

# Minute Particulars of the Counter-Culture: *Time*, *Life*, and the Photo-poetics of Allen Ginsberg

OLIVER HARRIS

*Keele University, UK*

Recent exhibitions of Allen Ginsberg's photographs, which feature 1950s snapshots of his fellow-Beats Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, have been dismissed by some as marketing exercises for the Beat myth that promote their biocentric image. Ginsberg himself invited comparisons between his work and Robert Frank's *The Americans*. However, a detailed material analysis of his work as a poet-photographer, paying close attention to his handwritten captions, recognises it as a complex hybrid that extends his prophetic poetics. In particular, contextualising his work in relation to the 1950s photojournalism of *Life* and *Time* establishes the ways in which Ginsberg, and Burroughs, responded to the attacks made on the Beats in those magazines on behalf of Henry Luce's 'American Century'.

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On the thirtieth anniversary of *Howl* (1956), Allen Ginsberg stated that the aim of the poem which launched his career had been to leave behind for future generations 'an emotional time bomb that will continue exploding in US consciousness' (Ginsberg, 1986: xii). Twenty-five years later, visitors to 'Angelheaded Hipsters: Images of the Beat Generation', an exhibition of Ginsberg's photography at London's National Theatre, like those who attended the similar 'Beat Memories' show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington the previous year, did not see any explosions. Whether the bigger picture is Ginsberg's career or the history of the Beat Generation, the portraits on display seemed to conform to the standard view of the Beats: because they have been popularly commodified and academically canonised for so long now, the sight of Burroughs and Kerouac in a series of monochrome images on the walls of public galleries only affirms that the Beats are history, the shocking vitality their writing once had replaced by nostalgia for their photogenic appearance. That this passage from subversive margin to cultural mainstream is completed by one of their

own, that it should be Ginsberg who converts counter-cultural iconoclasts into celebrity icons, would add complicity to the inexorable triumph of the spectacle. And if the bigger picture is the ideology of American free market capitalism, then these images in the national institutions of Washington and London must be seen as not just promotions for the Beat myth but for the soft power of American culture — the con cop to the increasingly tired tough cop of military and economic imperialism — and its continued ability over time to defuse any bomb and turn it into an advertisement for itself.

The ‘hardening of Beat literary history into a veritable slideshow’ (Arthur, 2010: 241) has featured the literal co-option of the Beat image for advertising — in the controversial 1990s advertisements for Nike with Burroughs and for Gap with Kerouac — and more recently two cinematic projects that in very different ways stylize a biocentric view of the Beats within a frame of 1950s Americana: the semi-documentary *Howl* (2010) and Walter Salles’ *On the Road* (2012). But to see the biographical image as merely promoting a nostalgic fetish is not as simple as it looks. The problem appears most revealingly in Edmund White’s dismissal of ‘Beat Memories’ in the *New York Review of Books*, which sees the exhibition as no more than a marketing exercise for the Beat franchise in surprising terms. Turning Ginsberg’s own words in the catalogue against him — ‘If you’re famous, you can get away with anything’ (quoted in Greenough, 2010: 118) — White puts his photography down as a cynical late-career move, noting that both Ginsberg and Burroughs ‘discovered late in life that making works of art is the way to get money’ (White, 2010). Implicitly, Ginsberg was found guilty of trading on the political and spiritual values of his mission as America’s great national poet-prophet. White’s verdict is surprising, not only because of his expected sympathies — he ended an introduction to Ginsberg’s interviews by hailing the poet’s generosity of spirit (Ginsberg, 2002: xviii) — but because of the precise grounds of his attack: the function of the handwritten captions Ginsberg added from the mid-1980s onwards to his images, texts that ‘also added to their value by making them into unique objects’ (White, 2010). White’s criticism of Ginsberg’s captions is directed specifically against their application to his earliest pictures, the ‘drugstore’ snapshots he took in autumn 1953 in and around his Lower East Side apartment. These include many of the most famous early images of the Beat writers, such as Kerouac smoking on the fire escape of the apartment building and Burroughs standing on the roof, saluting to shade his eyes. To White (2010), these photographs are neither historical nor art but essentially personal documents — ‘private spontaneous shots of the people he loved’, in the words of Peter Shaw, curator of the ‘Angelheaded Hipster’ show<sup>1</sup> — truly *amateur* shots, predating both the fame of the Beat circle and Ginsberg’s more professional return to photography in the 1980s.

The aestheticisation of Ginsberg’s photographs was less obvious in London, where block-mounted digital prints substituted for the gelatin silver photographs under glass in Washington, but White’s resistance to seeing them as art, his insistence on seeing them as images of the Beats but not themselves a new Beat work, is significantly paradoxical: on the one hand, the image of the writer has replaced the writing, and on the other, an act of writing transforms the image into art. This paradox suggests the complexity of the relation between specular appropriation on one side

and resistance to commodification on the other. It in turn points to a series of false binaries — personal/political, commercial/cultural, verbal/visual, and past/present — that suggest the bigger picture for understanding Ginsberg's last works as the subtlest of solutions to the reification of reality through the manipulation of word and image. These contexts in turn may explain the entirely unexpected emotional power of Ginsberg's hybridisation of photography and writing, and why, despite their familiarity, despite having seen all the exhibited photographs before in books, on websites, on my wall, I left convinced I had never seen them until now.

## Behind the billboard

Ginsberg himself was not slow to suggest what the big picture was. In a 1988 interview published in *Snapshot Poetics*, he framed his intimate portraits from 1953 politically in terms of a well-worn historical binary:

You see, the mutual respect between us was contrary to what was taken for emotional and psychological reality in those days. It was the beginning of the 'American Century', the beginning of hyper-militarisation, of the Atomic Era and the Age of Advertising, of Orwellian doublethink public language. The candor of tenderness which Bill [Burroughs] and I expressed to each other seemed different from the 'square' mentality of public discourse. (Ginsberg, 1993: 8)

Whether his photographs bear out this simple opposition between innocent Whitmanian candour on one hand and a nationalistic commercial and media culture on the other is a question I will return to. But first, the aesthetic frame of reference that Ginsberg provides identified three photographers as essential to his practice: Elsa Dorfman, Berenice Abbot, and Robert Frank. His relationship with Frank is the most substantial, their friendship and collaborations going back almost as far as Ginsberg's purchase of the second-hand Kodak Retina he used in 1953 to take his first snapshots. The association was brought up to date in the 2010 'Beat Memories' exhibition, which included photographs of Frank taken by Ginsberg and which opened just twelve months after the National Gallery's fiftieth anniversary show, 'Looking In: Robert Frank's *The Americans*', closed. In his first major collection, *Photographs* (1990), Ginsberg invoked Frank even more emphatically, featuring four portraits, an introductory epigram (including: 'Allen is aware of History continuously running beside him'), and in his 'Commentary on Sacramental Companions', a reference to *The Americans* comparing Frank and Kerouac in Buddhist terms ('ordinary mind') that Ginsberg applied to his own work.

While Frank's association with Kerouac is well known and the introduction he wrote for *The Americans* has been much discussed, the Frank-Ginsberg connection has been overlooked, even in the one study seriously examining Ginsberg's photography (see Mortenson, 2010). This oversight is not unreasonable, since, whatever Frank's influence on his second-phase career as a photographer, almost none of Ginsberg's work bears comparison, not only in aesthetic but also political terms. Frank journeyed the length of the country on a two-year Guggenheim mission to record iconic pictures of mid-1950s America, whereas Ginsberg, whether in his New York apartment in 1953 or on international travels in the 1960s, took occasional

portraits of his close friends (the main exceptions appeared in *Indian Journals* (1970)). Ginsberg's photographs represent a small, self-enclosed world, viewed with an uncritical eye, and neither the images nor the captions he later wrote for them seem to say anything large about America or even the Beat Generation. But there is another historical point of intersection that has been overlooked, and rather than read Ginsberg's photography in the light of *The Americans*, the most illuminating material context is suggested by where Frank was publishing his own work during the summer and winter of 1953, framing the moment Ginsberg began to use his second-hand Kodak: *Life* magazine.

It is entirely possible that Frank discussed his experience at *Life* with Ginsberg, whether in January 1959 when filming *Pull My Daisy* (in which Ginsberg and Gregory Corso performed and for which Kerouac provided the voice-over), or from 1984 onwards, when the poet turned to Frank for advice on photography. But since it is a matter of meaningful context rather than traceable influence, the point is that Frank defined his practice and career as a photographer — and even his use of captions — against the methods of photojournalism in general and *Life* in particular. *Life* had pioneered and in the 1950s dominated the world of photojournalism, making the two effectively synonymous. Frank's antipathy towards *Life* was three-fold. First, there was the rigid economic division of labour that alienated photographers from their work: 'Mass production of uninspired photojournalism', he wrote in 1958, 'and photography without thought becomes anonymous merchandise' (Frank, 1958: 115). Second, there were the narrative norms of the photo-essay imposed on images — 'Those god-damned stories with a beginning and an end' (quoted in Greenough, 2009: 30) — an imposition that also applied to captions: as Blake Stimson argues (2006: 114), Frank's use of the facing blank page for captions in *The Americans* was 'emphatically and self-consciously at odds with the *Life* magazine version of the photographic essay that dominated the day'. And finally, the 'tremendous contempt' that Frank developed for *Life* was a strategic act of rejection (quoted in Greenough, 2009: 30). Having internalised *Life's* narrative principles but only won *second* prize in a 1951 competition, and finding himself published sporadically despite making concessions to their commercial aesthetic, confirmed for Frank the direction of his desire as an artist. *Life* was both Frank's nemesis and his making.

The reception of *The Americans* on its publication in 1959 as 'anti-American' has often been taken as read, but in showing 'that nameless thing in the weeds behind the billboard of American life' (Sante, 1995: 53), Frank certainly revealed an image of the nation that put him in the same marginal space as the Beat writers, and the connection was used against him in terms of form as well as content: 'His outlook seems just as disorganized, just as totally destructive', wrote the reviewer in *Modern Photography*, 'as that of the beat school of writers with whom he is associated' (quoted in Bezner, 1999: 214). In 1951 *Life* had hailed Frank as a 'poet with a camera' (26 November 1951: 21),<sup>2</sup> but by 1959 his poetics were evidently at odds with both the commercially controlled formal practices of *Life* and the ideological vision of America that went with them. And this is the crucial point of intersection with Ginsberg. *Life's* domination of the market for photojournalism coincided with the magazine's ambition to monopolize a coherent image of America — a big picture in which the Beat writers could only figure as more nameless things behind the

billboard. The difference is that, whereas *Life's* rejection of Frank's work effectively liberated him as a photographer, enabling his self-definition as an individual artist against the purveyors of anonymous visual merchandise, the reception of the Beat writers in the photojournalism of *Life* during the late 1950s circulated an image that promoted their notoriety as personalities while associating their writing with a series of lurid sociological clichés. *Life's* legacy was to entrench the biocentrism of Beat literary history and to blur the manipulation of their image in the media with their own counter example.

## Bad poetry

The ambiguous reception/production of the Beat Generation in the media of the period was recognised as early as March 1960 in the introduction to *The Beat Scene*, a photographic history by Fred McDarrah, which declared that 'the Fifties will go down in our literary history as the Beat Decade. Ironically, the attachment of this vivid label is largely due to the double-handed efforts of *Life* and *Time*' (Wilentz, 1960: 8). It is well known that Ginsberg carried on a long, antagonistic relationship with the press in the person of conservative critic Norman Podhoretz — author of the infamous 'Know Nothing Bohemians' evisceration of Kerouac's *On the Road* in 1958, and later editor of *Commentary* magazine — but in the 1950s Ginsberg's key bogeyman was actually Henry Luce. The specific roles played by *Life*, and indeed its sister magazine, *Time*, like the larger role played by Luce's publishing empire, have not been considered in relation to the Beats, let alone as a context for comparatively understanding Ginsberg's work. But Luce's weekly illustrated news magazines were far more than simply media platforms that vilified the Beat writers. In establishing the dominant journalistic practices for combining word with image, and setting them in a commercial context, Luce's magazines modelled for Ginsberg the rival poetics he defined in October 1959 as 'bad poetry (Philistine journalism)' (Ginsberg, 2008: 224).

*Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* were individually launched with grandiose ambition as national magazines, but collectively they came to function as an essential arm of American domestic and foreign policy. One of Luce's major achievements was to foster a national mass culture also designed for universal export. At home and abroad, his titles served the Cold War culture of containment, which Alan Nadel (1995: 4) distinguished as an era marked by 'the general acceptance' of 'a relatively small set of narratives by a relatively large portion of the population'. Luce's press achieved this persuasive reduction of possibilities by innovating methods of journalistic simplification, by synthesising, as James Baughman observes, 'the week's news in print (*Time*) or pictures (*Life*)' in stories that, despite a narrowly conservative agenda, seemingly 'possessed "omniscience", an all-knowing point-of-view' (2001: 5–6). This was the manipulation of word and image that Ginsberg identified in the historical context for his 1953 photographs as 'Orwellian doublethink public language'. To Ginsberg, the photojournalism of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* ultimately aimed, like the Newspeak of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to 'make all other modes of thought impossible' (Orwell, 2004: 312), in order to impose nothing less than a permanent consensual vision of reality itself.

The titles of Henry Luce's magazines therefore should be taken absolutely literally. For *Life*, Luce bought the title — and only the title, not its subscription list — from a defunct magazine of that name, ensuring that whenever anyone referred to 'life' they named his magazine, and vice versa. The first issue, on 23 November 1936, made the point by opening with the caption 'LIFE BEGINS' below the photograph of doctors delivering a baby (*Life*, 23 November 1936: 2). Six years earlier, Luce had changed the prospective title 'Power' to *Fortune* in order to extend the meaning, according to Alan Brinkley, beyond the realms of business and wealth to 'such ideas as "chance", "fate", and "destiny"', while in 1922 he had launched the first of his big three, *Time* (over 'Facts', 'Destiny', or 'The Synthetic Review'), again because the title could serve a double function: 'to chronicle the passage of time and to save readers precious time' (Brinkley, 2001: 151, 99). A third, and the most far-reaching meaning, inherent to *Time* in particular and Luce's three titles in general, becomes clear if we consider another key term in Ginsberg's historical context for his 1950s photography — 'It was the beginning of the "American Century"', a phrase popularised by Luce in the long editorial essay he published in *Life* on 17 February 1941: 61–65.

Luce's text seems surprisingly bland to anyone reading it for the first time in the rear-view mirror of the Project for the *New American Century*, whose 1997 'Statement of Principles' promoted 'military strength and moral clarity' in order to 'build on the successes of this past century and to ensure our security and our greatness in the next', and whose signatories ranged from Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld to Norman Podhoretz and Francis Fukuyama (Abrams *et al.*, 1997). Despite the immediate historical context of arguing for America's engagement in World War II, there is in Luce none of the jingoistic militarism associated with the later neoconservative project, and the only army he envisions is 'a humanitarian army of Americans' operating as 'Good Samaritans of the entire world' (*Life*, 17 February 1941: 65). Luce himself insisted: 'You can't extract imperialism from the American Century' (quoted in Brinkley, 2001: 271), while historian Stephen Whitfield finds 'no textual warrant' for such readings (2006: 92). On the contrary, I would argue that in four respects Luce's text operates precisely as a mission statement for an American Empire, and in ways that chime with Ginsberg's understanding of and response to the *Time-Life* project.

First, a close reading of the text's rhetoric betrays its colonising, global ambition. Thus, if our world is now 'one world, fundamentally indivisible' (*Life*, 17 February 1941: 64), then the unmistakable echo of the Pledge of Allegiance implicitly maps the unification of the American nation onto the whole planet. Second, anticipating Ginsberg's equation of Luce's journalism with 'bad poetry', it is significant that one of his closest advisors on the text was the poet, and Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish. According to Brinkley, Luce 'borrowed passages' from drafts prepared by MacLeish, and did so precisely to balance the input of Walter Lippmann, who in June 1939 had written for *Life* 'The American Destiny', effectively the Ur-text for Luce's own, and nakedly imperial in tone and reference: 'What Rome was to the ancient world, what Great Britain has been to the modern world, America is to be to the world of tomorrow' (quoted in Brinkley, 2001: 266). Third, as Amy Kaplan has argued, America's increasing preoccupation with the Roman Empire reveals both a



belief in exceptionalism and an eschatological anxiety about its survival across time, because ‘imperialism has always had strong temporal dimensions’ (2009: 14). In Luce’s text, when the phrase ‘it is America’s first century as a dominant power’ is repeated, the implication becomes suddenly clear: the twentieth century is the *first* American Century in the sense that a second must surely follow, and then a third . . . (*Life*, 17 February 1941: 64, 65). In short, it is a mistake to translate the temporality of the ‘American Century’ into spatial terms, as if only territorial conquest constituted an empire (in that sense, Whitfield has a case). Rather, Luce — the man who owned *Life* and *Time* — aimed at nothing less than a deterritorialized imperium over all humanity by bringing temporality itself under permanent American control. ‘The American Century’ means not just time *for* America — to take its place as a power in the world — but a world that runs on *American time*, as a new global standard, to the end of time. Luce leads straight to Fukuyama. Finally, the ‘end of history’, for Luce, was already being shaped by an emergent globalization, what he called an ‘immense American internationalism. American jazz, Hollywood movies, American slang, American machines and patented products’ (*Life*, 17 February 1941: 65). It is here, with this promotion of culture and commerce — or rather: culture *with* commerce — as the new universal currency that we can see how Luce intended to fulfil his double mission to project a vision of America to itself and the world until the two fully coincided: an image of America, demonstrated weekly not only through its photojournalism but its glossy adverts for American commodities, that would remake the world in that self-image. In short, the owner of the *Time-Life* publishing empire did not advocate a coercive imperialism of force because he had faith in the soft sell of an empire of images.

Naming the century ‘American’ was therefore a performative act in keeping with the material context of Luce’s magazines, in which the association of words with images in photo-stories operated in close tandem with the aesthetic economy of its main business: to fuse supposedly objective journalism with advertising. Ginsberg’s employment history — in 1948 as a copyboy at Associated Press Radio News Service; as a freelance market researcher in spring 1951 for Doherty, Clifford, and Shenfield devising slogans for Ipana toothpaste; in 1952 for George Fine Market Research, dealing with accounts for deodorants and cosmetics; in summer 1953 as a copyboy for the New York *World Telegram*; and in 1954–55, shortly before starting to write *Howl*, for Towne-Oller Associates in San Francisco — meant he knew this world and its bad poetry from the inside. For Ginsberg, the ‘American Century’ was more than a grand abstraction, shorthand for a project to universalise the values of American consumer culture through the pages of *Time* and *Life*. For Ginsberg it was personal and, most significantly, it was professional.

## Beatnik crap

Throughout the 1950s Ginsberg punctuated his letters, journals, and increasingly his poems with references to Henry Luce’s project, routinely prophesying its bankruptcy and in effect setting them against each other as rival prophets — one of the rise, the other of the fall of America. At the start of 1950 he wrote to Kerouac warning: ‘we are swollen with pitiful pride and history will bypass us’, and denouncing the ‘*Life*

magazine myth, that is just the false formal consciousness of America' (Ginsberg, 2008: 57). 'Just think a few years ago *Life* was talking about the American Century', he wrote to his brother in August 1954; 'We're too stupid, people here seem to think they can get away with the usual shit to the end of time' (2008: 98). The letter to his brother is typical Ginsberg, lambasting 'the Time-type myth of realpolitk', trying out ideas for what became his poem 'America' ('we never had a chinaman's chance'), and linking the 'egotistical direction' of American foreign policy with that of domestic materialism to conclude, with characteristic particularity and wit, that 'the US is lost in a mad dream of plastic lampshades' (2008: 99). Three years later, in December 1957, Ginsberg would name the American Century in 'Death to Van Gogh's Ear', where the term goes together with invoking the national poet-prophet of the nineteenth century on whom Ginsberg modelled his own identity in the twentieth: 'Whitman warned against this "fabled damned of nations"' (Ginsberg, 1985: 169).

Ginsberg was in Paris at this time, writing from his room in the Beat Hotel, and from this vantage point in early spring 1958 his journals record his most sustained and revealing engagement — not with the *Time-Life* publishing empire or the ideology it promoted but directly, personally, with the man behind it:

Who's Henry Luce to exercise influence? A sincere poet? [...] Be a failure / as Melville, as Whitman, as Poe, as Pound, as Christ — / Be Henry Luce not the voice of the machine [...] God doesn't want your reason / he wants your heart / He wants *you* Henry Luce / not your magazine [...] That great building of lighted windows / Rockefeller center — / Hive, stone, elevators, ahoy — I once worked there too. (Ginsberg, 1996: 446–47)

Given his excoriation of the American Century and Luce's magazines, what is significant about Ginsberg's fantasised address is his effort to undo the obvious binaries. Hence, not only the compassion for his enemy but the admission of his own complicity, via the irony that Ginsberg had himself worked (for the AP Radio News Service) in Rockefeller Center, the headquarters of Luce's empire. Ginsberg shows here his anxiety to escape the binary structure of demonisation, a structure that would not only risk binding him to his enemies but his becoming exactly what he opposed. This anxiety was central to much of his writing at this point, and he spelled it out in 'Death to Van Gogh's Ear': 'no more propaganda for monsters / and poets should stay out of politics or become monsters / I have become monstrous with politics' (Ginsberg, 1985: 169). That Luce would not play Ginsberg's game was clear from *Life's* coverage of the Beats at that time, as in the 9 September 1957 issue's 'Big Day for Bards at Bay', which reported the trial of *Howl and Other Poems* in San Francisco, dismissed the scene there as 'the James Dean school of poetry', and featured a photograph of Ginsberg hysterically captioned 'WILD-EYED SHOCKER' (*Life*, 9 September 1957: 108). Two years later, the 21 September 1959 'Squaresville USA vs. Beatsville' article prompted Ginsberg to lament his being deliberately 'confused with the image of a beatnik disseminated via mass media' (Ginsberg, 2008: 224). The media coverage of the Beats in Luce's magazines reached its zenith, or nadir, in the often-cited but never-studied 23 November 1959 issue of *Life*, and its article by Paul O'Neil entitled 'The Only Rebellion Around'. The text, photographs, and framing material context of this article all point to a highly calculated strategic treatment of the Beats that, in turn, points towards the counterstrategy of Ginsberg's own captioned photographs three decades later.



Opposite a one-and-a-half page photographic reconstruction of the stereotypical 'Beat pad', O'Neil's article opens with an extraordinary paragraph:

If the US today is really the biggest, sweetest and most succulent casaba ever produced by the melon patch of civilization, it would seem only reasonable to find its surface profaned — as indeed it is — by a few fruit flies. But reason would also anticipate contented fruit flies, blissful fruit flies — fruit flies raised by happy environment to the highest stages of fruit fly development. Such is not the case. The grandest casaba of all, in disconcerting fact, has incubated some of the hairiest, scrawniest and most discontented specimens of all time: the improbable rebels of the Beat Generation, who not only refuse to sample the seeping juices of American plenty and American social advance but scrape their feelers in discordant scorn of any and all who do. (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 115)

The invective is so over the top that it is easy to miss its extremely precise rhetorical strategy. The striking image of the US as a giant casaba, clearly enough, is used to illustrate the boon of American consumer plenty in a direct allusion to David Potter's 1954 book, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*. That Luce's 'American Century' article had made the promise of 'the more abundant life' a core value confirms its centrality to the mission statement of his magazine (*Life*, 17 February 1941: 64). But in particularising American plenty, the melon patch trope surely also alludes to Ginsberg, directly echoing 'A Supermarket in California', published in *Howl* (1956). Here the poet goes 'shopping for images' and finds not only 'wives in the avocados and babies in the tomatoes' but Walt Whitman 'poking among the meats in the refrigerator' and Garcia Lorca, 'down by the watermelons' (Ginsberg, 1985: 136). Set in the least poetic but most representative national space, a market patrolled by a 'store detective', Ginsberg's poem mocked the naturalisation of the post-war culture of consumption, and the normative sexuality that went with it, in a direct critique of the values promoted by *Life*. Writing to his father two years earlier, Ginsberg had denied *Howl* was about 'destruction or rebellion', insisting 'it only seems so to people who have accepted standard American values as permanent' (Ginsberg, 2001: 81). 'The Only Rebellion Around' lampooned the Beats for 'living in poverty (in the Age of Supermarkets)' and for being 'incapable of making their way in the ordinary competitive world of men' (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 130), making crystal clear the strategy of *Life*: payback.

The animosity of *Life*'s treatment of the Beats has such a personal edge that it is tempting to read it as a response not just to Ginsberg's poems recently published — including 'America', with its direct challenge to Luce's world: 'Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?' (Ginsberg, 1985: 147) — but to Ginsberg himself. Nine months earlier, in February 1959, in the least restrained of the open letters he regularly sent to magazines, Ginsberg had accused the editors at *Time* of having 'brainwashed your millions of readers'; 'you are an instrument of the Devil and crucify America with your lies' (Ginsberg, 2008: 221). Not that staff writer Paul O'Neil needed to read this letter, or Ginsberg's private correspondence with his brother ('the US is lost in a mad dream of plastic lampshades') to know that the Beats were against not just Mom and apple pie but 'the Automatic Dishwasher, the cellophane-wrapped Soda Cracker, the Split-Level house, and the clean, or peace-provoking

H-bomb' (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 115). Bearing in mind that the Nixon-Khrushchev 'Kitchen Debate' had taken place in Moscow only four months earlier, the domestic marvels were not simply the latest consumer products advertised in *Life* but, as the otherwise bizarre inclusion of the H-bomb confirms, symbolic objects of national importance. The devil is always in the detail, but all the more so in Cold War America, which conscripted the minutiae of everyday life into geopolitical service.

In this historical context, if Ginsberg's 'supermarket' mocked the absurdity of being made to 'feel absurd' for rejecting the norms of a nation turning into a police-state disguised as a shopping mall (Ginsberg, 1985: 136), then *Life* did its patriotic duty by placing Ginsberg back inside its own supermarket of a magazine. The essential work of containment and counter-attack does not lie in the text alone, but in the visual framing context created by the advertisements that filled virtually half the issue. The key strategy in the *Life* article was to deliberately blur the distinction between the Beat writers and the beatnik fashion craze and to ridicule both together through the precise juxtaposition of text, photographs, and adverts. That this was calculated is suggested by the extraordinary number and exact location of the advertisements. O'Neil's 5,000-word article runs to seventeen pages, making it by far the longest piece in the issue because of its interruption by no less than twenty-nine separate advertisements, including fourteen half-page and seven full-page spreads. In contrast, no advertisements disrupted a nine-page article on the Marine Corps or the ten-page feature on farming. Luce's own 6,500-word 'American Century' had taken up just five, uninterrupted, pages. The key image in *Life*, brazenly contradicting the article's own differentiation between 'the word Beat or the derisive term, Beatnik', is therefore the first (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 116). Recreating the typical 'Beat pad' while clearly featuring *Beatniks*, the photograph contains the threat posed by the Beat writers by attributing to them the mass production of rebels who all conform to type. A short text accompanying this parody of a lifestyle advertisement mockingly enumerates its visual representation of 'all the essentials of uncomfortable living' (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 115).

This staged photograph features a 'bearded Beat', his dull-looking 'Beat chick', and their 'Beat baby' asleep on the floor among beer cans. Not only does the Beat pad lack a kitchen but the people in it seem literally to come from another world in contrast to the happy Americans in the glossy colour advertisements that follow. The Beat chick won't be buying her man a seventeen-jewel Executive Series Gruen watch ('For the man in your life'), he can't treat her to beautiful melamine dinnerware ('If wishes were dishes . . .'), and they're missing out not only on the Calvert Reserve Scotch, the dual-function Acco power mower ('converts to outboard motor!'), but also a device that could give 'her an odor-free, smoke-free, grease-free kitchen for only \$39.95' (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 115-22). Unlike Jim and Ruby from Kansas and their teenage daughters Cindy and Patty, featured two months previously in the 'Squaresville USA vs. Beatsville' article, who have 'unfailing fun' together with the family photo album (*Life*, 21 September 1959: 32), these absurd losers are excluded from the bright world promised by the latest in Kodak cameras ('Take pictures to save and share the fun!' (*Life*, 21 September 1959: 47)). The alluring sales talk of *Life*'s all-American consumer culture ridicules people who would *choose* to live in a room with a naked light bulb.

In another sign that this issue of *Life* was very carefully organized, strategically aiming to use text and image to confuse the Beat writers with beatniks for the magazine's readership, the horror of the bulb without a lampshade reappears in the photograph of William Burroughs (see <http://images.google.com/hosted/life/f?imgurl=9c4f3585fd1dda28>).

Likewise, a connection to the Beat pad is contrived through the picture of Ginsberg, which is captioned 'LANGUISHING IN HIS PAD' (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 130). The Burroughs caption follows the standard two-line format used for the images of Ginsberg, Corso, Kerouac, and Michael McClure, combining an eye-grabbing headline phrase in capitals with further text: 'EX-DOPE ADDICT William Burroughs, who describes drug-taking in *Junkie* and *Naked Lunch*, now lives in Paris in what has become known as Beat Hotel' (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 124). At first sight, it is surprising how little the article does with these references to drug-taking and foreign residence, but the point is that the image makes further elaboration redundant. Far from evoking the expatriate glamour of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Paris looks boring, grey, and uncomfortable: there Burroughs sits, on a sagging bed staring towards the floor of his tiny room, beneath the naked light bulb. The photographs of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Corso are also revealing: all three are pictured on the set of *Pull My Daisy*, which premiered during the same month in which the *Life* article appeared, a film ironically motivated by Kerouac's desire to correct the 'Beatnik crap' put out by 'embittered journalists' (Amram, 2002: 41). But the image used here of Burroughs, in which he seems not to be writing in the Beat Hotel but serving a long sentence in Beat Prison, is remarkable both for the back story to it and for the strategic reaction it prompted, a reaction that helps to clarify Ginsberg's response to his own treatment in *Life*.

### Cutting up Life

In October 1959 Burroughs told Ginsberg of the reporter-photographer double-act from *Life*, David Snell and Loomis Dean, who had just spent three days with him. He praised their 'Brilliant photography' (Burroughs, 1993: 429), and pictures from the five rolls Dean took have since become some of the most famous images of Burroughs, showing him at his desk with a typewriter, promoting the just-published *Naked Lunch* in a Paris bookstore, chatting with a crowd in the bar of the Beat Hotel, and sitting with his painter friend and collaborator, Brion Gysin.<sup>3</sup> Out of all this variety, and even from alternative shots of Burroughs alone on his bed, *Life* chose the most solitary and literally down-beat image possible.

Snell and Dean's visit has become a familiar biographical anecdote — not, ironically, in relation to *Life* magazine, but in connection to the invention of the cut-up technique, the collagist method of textual *détournement* which Burroughs would spend the next decade developing. This was a discovery, recently made by Gysin, which Burroughs first saw in the presence of the reporter-photographer team from *Life* at the Beat Hotel. Burroughs' reaction to *Life*'s treatment of him — both verbal and visual — has been lost within this larger history. Critics have not recognised therefore that, before Burroughs applied the method to literary sources and his own writing, *Life* played a specific and crucial role in both *Minutes to Go* (1960), the launching manual and manifesto of cut-ups, and in the original application — indeed very conception — of his technique.

*Minutes to Go*, collaboratively written by Burroughs, Gysin, Corso, and Sinclair Beiles, is permeated with references to *Life* and *Time*, from Gysin's 'First Cut-Ups', which lists '*Life Magazine advertisements*' among its source material (Burroughs *et al.*, 1960: 6) to Corso's poem 'SPONTANEOUS PIECE ON THE '50S IN AMERICA', which includes the line: '*Time decade*' (Burroughs *et al.*, 1960: 32). The key evidence for recognising how Burroughs used the cut-up method as a direct and strategic response to 'The Only Rebellion Around' is his first text, 'OPEN LETTER TO LIFE MAGAZINE' (Burroughs *et al.*, 1960: 11–12). Here Burroughs cuts up parts of the 30 November 1959 article by Paul O'Neil and mixes in other texts with absurd results. As an 'open letter', his text presents itself as a riposte to *Life*, but not in the sense of Ginsberg's letters addressing the editor in the obviously hopeless expectation of being published. Instead, Burroughs' text is a ritualised act of verbal sabotage, turning the words of *Life* back against themselves in an exemplary act of pay back.

Exactly three years after O'Neil's article, *Time* in its turn would pay Burroughs back. The 30 November 1962 issue printed a scathing review of *Naked Lunch*, an attack that openly rehearsed the visual features of the 1959 article in *Life* by mocking 'the worn grey man' sitting in his 'worn grey room' among rats in the 'flea-bag shrine' known as the Beat Hotel (*Time*, 1962). Attack and counter-attack continued another three years later, when Burroughs chose this 1962 issue of *Time* as the shell for his own collage newspaper publication entitled *Time* (1965), just one of many works that took the temporality in the title of Luce's magazine literally by experimenting with 'time travel' through finding prophetic 'intersection points' in media reportage (see Harris, 2004). Burroughs' assault on Luce's empire would appear explicitly in his novel-length cut-up texts: from *Nova Express* (1964) — 'Who monopolized Life Time and Fortune?' (Burroughs, 1964: 13) — to the revised edition of *The Ticket That Exploded* (1967), which returned to the strategy of *Minutes to Go* by incorporating comically scrambled lines from the *Time* review of *Naked Lunch* (Burroughs, 1967: 27).

The cut-up technique evolved into an extraordinary series of experiments with word and image (including their technical extensions onto audio tape, photomontage, and film), and Burroughs saw his work as acts of resistance, the material critique of a falsified reality. The materiality of his own work was crucially related to his understanding of how words and images were used to generate specific associations, and his experiments with collages and scrapbooks suggest he learned as much from Luce's photojournalist magazines as from the international avant-garde.<sup>4</sup> Burroughs also used interviews to state explicitly what he saw as the true nature of Luce's news organisation: 'a control system': 'It has nothing to do with reporting', he told the *Paris Review* in 1965; '*Time, Life, Fortune* is some sort of police organization' (Lotringer, 2001: 73). From *Minutes to Go* it is clear that his cut-up methods were originally used in November 1959 for a targeted response to *Life*, but there is also compelling evidence that Burroughs understood his method *per se* as a political deconstruction of Luce's system. In January 1960 two texts appeared in *Evergreen Review*, one — 'Deposition: Testimony concerning a Sickness' (later published as the *de facto* 'Introduction' to *Naked Lunch*) — the other, a redacted cut-up version, entitled 'A Newspeak Précis of the Article Made in Its Image with Its Materials' (Burroughs, 1960: 12–14). Burroughs rarely referred to Orwell, so that his use of the

phrase ‘A Newspeak Précis’ as an alternative to ‘A Cut Up’ confirms the significance of a letter he sent to Ginsberg in December 1959. Noting his mother’s outraged response to ‘The Only Rebellion Around’ — ‘My Old Lady read the *Life* article’ — Burroughs added: ‘PS The name of method is: *Newspeak Poetry*’ (Burroughs, 1959). Although he quickly dropped it — no doubt recognising its limitations — that Burroughs should have initially named his new method in these terms in this precise context leaves no doubt regarding the centrality of Luce’s magazine to the cut-up project as a strategy of counter-attack.

Burroughs’ reaction to *Life* — to fight fire with fire — therefore begs the question of Ginsberg’s response: lacking both the particular technique and temperament of Burroughs, Ginsberg did not seem to have one. Instead, as he started to become a leader of the counterculture in the 1960s, Ginsberg faced an increasing tension between his personal self and public persona and between his creative and political writing. The division appears revealingly in a 1962 letter to Bertrand Russell, where Ginsberg responds to his ‘Act or Perish!’ campaign for nuclear disarmament by considering the visionary poetics of William Blake: ‘I’ve tried as poet 6 years to catalyze in others the sensation Blake woke. Meanwhile assembling long anti-bomb-politics-poetry — which leads maybe [to] action but not to awareness and depth consciousness’ (Ginsberg, 2008: 272). Ginsberg’s anxiety about political poetry aimed at direct ‘action’ — poems ironically built like bombs on an assembly line, he implies — compounds the risk he had seen five years earlier in ‘Death to Van Gogh’s Ear’: that he might become as ‘monstrous’ as his enemies. While writing his ‘political poetry’ in Paris in early 1958, Ginsberg did what he always did when looking for inspiration — looked back to his poet-prophet role models: ‘Blake fits Whitman like a glove to apply to present day epic of Fall of America’ (Kerouac & Ginsberg, 2010: 383). Just four months before O’Neil’s article in *Life*, in his Independence Day 1959 Manifesto (‘Poetry, Violence and the Trembling Lambs’), Ginsberg directly pitted his poetry against the ‘stereotypes of mass communication’, lamenting the ‘false image’ they projected of his nation:

Not the wild and beautiful America of the comrades of Whitman, not the historic America of William Blake and Henry David Thoreau where the spiritual independence of each individual was an America, a universe, more huge and awesome than all the abstract bureaucracies and authoritative officialdoms of the world combined. (Ginsberg, 2000: 5)

It might be overstating the connections to see in his 1980s career as a poet-photographer a delayed reaction to the ‘false image’ put down in the ‘bad poetry’ of *Life*’s photojournalism. However, in looking back three decades to his 1950s private snapshots, Ginsberg certainly continued his long pursuit of a Whitmanian ethics of ‘comrades’ and a Blakean poetics of ‘awareness’ — and, most paradoxically, his aim to catalyse in others the sensation of a huge and awesome universe.

## Dark patches

That the spirit of Walt Whitman seemed to preside over the exhibitions in Washington and London is confirmed in curator Sarah Greenough’s (2010) introductory essay to the ‘Beat Memories’ catalogue, which opens and closes with citations of Whitman

made by Ginsberg himself. Using epigrams first from *Howl* and finally from his book *Photographs*, the quotations in *Beat Memories* are made to connect Ginsberg's practice as poet and photographer through Whitman and in effect to frame his career across four decades.

Taking Ginsberg on his own terms, the 1953 pictures in particular ask to be read as images of fraternity and adhesiveness, embodiments of comradely candour in the original Beat circle. Thus Burroughs is shown, naked except for his shorts, lying on the bed he shared with Ginsberg in his Lower East Side apartment (Greenough, 2010: 40) [Figure 1]. And lest this seem intrusively voyeuristic, Ginsberg's captions sometimes direct attention to the reciprocation of intimacy, noting of the picture of himself laughing: 'Bill must've said something funny from the floor, we were taking snapshots of each other on the same couch, my \$13.00 Kodak Retina pawn-shop camera in Burroughs' hands' (Greenough, 2010: 43) [Figure 2]. The caption invites us to see the particular image in the context of playful sharing, a familiar game between close friends and lovers. That these were *gay* lovers, during the height of the 'lavender scare' and the demonisation of homosexuality as un-American, makes the image an alternative to the official visual history of unending family fun promised by Kodak advertisements and promoted in *Life*. However, Ginsberg's snapshots do not polemicise and do not address a public world: they exist in their own private space, exactly 'like funny, family photos' (quoted in Greenough, 2010: 120), seemingly

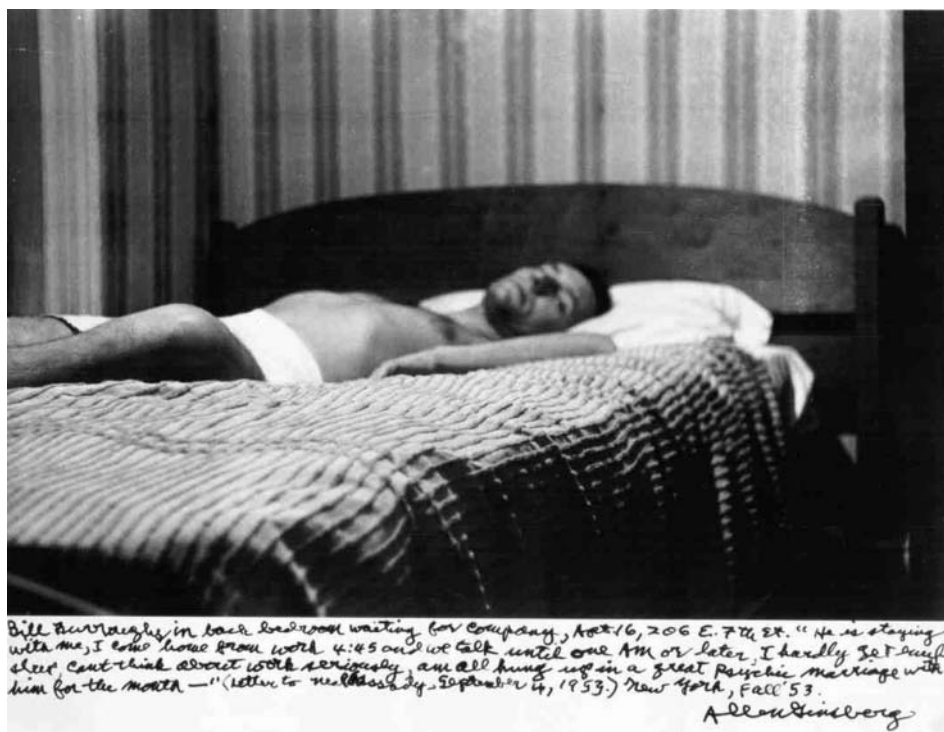


FIGURE 1 William Burroughs lying in bed. Image reproduced with permission from Peter Hale of the Allen Ginsberg Trust.





FIGURE 2 Allen Ginsberg smiling. Image reproduced with permission from Peter Hale of the Allen Ginsberg Trust.

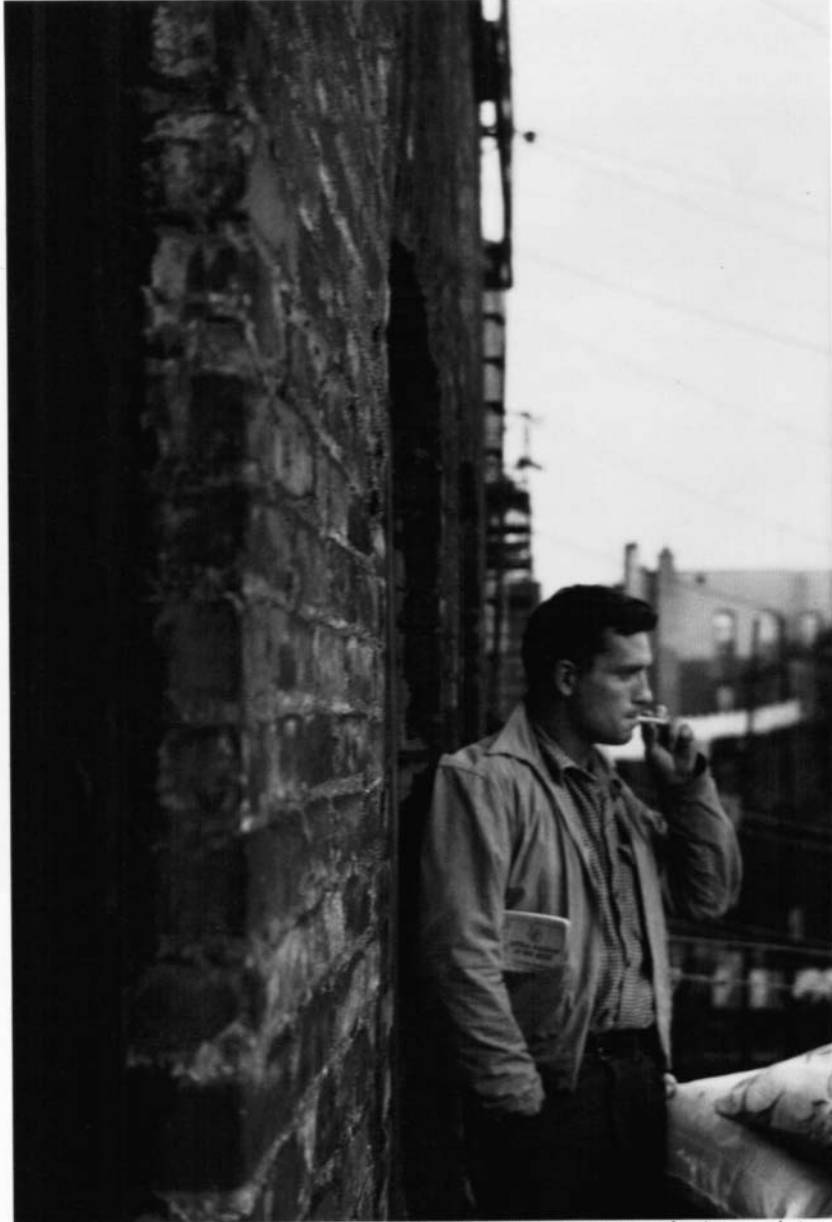
innocent of the wider history that gives them their meaning. This is one reason for the special power and poignancy of the sequences from autumn 1953, because they predate the public fame — and media notoriety — that lay ahead. Only in other contexts would Ginsberg directly relate the personal to the political, as in the ‘slogan’ he offered his Naropa Institute class and with which he closes his interview with Michael Köhler in *Snapshot Poetics*: ‘Candor ends paranoia’ (Ginsberg, 1993: 16).

There are at least two problems with such a reading, however. First, by drawing attention in his caption to the Kodak Retina, Ginsberg brings into the picture the artificial eye of the mechanical apparatus, introducing a self-reflexivity that contradicts the appearance of natural spontaneity. Or rather, it is a reminder that in other shots the very frankness of the look into the camera is itself staged, so that in posing for a portrait the subject inevitably anticipates and participates in the image-making process. As Alan Trachtenberg puts it, what the camera therefore records is ‘a picture of a picture’ (2007: 116). While shots such as Kerouac on the street seem genuinely spontaneous, this staging is especially evident in photographs of Burroughs, most spectacularly when standing beside a sphinx in the Metropolitan Museum (Greenough, 2010: 45). Far less obviously, it also applies to the image of Burroughs and Kerouac caught in the middle of a mock fight using a broomstick and a Moroccan dagger (Ginsberg, 1990: n.p.). While the picture is blurred, suggesting the camera’s inability to freeze action as it happens, Ginsberg’s caption reveals them as performers of a falsification: ‘They had to hold still a full second while I steadied

camera on back of chair'.<sup>5</sup> Equally, while the snapshots were supposedly private, not taken with any intention of use beyond Ginsberg's circle of friends, the fact that so many of them did come to be used publicly is significant. The famous picture of Kerouac on the fire escape, for example, looks much more like a publicity shot for Kerouac the author than a personal snap of Allen's friend Jack — a point underscored by Ginsberg recalling in the caption that Kerouac had already published *The Town and the City* (1950), and listing his other manuscripts up to and including *The Subterraneans* (Greenough, 2010: 47) [Figure 3]. Even more clearly, the picture of Burroughs behind a row of books, taken from the fire escape looking into Ginsberg's apartment, forms a pair with an almost identical image of Kerouac (reproduced on facing pages in *Photographs*), suggesting a literary self-consciousness in how the shot was set up. As Ginsberg's caption notes, the picture of Burroughs would indeed soon be used as an image of the author, 'inside dust-jacket rear flap Olympia Press first edition *Naked Lunch*' (Ginsberg, 1993: 23).

It might be argued that these snapshots bear out what Jason Arthur has called Ginsberg's practice of 'public privacy', so that they extend his 'careful manipulation and publication of written materials not originally intended to be public (i.e. letters and journals)' (Arthur, 2010: 227). The precise timing — autumn 1953 — would support such an interpretation. As Ginsberg observes in his picture of Kerouac on the fire escape, he himself 'scribed "The Green Automobile"' at this time (Greenough, 2010: 47). Based on his love affair with Neal Cassady six years earlier, this was a vital breakthrough for Ginsberg's open articulation of desire in his poetry. That the poem was addressed to Cassady not only rhetorically but materially — mailed in manuscript across the continent to San Jose in June 1953 — inscribes it within an epistolary economy of shared intimacies, making it an exemplary act of personal communication at odds with the self-policing of desire and expression in Cold War America (see Harris, 2000). This in turn is a reminder that in autumn 1953 Burroughs was back in New York for the first time in six years, bringing to an end his and Ginsberg's own long-distance letter relationship and leading to, as Ginsberg notes in one caption, an affair he called their 'psychic marriage' (Greenough, 2010: 40). Prompted by this renewal of the original Beat circle and by his breakthrough in turning private desires into publishable poetry, Ginsberg might therefore have taken the snapshots in anticipation of their future use. But if this is the case, the results actively undermine his claim for a Whitmanian snapshot poetics, in which 'Candor ends paranoia'.

The candour of Ginsberg's photographs might transcend the artifice of their staging but not the sanitized history they narrate both visually and verbally. For little in either the images or their captions hints at the dark side of the relations between Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac. Autumn 1953 was less a time of private Whitmanian candour than of a paranoia more reminiscent of the wider public culture of Cold War America. Ginsberg admits as much in a June 1953 letter to Cassady, complaining that Kerouac had infected Cassady 'with his anti-semitic paranoia' and had not long ago mailed him 'a poison pen paranoid letter': all in all, he felt lost in a 'labyrinth of paranoia' (Ginsberg & Cassady, 1977: 149). When Ginsberg's caption refers to his 'psychic marriage' with Burroughs, he does so by citing his letter of 4 September 1953, but the selective quotation is misleading. There is no hint here of how disastrously



Jack Kerouac, railroad brakeman's rule-book in pocket, couch-pillows lying on fire-escape three flights up overlooking backyard Cliftonville South. He'd already published *The Town & the City*, completed a treasury of half-dozen *Unpublished Classic Volumes* including *On the Road*, *Visions of Cody*, *Doctor Sax*, *Early Roots of Blues and Dreams*; he had begun *The Subterraneans*' adventurous love affair with dilemna her, "Mardon Fox": Allen typed for W.S. Burroughs then in resistance editing *yoze letters to Quebec mss.*, unquenchable that decade, censorship ruled. I scribbled "The Green Automobile," Gregory Corso visited that season, 206 East 7th Street near Tompkins Park, Manhattan, probably September 1953.

Allen Ginsberg

FIGURE 3 Kerouac on fire escape. Image reproduced with permission from Peter Hale of the Allen Ginsberg Trust.

their one-sided sexual affair would end, how desperate Ginsberg was to quit his ‘grubby’ job as a copyboy and escape both Burroughs and New York (154). If these photographs followed in any way the strategy of ‘public privacy’ modelled by ‘The Green Automobile’, then it is the sense that, as he also wrote in the 4 September letter, Ginsberg idealized the actual experience — his affair with Cassady was in reality a sado-masochistic fantasy — in order to ‘make a legend of love out of it’: ‘The point of this poem is to rewrite history’ (153). The same might be said of the narrative created by the ‘legends’ Ginsberg added to his 1953 photographs (literally, ‘to be read’; as in the French term for a caption: *une légende*). Viewed as art they constitute ‘some recognizable human-angelic ideal’ (153) that imaginatively rediscovers ‘the lost America of love’ he lamented in ‘A Supermarket in California’ (Ginsberg, 1985: 136). Viewed as historical documents, they compromise the spirit of candour, Whitman’s ideal of open communication that stood as the definitive indictment of Cold War culture for Ginsberg. His photographs and captions fail to include what, in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ (the source of Ginsberg’s epigram in *Photographs*), Whitman termed ‘the dark patches’ (2004: 193).

### Not the voice of the machine

In her introductory essay to *Beat Memories*, Sarah Greenough attributes Ginsberg’s captions to the inspiration of Robert Frank, but this is contradicted not only by Raymond Foye, the archivist who worked with Ginsberg at the time (who credits Elsa Dorfman’s influence),<sup>6</sup> but by Frank’s own practice. Although, as Greenough notes, since ‘the early 1970s he had also written on his photographs’ (2010: 15), Frank’s very short phrases have little in common with the style of long prose captions developed by Ginsberg. Despite Ginsberg’s own allusions to *The Americans*, if anything, Frank is important as a counter-example. His practice in 1959 typified the absolute priority he gave pictures over text, and his short place-name captions on separate facing pages in *The Americans* — none longer than ten words — demonstrated, as Rob Kroes observes, that ‘Frank wished his photographs to speak for themselves’ (Kroes, 2007: 139). And so, while Ginsberg’s own practice as a poet-photographer was as far removed as Frank’s from the model of *Life*’s 1950s photojournalism, it fundamentally differed in seeming to lack faith in the image’s ability to tell its own story. The logical conclusion would seem to be that Ginsberg used his captions to exercise control, making his reading of the image inseparable from it by writing directly onto his prints. The poet of the 1980s appears literally to have overwritten the work of the 1950s photographer. Put like this, however, we begin to see the unexpected complexity, indeed the uniqueness, of Ginsberg’s hybridised work and to recognise the inadequacy of thinking in traditional terms of ‘photograph’ and ‘caption’ at all.

Whether influenced by Robert Frank, Berenice Abbot, Elsa Dorfman or Raymond Foye, the point is that there were precedents for Ginsberg’s specific practice of writing directly onto his prints. However, for a poet to do so onto photographs he had taken thirty or forty years earlier — before he was a published poet and long before he thought of himself as a photographer — is surely unprecedented. This is one reason for the singularity of the early photographs: whatever their conventional ‘historic’ value as documents and whatever their aesthetic properties, they take to its

limit the collaboration between photographer and poet, which is both a collaboration between media and across time. Both Sarah Greenough and Erik Mortenson have written insightfully about these images and their captions, but there is much more to understand about the complex temporality and hybrid results of Ginsberg's work as a poet-photographer.

Analysed in isolation, the most obvious feature of Ginsberg's captions is their combination of documentary function and poetic quality. Written in his typically condensed style, many have the deceptively simple prose rhythms of a haiku and could easily be arranged accordingly:

William S. Burroughs looking serious,  
sad lover's eyes,  
afternoon light in window. (Greenough, 2010: 41)

Jack Kerouac,  
railroad brakeman's rule-book in pocket,  
couch-pillows airing on fire escape. (Greenough, 2010: 47)

However, if Ginsberg's texts invite us to read his photographs, the opposite is also true: the images invite us to *see* his captions. That is to say, the visual properties of the captions are essential, as is immediately evident when comparing Ginsberg's handwritten originals with the standard typed text versions that also appear both on the gallery walls in the exhibitions and in various book publications. This is why they can no more be read simply as poems than as sources of documentary information. Greenough rightly observes that the autograph writing has several crucial effects, one of which is to physically slow down the spectator (2010: 16). Time spent reading what lies beneath the image naturally encourages more time spent looking at the photograph, and the majority of captions direct our attention *into* the image. But the visible traces of the poet's hand also revoke the technical anonymity of the camera eye: the retina may belong to Kodak, but the penmanship is unmistakably personal and makes Ginsberg's actual signature superfluous. Odd slips of the pen that are crudely corrected confirm the spontaneity and improvisational quality of the writing. The autograph script thus re-inscribes authenticity and subjectivity and is the graphic equivalent of the grain of the voice. When Ginsberg mailed Neal Cassady 'The Green Automobile' poem in November 1953 — the very time he took these photographs — he commented, 'in hand M.S.S. to make it more real' (Ginsberg, 1977: 160). This claim to authentic presence is in turn evoked in Ginsberg's caption added three decades later that archaically phrases his authorship of the poem as 'scribed'. Needless to say, in all these respects, Ginsberg's captions are as far removed as possible formally — irrespective of content — from the standard length, uniform format, mechanically typed and anonymous captions used in *Life* magazine. His appeal to its publisher in 1958 — 'Be Henry Luce not the voice of the machine' — went unanswered, but Ginsberg's own practice as a poet-photographer modelled the counter example.

In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes describes the attraction that makes a photograph suddenly come into existence for the viewer as a process of *animation*: 'The photograph itself is in no way animated [. . .] but it animates me' (1981: 20). In Ginsberg's practice, the otherwise lifeless photograph, immobile and silent, is animated and



brought to life, by the visible vitality of his writing. This is achieved most literally in the caption that ventriloquises for Burroughs his speech to Kerouac in the shot of them sitting on Ginsberg's couch [Figure 4]. While this might be seen as another way to control the image, to literally force it to speak words that Ginsberg puts into his subject's mouth, the enormous temporal gap between the past image and present writing is so clear that the effect is entirely opposite. Whereas the anonymous captions in *Life* were instances in miniature of Luce's project of reductive synthesis, Ginsberg's do not lay claim to objective knowledge or falsify history but demonstrate the past's subjective existence for him as a memory he can literally hear right now. This is the case more generally, where the effect of Ginsberg's handwriting is to turn the frozen past of the photograph into a present response that releases its memorial and affective function as a living experience. Ginsberg does not so much re-write the past as he re-presents each photograph. And so, if the term 'captions' is entirely inadequate to describe Ginsberg's practice it is not, paradoxically, because they add a poetic quality to the photographs. On the contrary, in their improvised spontaneity and in the priority they give to the act of writing over the written text, they *renew* the photographic snapshots. The term *caption* applies in its literal sense: from the Latin *capere*, to seize or to take. Seized by the image, it is as if Ginsberg re-takes the snapshot by writing onto it. Or, to invoke Walter Benjamin's well-known terms from 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', the past is responded to as 'an image which flashes up' in the present at the moment of recognition (1973: 257).

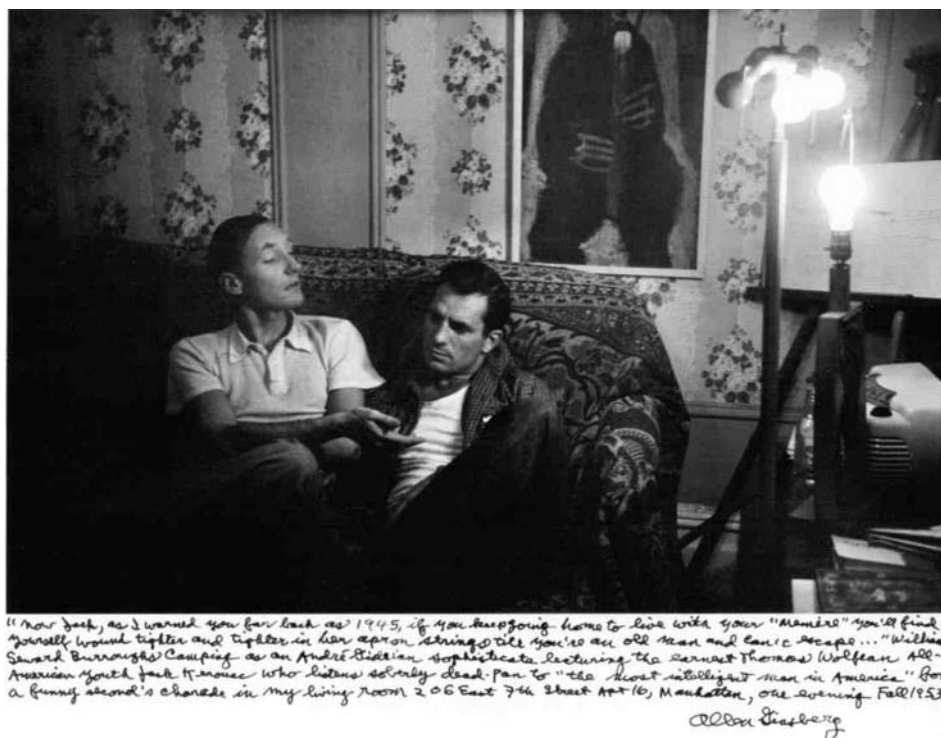


FIGURE 4 Burroughs and Kerouac in conversation. Image reproduced with permission from Peter Hale of the Allen Ginsberg Trust.



Bringing the past into the present is the essential feature of Ginsberg's hybridisation of word and image and his emphasis on temporality appears both within individual captions and, more strategically and remarkably, across them as a whole. In the case of the speech that Ginsberg ventriloquises for Burroughs, the 1980s poet puts into the mouth of Burroughs' image from 1953 words that in turn both look back a decade ('Now Jack as I warned you far back as 1945 ...') and then forward in time (to anticipate what 'literary critics of the Future' will say about Kerouac) [Figure 5]. These looks back and forward are significant because they internalise the very situation of Ginsberg when he wrote his captions onto these images from the 1950s, as the older poet looks back from a position of public fame in the 1980s and meets the gaze of the aspirant poet and amateur photographer looking forward to a time when his poems will be read, and by association his snapshots will be looked at by others. This complex mirroring of looks across time points to why Ginsberg chose an epigram from 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' for his book *Photographs* (1990). For, like Whitman who 'laid in my stores in advance' (2004: 194), Ginsberg the archivist of his own future also addresses those who will look back at him: 'Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you' (in *Photographs*, 1990). Ginsberg's photographs are far from being documentary records of people in the past, but are really engaged in creating effects on other, unknown



FIGURE 5 Burroughs and Kerouac in conversation with longer caption. Image reproduced with permission from Peter Hale of the Allen Ginsberg Trust.

people in their present. In addressing *us*, Ginsberg's photo-poetics is about time travel. It is here, finally, that we see the double significance of William Blake and can also grasp the most remarkable yet overlooked dimension of Ginsberg's practice.

## Time machine

When Ginsberg discussed photography in interviews during the late 1980s and early 1990s he stressed his understanding of its temporal 'special powers', describing his experience of Berenice Abbot's studies of 1930s New York as 'like going back in a time machine' (Ginsberg, 1993: 12), and in turn seeing his own 'older photos' as 'like having a telescope into time' (quoted in Greenough, 2010: 120). What makes his retrospective understanding of photography significant, however, is its extension of how he previously saw the prophetic powers of his poetry. In a 1965 interview with Tom Clark, for example, he described the ambition of his poems in terms of photographs, in the sense that their meaning only 'becomes clear' in time, 'like a photograph developing slowly': 'What prophecy actually is', he explained, is 'knowing and feeling something which someone knows and feels in a hundred years, and maybe articulating it in a hint' (quoted in Ginsberg, 2002: 26). At the root of this understanding was Ginsberg's famous Harlem vision of William Blake in 1948, when he had heard the poet's voice reciting the poem ('Ah! Sunflower') he had himself been reading:

The thing I understood from Blake was that it was possible to transmit a message through time which could reach the enlightened, that poetry had a definite effect [...] Blake could transmit his consciousness and communicate it to somebody else after he was dead — in other words, build a time machine. (Ginsberg, 2002: 27)

We might say that the photographs Ginsberg took five years after his vision of Blake were only *developed* thirty years later through his inscription of captions: picking up the 'hint' from his younger photographer self, the older poet used his writing to transform these images from the past into time machines. The content of Blake's message was itself a visionary awareness of life, and in *Photographs* (1990) Ginsberg would recognise it in the attentiveness of 'ordinary mind' that turns the quotidian into unique 'epiphanous moments', as in the work of Kerouac and Robert Frank (Ginsberg, 1990: n.p.). The specific and crucial connection to Blake, however, is not spelled out by Ginsberg, and is missed by Greenough in her otherwise excellent essay, when she quotes what I take to be the key line in Ginsberg's 'Commentary on Sacramental Companions': 'There are minute particulars, and photographs preserve the noticing of their place in history' (Greenough, 2010: 17). In *Jerusalem*:

Labour well the Minute Particulars: attend to the Little Ones [...]
 He who would do good to another, must do it in Minute Particulars
 General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, & flatterer:
 For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars,
 And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power.
 The Infinite alone resides in Definite & Determinate Identity. (Blake, 2004: 745)

The importance of Blake lies in two directions: inwards to see the particulars in Ginsberg's work, and outwards to set against it the generalising, rational, abstract

‘General Good’ represented in shorthand by the photojournalistic world view of *Time-Life*. Ironically, if there is a connection between Ginsberg’s photographs and those of Robert Frank, it was made by *Life* itself when awarding him second prize in their 1951 competition, and noting that ‘Frank aims his camera at familiar “little” things’ (26 November 1951: 21). Ginsberg himself only recognised this function in his 1953 photographs when he had new prints made in the mid-1980s, and ‘was amazed, particularly when I saw enlargements of images I had never cared to have drugstore prints made of’ (Ginsberg: 1993, 12). Only then did he recognise what Barthes (1981) called the *punctum*, the marks of contingency in the image, the small and ordinary elements that, far from being insignificant, animate in the viewer a state of wonder. The view in retrospect, however, clarifies that the attentive state of ‘ordinary mind’ had nothing to do with the photographs taken by Ginsberg in the 1950s but are entirely a function of his inscribing onto them his captions from the 1980s. The ‘couch-pillows airing on fire escape’ noticed in his caption to Kerouac on the fire escape are a case in point: a detail almost impossible to see prior to the production of enlarged high-quality prints, such as those put on display in Ginsberg’s exhibitions. His caption transforms the ‘historical importance’ of the image — as a picture of Kerouac, the soon-to-be-famous author — into an awareness of Blake’s ‘Infinite’ through our engagement by the utterly mundane and contingent juxtaposed detail. This same image invites us to share the revelation that Ginsberg experienced in 1948 while staring at the cornices of his building in Harlem, asks us to see the detailed texture of the bricks next to Kerouac as more than just brickwork, not despite but because it has no value whatsoever as a sign of anything else. The most ordinary thing in life becomes infinitely precious in itself, as Chögyam Trungpa stated and Ginsberg never tired of repeating: ‘Things are symbols of themselves’ (quoted in Ginsberg, 1990: n.p.). Staring at the brickwork next to Kerouac puts us in the position of Bergotte in Proust’s novel, utterly captured by the sight of the ‘petit pan de mur jaune’ in Vermeer’s ‘View of Delft’ — a view of a wall that literally turns into a *vision* (Proust, 1988: 692).<sup>7</sup>

Blake’s visionary attention to material particulars inspires Ginsberg’s re-vision of his 1953 photographs expressed in his caption writing. It also clarifies how Ginsberg responded to the vision of the world embodied by *Life* magazine, and why, on 4 July 1959, he had associated Blake, Whitman, and Thoreau to declare that ‘the spiritual independence of each individual was an America, a universe, more huge and awesome than all the abstract bureaucracies and authoritative officialdoms of the world combined’ (Ginsberg, 2000: 5). Ginsberg’s absolute inversion of scale becomes the most politically as well as spiritually vital challenge he can make to the world of the official Big Picture. Such a reading extends the analysis of Greenough and Mortenson, but there is a further overlooked element that takes everything to a higher level.

One of the limitations in the ‘Beat Memories’ and ‘Angelheaded Hipster’ exhibitions was their conventional aesthetic of the single image, ignoring the quite different effects generated by displaying photographs in a series, as is usually evident from contact sheets. In the case of Ginsberg’s work, however, this issue takes on an entirely different meaning because of his practice of writing *multiple* captions — and to an extraordinary extent: in the case of his photograph of Kerouac on the fire escape Ginsberg wrote at least forty different versions of the caption. When Edmund White objected to the inflation in the sales value of Ginsberg’s photographs created by

handwritten captions that turned ‘them into unique objects’, his cynicism about motives may be unjustified but his point becomes all-important when we recognise that no two of Ginsberg’s prints are the same. Against the logic of mechanical reproduction, by constantly varying his inscriptions Ginsberg ensured that each print of a photograph becomes unique, particular. His original motive may actually have been entirely pragmatic — rewriting his text each time a print was requested — but we can interpret his practice as both a fulfilment of his 1950s opposition to mass production — in ‘America’: ‘I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as individual as his automobiles more so they’re all different sexes’ (Ginsberg, 1985: 147) — and as modelled on Blake’s printing of illuminated poems. Ginsberg was certainly well aware of the processes of relief etching and hand colouring and its ideological implications, observing of Blake’s work in 1969 that ‘there was no robot mechanical repetition in any copy’ (Ginsberg, 2002: 277). While not pretending to exist outside the market, Ginsberg’s work as a poet-photographer defines itself against the dominant division of labour and the hegemony of the machine.

Only a lengthy, detailed taxonomy could do justice to Ginsberg’s production of multiple captions, but three issues are paramount. First, in writing and re-writing his captions, Ginsberg significantly complicates them. Thus in the case of the picture of Kerouac listening to Burroughs — whose caption exists in at least a dozen variants, ranging from 21 to 695 words in length — he creates an apparently reductive binary of national identities that opposes the ‘All-American’ Kerouac to the ‘Gidean sophisticate’ Burroughs; but this binary is undone in the longest caption, where Ginsberg ventriloquises a second speech in which Burroughs now draws attention to Kerouac’s ‘French-Canadian family heart’ [Figure 6]. Second, in the majority of cases, the variations are typically *minute*, in keeping with Ginsberg’s Blakean inversion of scale, but the range of permutations can be remarkably extensive. This applies to even the simplest of elements, such as Burroughs’ name, which across captions is permuted in eight different ways: William Seward Burroughs; W.S. Burroughs; Wm. S. Burroughs; W.S.B.; Wm. Burroughs; Bill Burroughs; Burroughs; Bill. This might not seem to *matter*, in contrast to subtle but more referentially significant permutations, such as the variations describing Kerouac listening to Burroughs: ‘All-American Thomas Wolfean youth’; ‘the earnest Thomas Wolfean All-American youth’; ‘the all-American serious Thomas Wolfean youth’; ‘country bumpkin Thomas Wolfean American youth’.<sup>8</sup> I would argue that the permutation of phrasing not only changes the meaning — when ‘All-American’ turns into ‘country bumpkin’ Ginsberg’s irony comes out into the open — but is in itself meaningful and, cumulatively, curiously affective: when the image from the past stays the same but the telling of it keeps changing, we are reminded that the past does not actually stay the same at all, is not objectively ‘out there’ as things that happened, but always in the process of being written. Third, precisely because the exhibitions and books of Ginsberg’s photographs fail to demonstrate any of this variety, to unexpectedly encounter a variant version and recognise it as such becomes an *uncanny* experience. To see again Kerouac on the fire escape but to read a caption that lacks the ‘couch-pillows’ is strangely disorienting. Once noticed, variations keep turning up in unexpected places to create new experiences. If each caption is Ginsberg’s *take* — a play on words he seems to have used knowingly, from his analysis of Blake’s own verbal-visual hybrids: ‘The illustrations

give us new takes on how Blake views his subjects' (Ginsberg, 2002: 284) — then by rewriting the caption he *re-takes* the image, *re-presenting* it again and again. Whereas the captioned images of the Beats in *Life* magazine will never change, Ginsberg keeps writing in response to the image because he keeps looking, avoids repeating himself by renewing the encounter, a living response we are invited to share.

It is no coincidence that the photographs inspiring by far the most variations and the longest captions were the earliest pictures. In pragmatic terms, these may have been the most in demand by galleries, publishers, and friends, but they are also the ones where the temporal gap between poet and photographer is largest and so the questions posed for identity, memory, and history are most significant. Inscribing each print with new words — *especially* when the differences are minor, such as permutations in the order of phrases — becomes an ingenious solution to not only the fixity of the image and the reification of the past it implies, but to Ginsberg's own sense of self-image, which is above all problematic given his combination of Buddhism with Romantic humanism. The autograph script clearly centres Ginsberg as author and subject, but the multiplication of captions, each functioning as a spontaneous response in a present moment charged with a sense of the Blakean Infinite, multiplies that self, implying both continuity and acceptance of change. What matters is awareness of the *punctum* — in the photograph, in life — not holding onto it as a static image. This is not only consistent with the First Noble Truth — that life is transitory — but could be taken as a reply to those unable to accept the fall of America, like the neo-Imperialists who, for Amy Kaplan 'show the difficulties of accepting peaceably a future of loss, or relinquishing an image of oneself as the indispensable nation of futurity, without imagining annihilation and apocalypse, or the end of time' (2009: 31). And so, while it is in the very nature of Ginsberg's work as a poet-photographer that little in it points to the bigger historical picture — to his war against Orwellian Newspeak, the Age of Advertising, the Atomic Era, or the American Century — it could be said that in its minute particulars he found a way to beat *Time* and *Life*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Shaw, poster for 'Angelheaded Hipsters', The National Theatre, London, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The full contents of *Life* magazine are available online via Google Books at: <<http://books.google.com/books/about/LIFE.tml?id=R1cEAAAAMBAJ>>.

<sup>3</sup> Photographs taken by Loomis Dean for *Life* are available at: <<http://www.life.com/search/?type=purchasable&qo=william+s.+burroughs&page=2>>.

<sup>4</sup> From his own collages it certainly looks as though Burroughs noticed and then practised the strikingly precise juxtaposition of photograph, text, and advertising in the 30 November 1959 issue of *Life*. Just below his captioned image, a line notes that Burroughs had 'dosed himself' with 'a hashish candy'; immediately to the left of the photograph and text appears an advert for sore throat antibiotics: 'Candettes taste like orange candy, but don't let that fool you' (*Life*, 30 November 1959: 124). Evolving

from a deconstruction of commercial and media sign systems, Burroughs' extensive verbal-visual experiments in the 1960s were themselves commercially unprofitable, but they give the lie to claims that his turn to painting in the 1980s was no more than a sudden and cynical late-career move.

<sup>5</sup> Caption courtesy of database provided by Peter Hale of the Allen Ginsberg Trust, whose generous help I would like to acknowledge along with permission to reproduce Ginsberg's photographs and captions.

<sup>6</sup> Email from Raymond Foye, 24 August 2011: 'Robert Frank was a great influence but not so much on the captions as I recall. It was very much [Elsa] Dorfman'.

<sup>7</sup> For making the connection to Proust, my thanks to Véronique Lane.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Hale database of captions.

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## Notes on contributor

Oliver Harris is Professor of American literature at Keele University. He has written extensively on the Beat Generation and his scholarship includes editing five editions of works by William Burroughs. He is the author of *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (2003) and co-editor of *Naked Lunch@50: Anniversary Essays* (2009). In 2010 he became the founding President of the European Beat Studies Network. Publisher for both these books is Southern Illinois University Press.

Correspondence to: Professor Oliver Harris, American Studies, Keele University, Staffordshire, ST5 5BG, UK. Email: [o.c.g.harris@ams.keele.ac.uk](mailto:o.c.g.harris@ams.keele.ac.uk)