphasis on open and spontaneous forms of representation? Other than a brief definitional discussion early in the book, Tietchen is generally silent on the formal qualities of these texts. Conceptually, "Beat" itself remains a largely unexplored term in this account, even though he widens the spatial and temporal axes of its use in a way that at times threatens to undo the presumed utility of the term as an analytic lens and also raises all sorts of unanswered questions about the relationships between Beat literature and broader understandings of the American literary canon. This struck me as odd in a book otherwise so finely attuned to the political implications of our cultural and artistic representations.

Writing in 2003, critic Manuel L. Martinez argued that "[l]iterary historians (even the newer ones) and critics working on the reconstruction of American literary history characteristically know little in depth about the history, symbologies, cultures, and discourses of the Americas." He calls for a literary perspective that refuses parochialism and the "limiting tacit assumptions" of single-author or mono-cultural points of view. He is admirably served in this regard by Tietchen's book. *The Cubalogues* is a valuable contribution to the emerging scholarship on transnational Beat identities and international Beat politics, a fascinating intervention in the "continuing project of a truly inclusive Americano studies" (Martinez 19).

Endnote

[1] Ronna Johnson and Nancy Grace, *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002; Timothy Gray, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Countercultural Community*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006; Manuel Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent From Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003; Kostas Myrsiades, ed. *The Beat Generation: Critical Essays*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002; Jennie Skerl, ed. *Reconstructing the Beats*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004.

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Manuel L. Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003.