

Cold War Correspondents: Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady, and the Political Economy of Beat Letters

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On June 23, 1953, an aspiring poet employed as a copyboy for the New York *World Telegram* wrote a long letter to an old friend in San Jose. The letter ends by reproducing a telegraph sent to President Eisenhower protesting what David Caute has called “the midsummer’s night of postwar anti-Communist, anti-Soviet hysteria” (62)—the electrocution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the so-called atom spies: “Rosenbergs are pathetic, government Will sordid, execution obscene America caught in crucifixion machine only barbarians want them burned I say stop it before we fill our souls with death-house horror” (Ginsberg, *As Ever* 150). Since the copyboy was Allen Ginsberg and the friend Neal Cassady, the letter witnesses a precise intersection of the dominant narrative action of early Cold War America and its dissident counternarrative as represented by key figures in the emergent Beat movement. However, in context of the *exemplary* character of Beat cultural politics, Ginsberg’s telegram of public protest is not just atypical—his friends were shocked at him for “*doing* anything outright about his political complaints” (Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road* 222)—but anomalous. What’s important is not the intersecting of narratives, personal and political, dominant and dissenting, but their correspondence. Defining the relation between Cold War and Beat generation along the double axis private/public and personal/political, Ginsberg’s letter turns out to be a key document, and this unlikely point of departure brings to light a scene that is central to what might be termed the political economy of Beat letters.

The Rosenberg case was one of a series of national and highly public trials stamped by the paranoid style of American politics, a style that re-

sponded to global stalemate by waging domestic war on enemies within. This was a total conflict fought on microscopic scale and through inflated symbolic dramas, so that the early Cold War years were marked by an unprecedented politicization of culture and by the conscription of private life in the name of national security. The key to political containment abroad was, then, personal self-containment at home, and the Cold War penetration of the private by the public was as much a matter of patriotic self-policing and voluntary self-censorship as of panoptic state surveillance. In context of this disciplinary and demonizing feature of Cold War culture, the hyperbolic escalation of the Rosenbergs into evil “atom spies”—condemned to death by Judge Irving Kaufman for a “diabolical conspiracy to destroy a God-fearing nation” (qtd. in Caute 67)—represented a definitive escalation of the local. The Rosenberg case did not prove that scientific secrets vital to national security had been betrayed. Rather, it proved the assumption that an absolute secret existed in the first place—what Caute called the Myth of the Vital Secret—and that it might be given away by what passed for ordinary men and women. Absolute secrets demand absolute secrecy. The Secret therefore motivates all the secrets of everyday life and equals their apocalyptically scaled-up master narrative: it symbolized the total implications of mundane acts in a war whose front line was, ideally, not just here or there but everywhere and implicating everyone.

What turned the Rosenberg case into a central document in this politicized field of Cold War culture was its transformation into a particular kind of text—an epistolary text. I refer to *Death House Letters*, the correspondence between Ethel and Julius from their cells in Sing Sing. This notorious exchange served as vital political propaganda for the Rosenbergs at the time and was then used as an essential text *against* their intellectual sympathizers in the aftermath of their deaths. Here I refer to the articles in *Commentary* and *Encounter* by Robert Warshaw and Leslie Fiedler respectively, two cultural critics who took it upon themselves to subject the Rosenbergs to a second trial, this time by New Critical close readings of their letters.¹ The case against the letter writers can be reduced to this: they no longer knew the difference between private and public. For “exploiting their final intimacies to strike a blow in the Cold War” while hiding their communism behind the double talk of believing in “roses and children’s laughter” (Rosenberg 30), Fiedler is merciless: the “obscurity” or “tragedy,” as he calls it, is that their private selves had disappeared inside an entirely political identity, one as false and empty as the rhetoric of their letters (41–42).

This history and analysis are now well known, but few historians or analysts of the Rosenbergs and their letters have done more than touch upon the significance of the epistolary situation or medium itself. Thus Warshaw

observes simply that they “had to communicate frequently in letters” because, for “the two years in the death cells they lived within about a hundred feet of each other but could be together only during brief weekly visits” (33). Warshaw doesn’t register how truly bizarre this situation was, or how potentially revealing. He passes over both the symbolic resonance and the chain of effect that connects the Rosenbergs, forced to correspond from inside their jailhouse, to the disciplinary economy of Cold War communication at work on the outside.² For the letter writers are both tenor and vehicle in an allegory of their times: maybe the Rosenbergs’ letters *were* as false and inauthentic as their politicized selves, but so too were the conditions of writing imposed so punitively upon them. In a masterly review of Warshaw and Fiedler, Andrew Ross makes a tangential point, recognizing that the language of their letters

is no more “artificial” than that of professional poets or prophets, who, when they write their letters with an eye to their publication, are nonetheless obliged to show in some way that their writing is both “natural” and indifferent to the public eye. (27)

Ross is surely right here, and his comments suggest an inviting link back to Ginsberg. But this link demands historical specificity: we have to understand the early 1950s as fixing a very particular epistolary context for poet-prophets as well as for atom spies.

The Rosenbergs could be found guilty of living their private lives politically because this was a period proclaiming the end of ideology: any alternatives to a hegemonic national narrative were *necessarily* false. And so Warshaw derides “their absolute and dedicated alienation from truth and experience” (43) while, as Molly Hite puts it when analyzing Robert Coover’s fictionalization, *The Public Burning*, “If one is functioning freely and out of the authentic core of one’s being, one will oppose Communism” (90). Now, given the series of guilt-by-association equations that characterized the paranoid style of American Cold War politics, opposition to communism could require other apolitically “authentic” and natural “functioning,” such as homophobia, resistance to equal rights, and in the realm of a massively expanding consumer culture, the love of full iceboxes that showed loyalty to “economic nationalism” (Ewan 211) and so befitted the national character of David Potter’s *People of Plenty* (1954). But the discourse of homogeneity only manufactures difference, always enlarges the field of the Other: this supposedly desirable and authentic national identity, invisibly constructed in such absolute terms and imposing equally invisible and absolute disciplinary limits on experience, inevitably *produced* self-alienation.

When the stakes for failing to coincide fully with an identity coded as

natural are so high, in terms of personal anxiety and national security, it is a short step from falsifying oneself in public to falsifying oneself in private—which is why the epistolary scene is so resonant in the Cold War context. The letter exchange is vulnerable to incriminating interception and authoritarian state censorship, a liability that makes the postal system, as Wilhelm Reich argued, an emblematic site for the “arbitrary practices” of a bureaucratic apparatus exercising power (307). The exchange of personal letters becomes an exemplary field of private expression and communication that can either confirm by reproducing or betray by contradicting the public discourses of loyalty and authenticity. And as I have been implying, the death-house letters of Julius and Ethel conformed to a “false consciousness” in ways that fulfilled the highest expectations of anticommunist ideology. Bearing the stamp of a wider economy of self-misrepresentation, these letters were premeditated and staged for publication in ways that echoed the self-control and self-surveillance demanded by Cold War discourse, which makes them contrived and fabricated equally by the closed world of their authors’ communism and by the free world of their authors’ jailers. Ironic then, but no coincidence, that Fiedler should have indicted the Rosenbergs for their “refusal of candor” (xi), since Walt Whitman’s ideal of open communication stood, for Ginsberg, as the definitive indictment of Cold War culture.

To bring our narratives together, and to enable one to be read through the other, it might be said that where the Rosenbergs were found guilty of living their personal lives as political allegories, the Beats became notorious for seeing the details of theirs as symbolic cultural texts. But if it’s true to say that Cold War ideology reduced the political to the personal—in the sense that dissent equaled deviance—it won’t do to generalize that the “Beats’ spontaneous, free-wheeling writing publicized their personal existence, and made it political” (Farrell 66). To say that the Beats—to prolong another generalization—invaded a well-policed public world with their wildly spontaneous private writing is to reify a categorical distinction that will not hold. Such a private/public binary misrepresents the complexities of and contradictions within Beat experience and aesthetic practice, misunderstands the historically specific interpenetration of politics and culture, and ignores what Derrida identified as a general “*crise de la destination*” for which the letter is emblematic. If, as Ginsberg claimed, private behavior was not only the basis of their “cultural breakthrough” but also “the ultimate politics” (qtd. in Miles, *Ginsberg* 531), then it is fully understandable why the letter should occupy a vital, but not always visible, space in Beat cultural politics.

Historically linked to the romantic idealization of spontaneity (see Perry

77), for the Beats the letter represented a technology of self-expression and intimate communication opposed to the impersonal relations of commodity exchange and the controlled uniformity of modern mass media. Put another way, the value of Beat letters is the product of their position as not just unpublished but *unpublishable* writers: the likes of Ginsberg and Kerouac invested essential energy in correspondence during the early Cold War years, when their social marginality was also economic and cultural. For those undesirables denied voice or place by Cold War discourses, the letter embodied postwar American dreams of an alternative personal and social space. As William Decker observes, “the claiming of confidential, intimate, utopian space figures among the letter’s genre-specific themes” (177). But Decker’s frame of reference is nineteenth-century American letters, and the cultural meaning of this theme is historically contingent.³ The defining fiction of the letter may sustain, as another critic of the epistolary phrases it, “our belief in the immediacy of truth and the communicability of lived experience” (Cousineau 28), but private letter exchanges always implicate technologies and economies of communication and desire at work in the wider social body. Cultural codes speak private desires: privacy is a fiction delivered by the post, and in the Cold War context spontaneity turns strategic, and secrecy tempts deceit as well as surveillance. As a result, dreams of a utopian alternative were compromised in both the most local and in the largest of terms.

To begin with, Beat letters were intercepted by the police and found incriminating, a scene that is explicit in Burroughs’s fiction (see *Junky* 84–86; *Naked Lunch* 209). The result was epistolary self-censorship and an anxiety that tainted the privacy and liberty invested in letter writing in the first place. In this context, *literary* self-consciousness was not the only constraint on natural style. But in larger terms, dreams of an alternative space of writing and being presumed an opposition between socioeconomic forms and human agents that was as untenable then as the letter form is technically anachronistic now.⁴ Defined by the Fordist generalization of consumption and by Weiner’s cybernetic systems theory, the postwar period inaugurated a *totalization* of economy and communication. Ironically, the resurgence of critical and creative interest in the epistolary in the past two decades, dating from Derrida’s theorizing *La carte postale*, only confirms its decline as a meaningful practice of everyday life. Letter writing between poets and novelists goes on, to be sure, but the vital cultural meaning it had for the Beats has passed with the historical moment. This essay explores that cultural meaning as it oscillates, like the letter, in the unconstituted limbo between the literary and the biographical, the public and the private. And, I would argue, the key permutations of Beat correspondence (Ginsberg–Cassady

and Cassady–Kerouac; on grounds of definition, I limit the Burroughs–Ginsberg correspondence to a coda), reveal at once the neglected significance of the epistolary as an exemplary mediation of life and literature, of politics and culture, and also the multiple ways in which the spirit of the Beat project was often in literal tension with its letter.

ALLEN GINSBERG: LETTERS WHICH ARE INVISIBLE

Ginsberg's letter of June 23, 1953, turns out to be pivotal both in his epistolary relationship with Neal Cassady and in the narrative of his poetic development. Context is all-important: recall that Ginsberg, the aspirant poet-prophet, is working as a copyboy on a weekly salary of \$45. He quotes John Hollander, a contemporary graduate from Columbia University, as having said: "A lot of people (up here) have given up on Ginsberg' (up here—columbia minds)" (*As Ever* 150). His, Ginsberg felt, was "a shoddy fate, if accurate," while Hollander was "an honored scholarly instructor in Illinois" whose poetry was to be published in the *Kenyon Review*. That Ginsberg should judge himself so harshly in relation to Columbia—the alma mater that had disciplined him in the 1940s—and to the *Kenyon Review*—derided by Kenneth Rexroth at this time as the "*Ku Klux Kenyon*" (176)—suggests just how hegemonic he experienced such institutions to be in terms of his intellectual and literary identity.

What makes Ginsberg's sense of failure and hopelessly limited options so interesting is that it coincides with breaking news to Cassady of a major change of poetic and personal direction. He had spent years laboring on "college imitations of Marlowe, Marvell and Donne" (*Collected Poems* 749), including one titled "Love Letter," a metaphysical abstraction anonymously addressed to Cassady. Such formal exercises in self-discipline betrayed a "New Critical takeover" of desire (Burns 143) and ran in parallel with Ginsberg's program to straighten out his sexuality by "attentive work like studying for a job" (qtd. in Burroughs, *Letters* 68). Only after failing in both employments did he begin to invest in precisely those currencies of self that were nonnegotiable. Looking back, Ginsberg would confirm that his new long poem, "The Green Automobile," was his "first breakthrough as a poet": "First time I let my imagination and desire dominate over what, in the mental hospital, I had been taught to accept as an adjustment to reality, to limit my demands of the external world to what could be workable so as to avoid excess suffering" (qtd. in Miles, *Ginsberg* 153). As a turning point in the articulation of desire, "The Green Automobile" connects Ginsberg's formal education, his psychiatric treatment, and his exclusion from publishing. And as the immediate context makes clear, it connects crucially to his epistolary

relation with Cassady. Indeed, this relation is reciprocal to the point of being creatively incestuous. Setting out to “explore some of the uncharted verbal rhetorical seas that Jack (& yrself) sail in” (*As Ever* 147), Ginsberg plots his new venture according to coordinates given by Kerouac and Cassady, who had significantly explored these “rhetorical seas” through their own letter exchange.

Since Ginsberg tells Cassady that he is the “chief character” in the poem, it might be assumed that “The Green Automobile” escapes the internalized disciplinary limits on desire by virtue of the intimacy between the two men mediated by the letter. In a sense, this is indeed the case: in the following letter Ginsberg encloses “a writ copy of the as yet unfinished GREEN AUTOMOBILE, which shows you that though this letter is late I’ve been writing it, in other forms” (153). That resonant final phrasing measures Ginsberg’s identification of letter and literature, hinting at the reciprocal economy that makes of letters poems and of poems letters. Undoing New Critical orthodoxies, it would elide the distinction between the poem as publishable and public property—destined for such august journals as the *Kenyon Review*—and a written personal communication, one governed by the key economics of the letter: the desire for exchange and the specificity of the reader (Altman 112). By aligning the desire for exchange with the exchange of desire, Ginsberg might, then, construct a countereconomy of writing, one that escapes the very formal economic and professional systems from which he and his fellow Beats were excluded.

The Beats’ autobiographical impulse of self-expression therefore coincided with and was sustained by the epistolary dynamic of close communication. And as a mundane practice, the letter was a natural medium for writers committed to the representative value of the commonplace: a near-universal form of personal communication through which to recognize how the universal is communicated by the personal. But in the age of mass media such practices become archaic, anachronisms informed by a certain nostalgia: Ginsberg and Kerouac knew they were resurrecting a philosophy and practice from the era of Emerson, who also dreamed of an epistolary “colloquy sublime” and for whom, as Decker observes, “the eternal is ever to be grasped in the common quotidian detail typically recorded in letters” (122). The tense of everyday experience typically consecrated by the Beats is, significantly, the lost past rather than the immediate present.

Ginsberg’s letter to Cassady enclosing “The Green Automobile” is not just “late” but three months late—it is now September 1953—and Ginsberg is apologizing not so much for a failure to reply speedily as for a virtual collapse in their epistolary relationship, or rather for a crisis in correspondence that exposes their relationship to be, precisely, virtual. This exposure

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of a fantasmic, and specifically epistolary, virtuality underwrites the poem from first stanza to last:

If I had a Green Automobile
I'd go find my old companion
in his house on the Western ocean.
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!

.....

and back
to my visions, my office
and eastern apartment
I'll return to New York (Collected Poems 83–87)

What is going on here becomes clearer as Ginsberg's letter continues: "The point of this poem is to rewrite history, so to speak, make up a legend of my poor sad summer with you, and try to create some recognizable human-angelic ideal, ideal story, too" (*As Ever* 153). Legend—that which is readable as well as mythic—substitutes for reality; an aestheticized, paper triumph compensates for the actuality of a failed, bodily relationship. This is less a Whitmanesque eulogy for "homoerotic comradeship and visionary partnership" (Stephenson 161) than an epistolary fiction.

Such recognitions have important consequences for writing that makes high claims to uncover some naked innermost core of self, spontaneously revealed and communicated to another self. Here the letter-poem does not memorialize what it chronicles, but idealizes an alternative history. At the center of his letter of June 23, Ginsberg maps the dialectic of absence and presence that structures epistolary desire onto physical space, offering an extraordinary alignment of his own displacements—fantasized past for fantasy future, automobile poem for actual travel, poems for letters, letters for face-to-face contact—with an historical literary counterpart he was then researching: "Many chinese poems are occupied with subject matter of old friends way far from each other over boundless chinese provinces . . . or are enclosed in actual letters" (147). The point involves distances measured not only geographically or temporally by the letter but also spiritually and erotically, and it applies equally to Ginsberg's other principal relationships with Kerouac and Burroughs. As he put the situation in late 1952: "I wish we were all together however. How have we become so scattered?" (136)

If the Beats were no longer "together" but in a state of diaspora that turned them into letter writers, then this was the case most literally between Ginsberg and Burroughs. In June 1953, Burroughs was trekking through the jungles of Peru and mailing Ginsberg material later to appear in *The Yage Letters* as "In Search of Yage." The fact of the novella's near-total critical

neglect testifies to both the indeterminacy of its literary status and to an equally traditional relegation of letter writing to the biographical margins. Burroughs falls outside the scope of this essay, but it should be recognized that "In Search of Yage" represents a significantly explicit politicization of the letter form. For the writer of *The Yage Letters*, the epistolary and exile go together, though when he claims to "feel like a Roman exiled from Rome" (31), this is not nostalgia for his *patria*, because it is Mexico, not Cold War America, that he means by "home." In a similar region but a different period—1970s Argentina—Tomas Eloy Martinez identified exile as "that place from which the letters arrived" (qtd. in Payne 102), a definition that fits the Beats as a generation of exiles, both internal and external.

There is also a more figurative scattering of the Beats, and Ginsberg's letter of June 23 presents their relations in terms of intense personal dislocations. These divisions are in turn presented in a rhetoric of loyalty and treason, mirroring the social bonds projected by the Cold War conversion of "private individuals into representatives of the national interest" (Pease 162). Forced to respond to accusations of "betraying" Kerouac by revealing his whereabouts to his estranged wife, Ginsberg charts an ironic descent into the paranoid anxieties and conspiratorial secrecies that characterized mainstream Cold War culture, concluding: "It is true I make or keep so many secrets I hardly remember what's supposed to be secret from whome in this labyrinth of paranoia" (149). Undermining loyalty to what, the following year, Ginsberg would name the "boy gang"—a phrase that originates in the most revealing of fantasy forms: a "dream letter" from John Clellon Holmes (*Journals* 80)—the specific gender politics of this betrayed camaraderie, which so clearly reproduces the dominant culture's exclusion of women, is in turn tied to both the poem and the letter as linked media of supposed candor. Thus Ginsberg turns on Cassady: "Can you imagine that the author of the Green Automobile goes around gossipily betraying you to ex-wives?"; "Nothing brought home the dank truth of the passage of time to me [more] than your unfortunate remarks on this score in yr letter . . . I really saw serpents. So for gods sake, write freely" (149). A year later, and it would be Kerouac's turn to be caught in a net of tangled relations and deceptions, forced to "call now for all of us to return to Beat Generation 1947 confessions and honesties" (Letter to Allen Ginsberg).

The scattering of the Beats was both physical and figurative, and it was so highly charged for their poetics as well as their ethics because it represented a fall from a specific point of origin when proximity seemed absolute. This is the mythos of a Beat Eden, a prelapsarian state of communication falling into history's "dank truth," its innocent mutuality corrupted by "serpents." Ginsberg in particular would look back to the intense conversa-

tional intimacies that brought the original Beat circle together in the New York of the mid-1940s and see in those shared confessional encounters a definition of Beat in direct opposition to the culture of Cold War America. Ginsberg was acutely aware of how current social and economic relations contradicted knowledge of sensual desire or spiritual camaraderie and deterred sharing such knowledge with others by defining it as unnatural, even insane.⁵ The original Beat circle provided an alternative model that ran counter to those “systems of mass communication” where “the most personal sensitivities and confessions of reality are most prohibited, mocked, suppressed” (Ginsberg, “Poetry, Violence” 331). For Ginsberg, the Cold War was a conflict between mutually exclusive worlds of knowledge and communication. Offering *communitas* rather than containment, he too believed in a Vital Secret.

The tacit promise of the letter, therefore, was to extend those originally oral, intimate, and mutual confessions through a mode of writing inherently concerned with intimacy, orality, and mutuality. Significantly, when Ginsberg first mentioned “The Green Automobile,” he promised to “tape recite and send” it to Cassady (*As Ever* 146): the “tapevoice” poetics of presence, analyzed by Michael Davidson (*Ghostlier Demarcations* 196–223) and featuring Beat writers, directly upgraded the technology of the letter-poem. What Ginsberg called the “hypocrisy of literature” (Interview with Thomas Clark 289) might be answered by the letter as the least hypocritical circuitry of textual communication.

How fitting, then, that Ginsberg’s first publication should have been two letters to William Carlos Williams, and that they are explicitly concerned with communication itself. Writing against “the grey secrecy of time,” he addresses his first letter “somewhat in the style of those courteous sages of yore who recognized one another across the generations as brotherly children of the muses” (Williams 204). Such brotherly recognition was especially important to Ginsberg but was hardly unique for poets at this time. The correspondence of Creeley and Olson, for example, began at exactly this point—Spring 1950—and flourished as a mutually supportive correspondence for writers who were also, as George Butterick observes, “cut off by indifference and entrenched interests, seeking to communicate from their respective foxholes” (xv). The importance of the epistolary for the Beats, as distinct from the Black Mountain poets, only makes sense in relation to their particular history as a uniquely intimate and isolated circle bound together by multiple marginalizations, committed to autobiographical and group mythologizing, and eventually dispersed over time and through space. A product of absence, the letter nonetheless symbolically and practically answered to desires for presence: for making present both a

subjective logos—what Ginsberg called the “very spark of life” (“When the Mode” 329) and Kerouac called “the thing itself” (*Letters* 356)—and an intersubjective relation with another equally committed self. But in historical hindsight it is all too easy to invert Ginsberg’s vision of Beat communion, to say that it is no more than a belated myth, only a fantasy of accessing what Jacques Lacan would call the impossible Real of desire: a dream of primal unity and plenitude manufactured in the medium and from the viewpoint of separation and loss.

If Ginsberg’s answer to the “hypocrisy of literature” was “when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would with yourself or with your friends” (Interview with Thomas Clark 288), then this was certainly the condition of his central poetic breakthrough, the writing of “Howl for Carl Solomon.” Since “Howl” could only be begun by abandoning thoughts of a public—“thinking it couldn’t be published” specifically because of its “queer content” (*Howl* 163)—Ginsberg addressed a readership comprising the early Beat circle and formally dedicated his poem to just them. And yet, if this was “open secrecy,” writing for his “own soul’s ear and a few other golden ears” (“Notes” 318), Ginsberg’s very commitment to an *exemplary* practice meant that even the most private writing would have a public rhetorical reach: it would always be strategic, always anticipate some literary-historical or political destination. The immediate result is Ginsberg’s trademark self-consciousness, heightened well beyond that of Andrew Ross’s letter-writing poet-prophets because it feeds so directly into the work. The end result is that Ginsberg came to matter less as a poet than as “an exemplary life,” and that, once published, “it is to the clarification of the example that the journals and letters are devoted” (Schechner 334).

Equally, if Ginsberg recognized his Beat vision in the candor of Walt Whitman, he also faced the “dank truth of the passage of time,” both in the larger betrayal of national identity that divides the two poets in their respective midcenturies and in the particular betrayals of Beat relations through the epistolary. The one-to-one intimacy celebrated in “The Green Automobile” became a literary-historical correspondence in “Sather Gate Illumination” (1955)—“Dear Walter, thanks for the message / I forbid you not to touch me, man to man, True American” (*Collected Poems* 142)—but each was, as Ginsberg well knew, contradicted by the social relations of capital exchange in general and by the politicization of same-sex desire in Cold War culture in particular. And Ginsberg also knew that the intimate reach of the letter, as a model for writer-reader relations, could attain a “human-angelic ideal” only by a conscious rewriting of personal history—one that, in the case of his relationship with Cassady, was a wrenching saga of masochistic desire and manipulation. Writing in Fall 1947 after his “poor sad

summer" with Cassady, the liaison turned into legend in "The Green Automobile," Ginsberg wrote a letter of naked abjection that exposed the complicity of writing: "I can't write except with you in mind . . . I blame you yet I still ask for the whip. I don't know what I am when I speak like this but it is near my true speech" (*As Ever* 28). In short, Ginsberg was forced to defy not only the social arrangements of the public world and its repressive economics of communication but also the asymmetrical power relations of desire exposed in his own private correspondence—relations that were, in some sense, continuous and reciprocal with them. Cold War and Beat generation worlds of knowledge and communication were far from mutually exclusive: to an uneasy degree, they corresponded.

In the short run, the only way for Ginsberg to escape the crude and falsifying binaries of true/false, inner/outer, private/public was, as "Howl" makes plain, to dissolve them in opposite directions. On the one hand is Moloch, the "heavy judger of men" who had condemned the Rosenbergs,⁶ and more generally, a force that "gains its power not because it lives beyond human will but because we willingly, if blindly, participate in its authority" (Davidson, *San Francisco* 82). On the other hand is the "Footnote to Howl," with its repeated blessings of wholeness and health, its insistence that *everything* is holy. However, Ginsberg's dedication within the poem itself to "N.C. secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver" (*Howl* 4), seems obliged to keep secret precisely the true economy of their relationship given in the correspondence. For "Howl" curiously disarticulates sexual acts from any sexual relationship, and above all from one that exposed the ugly play of power. Such exposure of complicity risked compromising fundamentally the poem's desired political challenge to the public world, risked a counterproductive nakedness. In the original draft of part 3, Ginsberg had addressed Carl Solomon through a code of Cold War repression tied directly to epistolary censorship: "I am with you in Rockland where you write only letters which are invisible" (89). This notion of "invisible letters," in turn blue-penciled in revision, makes all the more telling Ginsberg's deletion of the phrase that identified the cryptic "N.C." of his dedication as "our long old love" (38). The center of Ginsberg's major Beat poem is, therefore, a vital aporia, one that marks the point where the personal is cut to fit the political and where the public readership of literature returns to displace the private reader of the letter. Far from coincidentally, such displacements are also crucial to Neal Cassady's other key epistolary relationship, the one with Jack Kerouac.

JACK KEROUAC: UNSPEAKABLE VISIONS

Unlike Ginsberg's, Kerouac's self-invasion of private life and its secret sentiments had tragic consequences, not only for himself but also for the involuntary real-life subjects of his writing. Significantly, the model and central subject of Kerouac's mythmaking—Neal Cassady—was both the principal agent in the development of his writing project and its chief victim.

The case for Kerouac's creative alignment with the epistolary is well known, at least in outline. The turning point is the so-called Joan Anderson sex letter that Cassady mails Kerouac in late December 1950. On December 28, the day after receipt of the letter and just three months before the marathon writing of *On the Road*, Kerouac responds by vowing to "write the confession of my entire life to you, Neal Cassady, and send, by mail, in installments three thousand two hundred miles across the continent we know so well" (*Letters* 246–47). Reproducing the spontaneous energies of his speech, Cassady's letters retained the priority of orality over literacy via a mode of writing that, as Tim Hunt argues, "does not require the distancing modes more deeply enmeshed in print" (xxii). The intersubjective frame of their intimate correspondence gave significant form as well as substance to Kerouac's principle of autobiographical spontaneity, a principle he had valorized since meeting Cassady.

Altman observes of the historical genre that "epistolary discourse is obsessed with its oral model" (135); in relation to the Kerouac–Cassady correspondence, it's also the case that, like the oral storyteller, the letter writer uses narrational tactics determined by feedback.⁷ Paradoxically, it's exactly this ability to anticipate audience reaction based on previous exchanges that makes it possible for the letter to extend into full-scale narrative. Answering Cassady's novella-length letter in installments, Kerouac is working toward a form of unchecked epistolary discourse, a paradox described in another context by Simon Bischoff: "It is a dialogue with an absent partner, potentiated dialogue, an infinite and unhindered stream of monologue" (45). And this version of orality, as Hunt has ably demonstrated, was vital for Kerouac's development of a subjective, idiomatic, first-person narrative voice, a development that shaped his entire writing career after his debut novel, *The Town and the City*.

Cassady's mythic letter gave Kerouac the "permission," as Nicosia says, "to make actual reality" his subject (338). Just as significantly, its oral and nonchronological structuring of remembrance was a model for *Visions of Cody*. And most important, the letter ventured a subjective narrating voice seemingly unalienated from self or reader. Cassady's letters led Kerouac to commit himself to practices of writing removed from the cultural and com-

mercial reach of mass society, to the extent that they assumed—in the year of Reisman's *Lonely Crowd* (1950)—the form of spontaneous, confessional dialogues with an actual and intimately known “willing listener,” not monologue to the impersonal readership of fiction, the inhibited and inhibiting, easily bored “mysterious reader” (*Letters* 273). Driven on by the example of Cassady's confessional letters, Kerouac's development of a first-person voice in turn made him, as Thomas Schaub has argued, “the representative writer of the McCarthy era” (83). This may be so, but it is just as significant that Kerouac's narrating subjectivity was inseparable from his sense of audience, that the first-person “I” was wedded to a second-person “you.” This is why Kerouac's depiction of himself and Cassady, in his letter of December 28, 1950, as “contending technicians in what may well be a little American Renaissance of our own” (*Letters* 247) is so revealing. For a writer with Kerouac's experience of cultural and economic exclusion, it connected his own innovations to the generation of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, and especially Melville: these too were writers who sought to forge a “human bond with their readers” at a time when publishing first became a branch of American industry and writing a form of commodification (Gilmore 144). Seeking to bypass damnation by dollars, the epistolary bond also accords with the central relationships in Kerouac's texts, especially in *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*. As the letter relation led Kerouac to writing by way of the other, so here the narrator's process of self-discovery goes by way of his investment in understanding a male partner.

Kerouac responded to Cassady's letter by posting a series of enormous confessional texts of his own. These, as Ellis Amburn observes, “unintentionally outlined most of his novels for the next ten years” (162). But their value is not genetic alone: they are integral to the oeuvre. Their effect, then, is reciprocal: Kerouac's letters invite a literary reading as much as they call for an epistolary reading of his literary work. The complex consequences for his sense of destiny as a writer, for his sense of his writing's *destination*, are immediately apparent in his letter of December 28. Two related problematics dominate. One is aesthetic, and is marked by the stilted formality of his opening lines: “Then shall I say, Neal, I hereby renounce all fiction” (*Letters* 246). His extraordinary self-consciousness in this “opening preamble” to a “confession” prompts an equally extraordinary self-deconstruction; he even notes “the neatness of the page” as a visible sign of his falsity (247). Kerouac names his problem “the mysterious outside reader” (248). A tormenting revenant, this alienating figure betrays Kerouac's other problematic, which is his writing's public—that is to say, economic—destiny. His self-division is exposed in a series of contradictory moves, most nakedly when demanding that Cassady “burn these things” to preserve the

purity of his renunciation of all fiction, “or keep them, to hand, personally, to Giroux the editor of Harcourt-Brace” (246). Kerouac’s maneuvers suggest an anxiety that may have less to do with his work—to which he is devoted, passionately—than with its relation to Cassady. Having idealized him as a writer, Kerouac now converts Cassady into an ideal reader for his own writing. This role reversal manifests the reciprocal exchange of correspondents; but to also nominate Cassady his literary agent admits that the letter’s private economy exists as capital for public consumption.

Kerouac frames *On the Road* with significant epistolary references, but just as significantly folds the letter’s private meaning into an acceptable social text. The novel introduces Dean to Sal through his letters and ends by direct reference to the Cassady letter that most inspired Kerouac’s novel in the first place, while using the symmetry of divorce and marriage to open and close Sal’s travels with Dean on the road (1, 304). The parallelism is clear: between male social relations inside the novel, and those that produced its writing. As a result, the homosocial bonds between Sal and Dean are contained within a heterosexualized circularity, a framing whose by-product is to foreclose any suspicion of homosexuality. The structural closure of *On the Road* represents a form of self-containment, marking out the undesired ethical limits to Kerouac’s aesthetic principles. His repeated pledges of candor to Cassady drew the line at the hint of sexual ambiguity: “Posterity,” he had written Cassady in the year of the Kinsey report, “will laugh at me if it *thinks* I was queer” (*Letters* 167). Beat mail was *male* writing: written by men, about man-to-man relations, and exchanged between men.⁸ But for Kerouac, certain sentiments had to be censored or readdressed: some visions remained unspeakable.

As Ginsberg observed, Kerouac was very reticent about “any sexual relationships that weren’t fully idealizable in his own terms. . . . So there was a whole area left out” (Interview with James McKenzie 29). It’s hardly coincidental, then, that the first chapter of *Visions of Cody* closes with a letter to Cassady that exposes the process of idealization. After pledging himself in the spirit of Whitman’s adhesiveness—“I’m completely your friend, your ‘lover,’”—he admits to “catching [himself] in the act of shuffling the file cards of the memory or the mind under the deck” (39, 41). When Gore Vidal famously challenged Kerouac about the version in *The Subterraneans* of their night of sex together, the “Great Rememberer” and advocate of confessional honesty had no alternative but self-humiliation: “Well, maybe I wanted to forget” (qtd. in Gifford and Lee 183).

Kerouac fell victim to the absolutism of his own artistic principles, and this manifests itself in the troubled self-consciousness of the first-person narrator. In context of *The Subterraneans*, as Eburne demonstrates in a care-

ful critique of Schaub's claims, the subjective voice "serves more to alienate the self from the self than to distance the 'rebel' self from postwar society" (59). At the same time, outside the world of Kerouac's texts, his artistic principles resulted in troubling self-consciousness and victimization of others. Firstly, Cassady's own writing lost its natural verve and quickly dried up: his self-consciousness killed him as a writer because it made him more "literary." Secondly, if for Ginsberg Kerouac left out too much of himself, from another point of view, he put in too much of other people. Hence Gary Snyder "felt his privacy had been invaded" in *The Dharma Bums* (Miles, *Kerouac* 244), and Aileen Lee, the real-life original of Mardou Fox, was outraged by *The Subterraneans*. She saw the inclusion of one of her own letters as the most literal and embarrassing betrayal: she had believed "people wouldn't do that to their friends" (qtd. in Nicosia 452). And yet, in 1960, Kerouac would reaffirm both the practice and principle of truthfulness, recalling of *The Subterraneans*:

Not a word of this book was changed after I had finished writing it in three sessions from dusk to dawn at the typewriter like a long letter to a friend. This I believe to be the only possible literature of the free future, uninterrupted and unrevised full confessions about what actually happened in real life. It's not as easy as it sounds since it hurts to tell and print the truth. (qtd. in Miles, *Kerouac* 191)

Is this Kerouac at his most naive, or at his most political? In the mouth of a Ginsberg or a Burroughs there would be no question, but coming from Kerouac, and given the cost of his principles to those nearest him, it is hard to call. In 1952 he believed that, far from being "malicious," the rejected manuscript of *Visions of Cody* proclaimed "the freedom of expression that still lies ahead" (*Letters* 377). But what did he think would have happened had the book been published? This is a question that returned to haunt Kerouac, given what did happen after *On the Road*—a far less confessional text—appeared in 1957—a far less repressive context.

NEAL CASSADY: BOX NO. A-47667, SAN QUENTIN, CALIF.

We end as we began, with a case of disproportionate punishment and the unnatural jail-house letters of a "political prisoner" (Ginsberg, Footnote). I refer to Neal Cassady's correspondence with Carolyn published as *Grace Beats Karma*. Entrapped by a pair of narcotic agents, Cassady lost his long-standing and much-loved job on the railroad, his long-suffering wife, and his children, and so he lost what little chance of stability he had in life. Kerouac saw publishers as bloodsuckers, but the same charge of eco-

conomic exploitation of the private self would be leveled at him, most lucidly by Burroughs, writing in outrage just weeks after Cassady began his sentence:

Jack has reaped fame and money telling Neal's story, recording his conversation, representing himself as Neal's life-long friend. Maybe the fuzz got onto Neal through Jack's book. In any case he has sold Neal's blood and made money. (Burroughs, *Letters* 392)

The truth of culpability here is symbolic, and it is Neal's own writing, from prison, that provides a fitting finale to the history of Beat letters.

Cassady's situation has the ironies of a contrived novelistic denouement. Here is the fast-moving, free-writing, wild-loving embodiment of unconstrained Beat energy, serving a sentence that began on Independence Day. And here is the trumpeted author of the Joan Anderson sex letter, confined to an epistolary relation with his own wife, at the mercy of "Mr. Right Watchful ole Censor" (*Grace* 127). Cassady's very first prison letters are a condensed history of personal communication subject to Reich's "arbitrary practices" of institutional censorship. This, Cassady explains, is actually his sixth letter, following three rejected efforts: the first of these, he tells his wife, was refused because the handwriting was too small, and the censor charged that it was "full of 'Double-talk,' secret answers to your secret questions, & thus couldn't be sent"; the second was a "biting satire on 'double-talk'" which has, he imagines, been "put in my central file to show I disrespect authority"; the third is returned because he failed to put his prison number on the envelope back—and so on, all the details of punitive censorship narrated in a letter that is allowed to pass (24–25). To say, as Carolyn does, that her husband's "only avenue of conning in such a profitless environment" was to lard his letters with "gushes of conscience and remorse" ("Poor God" 5) is to say only that the censor has colonized discourse. Forced to internalize censorship's "invisible bars of self-control and discipline" (*Zaczek* 176), Cassady is locked in a prison house of letters.⁹

The free-spirit "entelechy" that Kerouac shared with Ginsberg (*Plummer* 46) wasn't even allowed now to write to them, while outside his prison walls the Beat generation, featuring Kerouac's and Ginsberg's versions of Cassady in its core texts, was in full media swing. Cassady's epistolary years in San Quentin concluded that history of "togetherness" in solitude and with a total penetration by the public of the private, so that the martyrdom of the Beat muse becomes both a symbolic expression of the economy the Beats sought to oppose and a literal consequence of that very counter-economy.

BURROUGHS: SENDING IS EVIL

Read as an epistolary text, the Beat generation writes a unique chapter in the history of the letter. Ginsberg and Kerouac didn't theorize their practice, nor did they work inside a genre, and the letter's importance remains visible only marginally in their published works. And yet what the epistolary signified for both writers throughout the 1950s gets to the heart of any articulated Beat aesthetic. Each made major breakthroughs that coincided with creative investment in the singularly private and interpersonal at the expense of the public and impersonal, so embodying a cultural politics that in key respects is the mirror image of Cold War disciplinary economic and communication systems. The outcome was work informed by the historical vitality of the letter form in its fading promise of a utopian space for visions unspeakable in American society, unspoken in its belles lettres, and unsalable on its markets.

But their work also embodied certain historically specific contradictions in the epistolary as both a technology and an economy of writing. Their exemplary personal works all too readily translated into reductive mass-media stereotypes, so satisfying vicarious desires for alternative realities at paperback prices. Kerouac saw himself suffering "the curse of Melville" (*Letters* 239) but ended up a victim to Thoreau's "curse of trade" because his work was vulnerable to commodification to the very extent that it was conceived in innocence of the commodity's relations: he should have known that real huckleberries, let alone "messages from heaven," never reach market (Thoreau 47, 117). Ginsberg's bold humanism also presumed an authentic selfhood commensurate with language. The letter-poem promised to join voice with speaker and to free desire, human presence, and true community. But like Kerouac, Ginsberg's poetic identity had much to learn from his epistolary self. Beat letters exposed asymmetries of power that made the economy of correspondence a bondage or a betrayal, not a brotherly bond. For all their courage and creativity, the two major figures of Beat writing reproduced the dominant in its gender politics and internalized its binaries, so making countermoves already programmed into the systems they opposed.

In this context, I exclude Burroughs. And this despite the fact that his creative investment in the epistolary during that decade is, as I have argued elsewhere (Introduction), the most extraordinary and crucial. Since this isn't the place to disclose in detail the uniquely determinant relationship between Burroughs's letter writing and his textual politics, suffice it to say that his version of epistolarity affirms his fundamental distance from Ginsberg and Kerouac. It does so because where they sought in the letter

an exemplary countereconomy of free subjective expression and interpersonal communication, Burroughs found precisely the opposite: a mirroring correspondence between inner and outer, private and public, personal and political. Burroughs's textual politics—that is, not only his work's analysis of power but its own relation to power—is built on this correspondence, on knowledge of his own deep complicity in communication as the exercise of power. Lacking their humanist faith in selfhood and language and rejecting their romance of an alternative space, Burroughs's epistolary-based critique runs counter to the Beats' own countereconomy. Rather than writing "Bibles for the Millennium," as Ginsberg proposed in 1958 (Ginsberg with Orlovsky 158), Burroughs insisted on the dead letter: return to sender.

NOTES

¹ Fiedler's significantly titled "Postscript to the Rosenberg Case" first appeared in the inaugural issue of *Encounter* (October 1953), and Warshaw's "The 'Idealism' of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg" in *Commentary* (November 1953). In his 1955 preface to *An End to Innocence*, Fiedler made explicit his application of New Critical methods, saying he gave "the letters of the Rosenbergs the same careful scrutiny we have learned to practice on the shorter poems of John Donne" (xv).

² Even Virginia Carmichael, in an otherwise outstanding book-length study of the Rosenberg story as a key to "the larger poetics of the formation of cold war ideology" (xxiv), is interested only in its cultural afterlife, not in the operations of power as told at the time in the Rosenbergs' own words.

³ For a fuller analysis of both Decker's book and the field of epistolary criticism, see my essay "Out of Epistolary Practice."

⁴ On the opposition between human agents and socioeconomic forms, see Siegle.

⁵ This was the essence of Ginsberg's famous William Blake vision in 1948, an epiphany that not only took place in context of the scattering of the original Beat circle (see Interview with Thomas Clark 302) but also was prompted by Cassady's letter of rejection: "the light broke" Ginsberg told him, "partly owing to your letter" (*As Ever* 37).

⁶ Ginsberg's gloss on this line makes explicit in retrospect what revisions to his manuscript had made obscure: "Heavy judger of men": Ref. also world-shock 1953 N.Y. electric chair executions Julius & Ethel Rosenberg spy convicts" (*Howl* 139).

⁷ On feedback in narration, see Chambers 220.

⁸ See my complementary article "Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel." For an excellent psychoanalytic reading of the relations between Beat textuality and sexuality, see David Savran 41–103. For another primary text of Beat letters, published too late for consideration, see Jack Kerouac and Joyce Johnson.

⁹ In a historical parallel of extraordinary ironies, 15 years earlier, in April 1943, Kerouac had written from the naval hospital at Newport, Rhode Island, to explain the "arch prose" of his letters to a friend:

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

you see, this is a combination bug and nuthouse, and our mail is censored, our *outgoing* mail. I wanted to say my piece to you, but I had to do it in a scholarly fashion lest the doctors disbelieve my arguments in favor of the better factors of my dementia praecox diagnosis. . . . But I don't care anymore. . . . I'll write as I please, censorship or no. (*Letters* 58)

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