

**Liberal Arts College  
Honours Seminar (LBCL 494 - A)  
Fall 2024  
Monday, 5:45 – 8:15**

**20<sup>th</sup> Century Avant-Gardes: Beat Writers and Their Legacy**

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Office Hours: Monday 3:15 – 4:15, Wednesday 5:30 – 6:30 and by appointment

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“If I have to claw it out of myself, literally with a grapple hook bleeding, I’ll produce those great books – if I have to rattle on like this till doomsday, till all the rattle is gone and the strike strikes – a venom of lies to heal the body truth, the parent truth, the apparent truth, the truth, the saying, the mouthing, the blah, the belief in happiness. (Future ages will believe in happiness.)” Jack Kerouac, *Journal 1951*

“The summer I woke and discovered I was not free was 1958. I have fought long against this. I come to accept it now. I head for the sea. Bearing my children and books, to study necessity and harmony. But in 1958 Jeanne was a baby, I noticed that I could not always go out, that I could not hitch thru New England or spend whole days at the Thalia. That I could not head for Central Park in the morning, my notebook under my arm and wait out the day there reading and writing and wandering by the lakes ...Deliberate search for amusement, the work sat patiently waiting to be discovered. To be enacted. Sat with its tail curled softly around its feet in the corner of my desk where it sits still. But now gets up to cavort time and again. To do a little dance on the desk by itself.” Diane di Prima, *Spring and Autumn Annals*

“So what I started to talk about was the sex that passes the censor, squeezes through *between* bureaus, because there’s always a space *between*, in popular songs and Grade B movies, as giving away the basic American rottenness, spurting out like breaking boils, throwing out globs of that Un-D.T. to fall anywhere and grow into some degenerate cancerous life form, reproducing a hideous, random image.” William S. Burroughs *Letters* Feb. 7, 1955

**Course description**

In the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, a small group of friends defied the conventions of American literature and culture, rejected consumerism, materialism, regimentation and uniformity, and believed in the redeeming, transformative power of art. The Beat movement, an informal network of writers and artists that experimented with language and explored taboo subjects, drew on romanticism, transcendentalism, and French surrealism, and became a world-wide phenomenon. This course will be more than a nostalgic appreciation of Beat literature, but will explore Beat writers in a wider, multi-media context involving jazz and performance. One of the challenges of teaching Beat literature is to keep the vivid drama of Beat authors’ lives from overshadowing the brilliance and complexity of their work. This course will explore Beat literature through concepts such as creative networks; humanism, posthumanism and

transhumanism; western Enlightenment ideals of reason, agency and perfectibility; materiality and embodiment; new forms of subjectivity and the effects of language and sound, and will look at other avant-garde literary communities such as the Black Mountain College, the San Francisco Renaissance and the New York School, communities that had important connections to the Beats. This theoretical and historical background can open up discussion about intersubjectivity, improvisation, and the relation of ethics and politics to creative praxis. The authors we will discuss include Jack Kerouac, Joyce Johnson, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Diane di Prima, Patti Smith and a selection of poets from contemporary arts communities. The course will draw upon the interests and expertise of the seminar participants.

**Course prerequisites:**

Love of reading, appreciation for language, openness to different points of view, curiosity about immersion in a represented consciousness, pleasure in collaboration, sense of humor.

**Course requirements:**

Brief, rotating interventions at the start of class (approximately 3 minutes), one oral presentation (15 minutes), several spontaneous writing assignments, at least one office hour visit and one extensive research paper (approximately 15 – 20 pages) with a creative option (a creative work with an 8 – 9 page analytic component relating it to Beat culture). Students will submit a detailed one-page long proposal for the paper with a bibliography three weeks before the research paper is due.

Suggestion: Keep a journal as you read. It is often difficult to find quotes you enjoy unless you have written them down or marked them. Your insights will disappear unless you write them down as the semester moves along with your other classes and work. Notice, for example, when your ideas about authors and characters change as you read.

**Required texts (available at the Concordia bookstore and at various online sources)**

1. Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
2. Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*. New York: Penguin, 2001.
3. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2011.
4. Diane di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters*, 2021.
5. William S. Burroughs, *Junky: The definitive text of "Junk."* 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, edited and with an introduction by Oliver Harris. New York: Penguin, 2003
6. William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. Edited by James Grauerholz and Barry Miles. New York: Grove, 2001.
7. Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters*. New York: Penguin, 1999.
8. Patti Smith, *Just Kids*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.

## Attendance policy:

Attendance at seminars is mandatory, and careful and thoughtful reading of the assigned texts is essential. During the semester you are permitted 1 unexplained absence. **Each unexplained absence above and beyond this quota will result in a 5% reduction in the final grade for the course.** It is your responsibility to notify me of anticipated absences and provide doctor's notes to document medical absences.

## Assignments and Grading:

Paper Proposal:	5%
Paper:	60%
Presentation:	15%
Class Participation (including interventions and brief assignments):	20%

## Class Schedule:

(The schedule is subject to change depending on the needs of the class).

Mon., Sept. 9	Introduction, theoretical approaches to Beat writing, Kerouac and language, "La nuit est ma femme" and/or "The Night is my Woman,"
Mon., Sept. 16	<i>Visions of Gerard</i> , Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose"
Mon., Sept. 23	<i>The Subterraneans</i>
Mon., Sept. 30	<i>Minor Characters</i>
Mon., Oct. 1	<i>On The Road</i> , part 1
Mon., Oct. 7	<i>On The Road</i> , part 2
Mon., Oct. 14	Thanksgiving
Mon., Oct. 21	<i>Howl</i> , <i>Footnote to Howl</i> , <i>A Supermarket in California</i> , <i>Sunflower Sutra</i> , <i>America</i> , <i>Kaddish</i> , <i>Wichita Vortex Sutra</i>
Mon., Oct. 28	Burroughs Documentary
Mon., Nov. 4	<i>Junky</i>
Mon., Nov. 11	<i>Naked Lunch</i> , selections
Mon., Nov. 18	<i>Naked Lunch</i> , selections

Mon., Nov. 25      *Revolutionary Letters*

Mon., Dec. 2      *Just Kids*

Oral reports should stem from your own research interests. Here are some possibilities:

Influences on Beat Writers: Rabelais, William Blake, Walt Whitman, Romantic Poets, Transcendentalists, Rimbaud, Proust, Joyce, Pound, Williams, Artaud (and many more possibilities)

African American Beats (LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman, Ted Joans)

Avant-Garde groups: Dadaists, Surrealists

Theater, Performance (performance art, performance poetry), Improvisation, Jazz, Visual Art, Sound Art

Beat Women

Beat Poets (Gregory Corso, Elise Cowen, Robert Creeley, Diane di Prima, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Barbara Guest, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Leonore Kandel, Bob Kaufman, Jack Kerouac, Joanne Kyger, Denise Levertov, Michael McClure, Harold Norse, Gary Snyder, Anne Waldman)

Beat Aesthetics

Beat comedy (Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Tom Lehrer, Richard Pryor, George Carlin)

Beat film

Avant-garde poetry movements – Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, New York School

Beats and the ecology movement

Collage and cut-ups

Katabasis and epic journeys, travel, migration

International Beat writers (there are/were Beat writers on every continent)

The Beats and spirituality (Buddhism, Sufism, Kaballah, Gnosticism, magic, alchemy, astrology, tarot)

Jazz and Beat writing

Sound technologies, tape recorders, sampling

Humanism and/or Posthumanism and/or Transhumanism in relation to any work we study (other critical approaches also welcome)

In accordance with College and University regulations, plagiarism is strictly prohibited and will result in serious sanctions. Students should familiarize themselves with the University's code of rights and responsibilities:  
<http://www.concordia.ca/vpirsg/documents/policies/BD-3.pdf>