

Hemispheric Beats (in the Bay Area and Beyond)

At a 1961 meeting of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, Lawrence Ferlinghetti unveiled one of his most well-known poems: “One Thousand Fearful Words for Fidel Castro.” Composed upon Ferlinghetti’s return from Havana the previous year, the poem warned Castro that he would soon be overthrown and assassinated, much like his boyhood hero Abraham Lincoln. In a telling allusion to the Spanish-American War, Ferlinghetti declared that “Hearst is Dead but his great / Cuban wire still stands: ‘You / get the pictures, I’ll make the / War.’”¹ As was the case with Theodore Roosevelt’s foray up San Juan Hill, Ferlinghetti believed that U.S. military intervention was a foregone conclusion augured by the yellow journalism of his time. Or as Ferlinghetti so bluntly put it: “They’re going to fix [Castro’s] wagon / in the course of human events.”²

The political thrust of “One Thousand Fearful Words for Fidel Castro” was animated by the concerns of Ferlinghetti’s audience: the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), a politically active group of intellectuals, led by Robert Taber and Alan Sagner, who had taken a noninterventionist stance toward the revolution and hoped that the federal government would work to establish friendly economic and political ties with Castro’s new government. Ferlinghetti’s concerns for Castro and revolutionary Cuba were also influenced by his experiences on the island in December of 1960, experiences captured in his “Poet’s Notes on Cuba” and published in the pacifist journal *Liberation*

in March 1961. Founded by A. J. Muste in 1956, *Liberation*, a vigorous supporter of the FPCC, featured the longtime peace activists Bayard Rustin and Roy Finch (one of the cofounders of Pacifica Radio) on its editorial board, and was one of the most innovative political monthlies of the Cold War period. As the editors explained in their inaugural editorial, “Tract for the Times,” they were primarily interested in theorizing a “Third Way” for democratic thought and practice in the Cold War world. The *Liberation* brain trust considered both U.S. capitalism and Soviet Communism politically bankrupt, dually characterized by an overdependence upon militarism, over-bureaucratized state structures, and severely compromised (because hyper-nationalized) public spheres. Arguing that “a central part of any radical movement today is withdrawal of support from the military preparation and activities of both the dominant power blocs,” the editors asserted that rather than support Soviet-styled Communism or U.S. visions of liberal democracy, North American intellectuals should attempt to foster cooperative relationships with activists in “Western Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, peoples who live ‘in between’ the two atomically armed power blocs.”³ Further citing the activities of “Asian Socialist parties, the Gandhian Constructive Workers . . . , non-violent responses to Colonialism in Africa . . . and the June, 1953, workers’ revolts in East Germany” as political templates, the editors implored U.S. intellectuals to align themselves with a Third Camp or Third Democratic Way “striving not only to avoid war but to build a socio-economic order and culture different from both Communism and capitalism.”⁴ During the initial years of the revolution, Cuban reforms in the areas of literacy, the criminalization of racism, universal healthcare, and land redistribution were heralded by the *Liberation* contributors as raising the possibility of a nonideological and democratic Third Way in the Americas—or what Robert Duncan might have referred to as a political topography “stranger” than that represented on either side of the U.S.-Soviet ideological divide.

While Ferlinghetti was impressed with Castro’s early reform programs, his “Poet’s Notes” begin with a critique of the federal government, the CIA, and the U.S. public sphere, with liberal members of the mainstream press absorbing the most stinging blows. Poking fun at the masthead logo of the *New York Times*, Ferlinghetti begins his article by asking:

Are we not to believe our own free press that publishes all the news that’s fit to print? Unless our Leaders and our newspapers have been deceiving us and spreading great monstrous evil lies about Cuba—unless the United Press International and the Associated Press and Time, Inc. and the CIA and all the radio commentators and all the big newspapers from the *New*

York Times to the *San Francisco Examiner*, are wrong—unless even most “liberal” writers in the United States are wrong in condemning Castro or in failing to back him—unless they along with most everyone else in the United States have been “brainwashed by news blackout” and, worse still, don’t even know it or won’t admit it—then I’m a naive fool.⁵

Ferlinghetti’s article attempted to dispel the myth of dictatorship, and the accompanying loss of civil and cultural liberties, which mainstream press accounts had identified as taking place in Castro’s Cuba. While Ferlinghetti supported the social programs initiated under the early revolution, his Cuba notes focus much of their attention on the diversity of public revolutionary culture, especially its inter-American or cosmopolitan aspects. Against the backdrop of the U.S. public sphere and its insistence on military intervention in Cuba—an insistence documented in the article’s opening lines—Ferlinghetti portrayed Cuba as a site of robust and transnational intellectual exchange. In turn, his article presents Cuba’s revolutionary press as transcending the Communist-capitalist divide, based instead on maverick or “stranger” forms of cultural interaction, which the *Liberation* editors were so interested in fostering, and which, as we shall see, Ferlinghetti had himself been fostering in City Lights Books since its earliest years.

In typical Beat argot, Ferlinghetti’s Cubalogue describes the general Cuban population as “‘turned on,’ a kind of euphoria in the air.”⁶ Despite mainstream press accounts of Castro as an enemy of free speech, Ferlinghetti asserts the public openness of the events taking place outside his hotel window: “At one A.M. they’re still at it, at two they’re still at it. Still later, I look out from hotel room and see the crowd still there, the Revolution being argued out in the night, in what looks like Free Speech.”⁷ He then asks, with a pronounced sense of sarcasm, “Where’s the Iron Heel of the Dictator crushing the People today?”⁸ While Ferlinghetti’s earlier characterization of the U.S. press had questioned its complicity in “news blackout,” he was quick to point out the opposite about Cuba, where “United States papers for sale in the center of Havana include the anti-Castro *Miami News* and *Miami Herald* and the *New York Times*.”⁹ Free speech issues—or questions regarding what could and could not be expressed in public venues—were obviously of intense interest to Ferlinghetti, who throughout his Cubalogue attempts to correct misinterpretations of Castro’s initial cultural policies while pointing out U.S. shortcomings in the same area. As a result of his own cultural activism over the course of the 1950s, Ferlinghetti was intimately aware of his own nation’s deficiencies in this regard, which goes a long way toward explaining the intensity of his interest in early revolutionary affairs.

Ferlinghetti's Cultural Activism

Ferlinghetti had spent much of the 1950s challenging what he saw as the rhetorical limits and hypocrisies of postwar U.S. culture through his participation in a variety of reportorial venues and publishing ventures—a set of commitments that eventually placed him at the center of one of the most publicized censorship trials of the Cold War era as he defended his right to publish Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956). His first public foray into Cold War cultural politics had actually come four years prior to the *Howl* controversies, with the publication of his article “Muralist Refregier and the Haunted Post Office” in *Art Digest*. Ferlinghetti's article decried the congressional attempt at removing Anton Refregier's federally sponsored murals—documenting a populist-inflected history of California—from the Rincon Annex Post Office in San Francisco. Refregier's panels were originally commissioned under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and were reminiscent of the populist murals of Thomas Hart Benton, with a great deal of attention focused on California's laboring classes. On account of wartime funding shortages, however, Refregier was unable to complete his project until 1948, and by that time, as Ferlinghetti explains, the United States had undergone a marked political makeover, and “Refregier's subjects came into increasingly acute focus as disputable symbols of American life.”¹⁰ Backed by organizations such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Representative Hubert Scudder (R-California) introduced a congressional resolution asking that the panels be excised from the post office walls. According to Refregier's account of the incident, Scudder was greatly offended by a panel titled *War and Peace*, which included the flag of the Soviet Union alongside the flags of the other allied powers, including of course, the flag of the United States. Citing a 1951 House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) report, which listed Refregier as affiliated with twenty-three Communist-based organizations, Scudder proclaimed that the Rincon Post Office murals were “definitely subversive and designed to spread Communistic propaganda” and demanded that they be immediately removed from public display.¹¹ The post office was “haunted,” in other words, by an earlier political moment in which the Federal government counted the USSR as its ally and actively financed art depicting working-class subject matter (through programs such as the Federal Arts Project). Ferlinghetti saw the attempt at exorcising this cultural ghost—a symbol of U.S. political and artistic history barely a decade old—as an orchestrated effort at erasing state-sanctioned populism and amity toward the Soviet Union from public memory.

Scudder's appeal to the House of Representatives was indicative of the

swelling McCarthyite tide of the period, in which an intensifying wave of anti-Communist sentiment, fostered by the United States' increasingly turbulent relationship with the Soviet Union, authorized, in Ferlinghetti's eyes, the whitewashing of recent political and cultural history. The leftist political leanings of artists such as Refregier, whose work had been put to extensive use by both the WPA and the Office of War Information (OWI), had suddenly become "un-American" within the context of the rampant anti-leftism inspired by geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union, and Ferlinghetti was concerned with the extent to which the new anti-Communist consensus might place new restrictions on what could be expressed under the moniker of U.S. culture into the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, Scudder's resolution failed to pass, due primarily to a tremendous outcry from Bay Area intellectuals skeptical of the anti-Communism pervasive in the Federal government, for they feared, and rightly so, that it represented a new and pronounced attempt at the sanctioned repression of dissenting viewpoints and culture.

The Refregier Affair remains integral to understanding the political evolution of Ferlinghetti in the years leading up to the Cuban Revolution, especially as it has been largely underappreciated by scholars of the American Left such as Van Gosse. Gosse has identified Ferlinghetti's 1961 unveiling of "One Thousand Fearful Words for Fidel Castro" as a pivotal moment in the development of the Beat Generation's political outlooks. According to Gosse's narrative of Cuban events, the early revolution provided a venue in which key figures within the Beat Movement "went South" and "went Public," as "the act of physically or metaphorically going to Cuba" allowed Ferlinghetti and others to emerge from their Bohemian chrysalis as newly engaged critics of U.S. Cold War policy.¹² While the Cuban encounter undoubtedly refashioned or clarified Beat political commitments, the metamorphoses of figures such as Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg were not as drastic as Gosse would have us believe. Gosse's version of the Beat encounter with revolutionary Cuba relies far too heavily on a stereotypical rendering of these writers as "thoroughly antipolitical . . . interested exclusively in unmediated experience and perhaps liberation via sex, drink, drugs, bop, and hitting the road," an overgeneralization that echoes the dismissal of the Beats by figures such as Daniel Bell and from which these figures, fresh from their Cuban experience, could only emerge as sober-minded public intellectuals guided, for supposedly the first time, by truly pressing political concerns and newly pronounced internationalist sympathies.¹³ Indeed, Gosse's characterization does a great discredit to Ferlinghetti's legacy as a publisher and activist in the years prior to the Cuban Revolution, a period in which he had already taken a principled stance against the paranoia of the Cold War National Security State and the cultural shortsightedness it helped foster. That is to say, revolutionary

Havana did not represent the first time in which Ferlinghetti went either “public” or “south”; rather, the early revolution allowed him to further elaborate on a number of commitments that had been at the forefront of his cultural activism and intellectual life since the early 1950s.

Considering his political lineage, Ferlinghetti’s position on the murals was nevertheless unusual. Ferlinghetti had come of political age within a postwar cultural milieu highly indebted to the tenets of wartime anarcho-pacifism as theorized by a number of artists and intellectuals who, at the height of the Second World War, had quite vociferously rejected the New Deal cultural legacy preserved in works such as Refregier’s panels. Figures such as William Everson, Kenneth Rexroth, and Robert Duncan equated New Deal culture with state-sanctioned expressions of nationalism, which had foreshadowed the nationalistic mass cultures of the Second World War—a cultural turn of events that compromised more worldly or cosmopolitan expressions of human community in favor of a culturally anchored and monolithic imaginary of naturally coherent nation-states possessed by competitive geopolitical interests, and willing to bomb each other into near oblivion in order to secure those interests. Their wartime pacifism was based, in other words, on rejecting the most recognizable forms of political affiliation secured under national symbols such as the “common people” and the flag—symbols which they blamed, in part, for the widespread death and destruction of the Second World War, and from which Duncan felt especially estranged.

Rexroth, who was affiliated with Everson’s Waldport Fine Arts Project, became one of Ferlinghetti’s principal mentors in the years following the war, spearheading a Bay Area intellectual collective known as the Libertarian (or Anarchist) Circle. Reflecting upon his own time within the Circle, Ferlinghetti’s poetic peer Michael McClure points out that Rexroth “was like Godwin was to early nineteenth-century England—an anarchist, teacher, political figure, literateur. He was a very brilliant man and put many of us on our feet with a stance we could grow with.”¹⁴ The guiding hope of the Circle, much like Muste’s *Liberation*, was the establishment and maintenance of a forum for political discussion unencumbered by the nascent political rhetoric of the Cold War. The Circle’s philosophy in this regard was deeply indebted to the wartime outlooks of anarcho-pacifism, especially in its efforts at creating cultural arenas opposed to the habitual anti-Communism of the postwar U.S. media even as it was still taking shape. Rexroth himself admitted as much when he identified the wartime culture forged by William Everson and other Waldport artists as the well-spring for the anarchistic and civil libertarian elements of San Francisco culture during and after the war.¹⁵ Rexroth’s Circle provided an informal—though intellectually charged—setting in which an earlier generation of antiwar activists

mingled with younger Bay Area artists and intellectuals. Regular participants included prominent members of the anarcho-pacifist movement such as Everson, Robert Duncan, Morris Graves, Roy Finch, and Lewis Hill (the cofounders of Pacifica Radio, who had both published antiwar poetry in *Illiterati* during World War II), along with up-and-coming poets such as Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, and eventually Allen Ginsberg.

Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books emerged as one of the more tangible fruits of this inter-generational convergence. Ferlinghetti founded City Lights in 1953 (the same year as his Refregier article) with Peter Martin, the son of assassinated New York anarchist and labor agitator Carlo Tresca. It was the first all-paperback bookstore in the United States, committed to providing affordable editions of imaginative and political literature to a non-academic readership. Ferlinghetti points out that "our bookstore had an anarchist background from the beginning. We sold the Italian anarchist newspapers, and I remember that one of the people who bought these papers was the garbageman."¹⁶ From the outset, Ferlinghetti stocked the shelves with paperback editions of the works being discussed by the Circle, as Rexroth's extensive library of volumes by figures such as Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin became the prototype for the early City Lights inventory.¹⁷ As such, the bookstore provided a site of public contact for the ideas being discussed in the Circle, as did Hill's KPFA/Pacifica Radio (which featured a weekly program hosted by Rexroth). Forwarding Waldport's commitment to free speech—especially in those times during which the government declares a national crisis or identifies a pronounced threat to U.S. national security—City Lights was dedicated to maintaining a cultural space for oppositional dialogue in the politically repressive climate of the early 1950s.

Ferlinghetti's participation in the Circle, along with the subsequent founding of City Lights, facilitated a sea change in his political outlooks that had begun during the closing years of World War II. Unlike Everson and his anarcho-pacifist peers, Ferlinghetti had been an active combatant in the Second World War, enlisting in the U.S. Navy, where he was initially assigned to a sub-chaser, then eventually took command of a small navy vessel which participated in the Normandy invasion. As the war was winding to a close, Ferlinghetti served in the Pacific as a navigator on an attack transport and took part in the occupation of Japan. Arriving on the Japanese coast six weeks after the nuclear attack on Nagasaki, he traveled to the bombed-out city hoping to witness the devastation firsthand, only to be emotionally overwhelmed by the lingering death and destruction. It was at this point, he later claimed, that he first gave serious thought to pacifistic philosophy.¹⁸ Then, in 1950, attracted by the burgeoning artistic and literary scene in northern California, Ferlinghetti migrated from Paris (where he had attended the Sorbonne on the G.I. Bill) to San Francisco.

He became acquainted with Rexroth in 1951 and immediately began attending Circle meetings. All things considered, Ferlinghetti's wartime experiences might explain, in part, his defense of Refregier. To a large extent, he was more historically invested in the visual culture of World War II than his eventual mentors, who had rejected the symbols of militarized national life and followed, to one extent or another, the call of conscientious objection. Whatever his reasons may have been, they initially inspired him to paddle against the gathering McCarthyite maelstrom, thereby inheriting a tradition of free speech activism that catalyzed the founding of City Lights Books and sent him on a political trajectory that eventually forfeited the symbolic trappings of Cold War nationalism for a politics more strictly in line with his anarcho-pacifist peers and mentors within the Libertarian Circle.

“Howling” Across the Bay Area

City Lights Books anchored one hub of a political and aesthetic culture that soon flourished in North Beach coffee houses, taverns, small art galleries, and public poetry performances. Suspicious of the mainstream political rhetoric of the McCarthyite period—as documented by Ferlinghetti in his 1953 *Art Digest* article—North Beach culture propelled the anarcho-pacifist quest for anti-nationalistic conceptions of human community and “stranger” expressions of political subjectivity far into the Cold War period. Toward this end, City Lights also became a small press publisher of poetry in 1955, and one of the chief outlets of the region's poetic renaissance. Ferlinghetti's own *Pictures of the Gone World* represented the first volume in what would become the press's world-renowned Pocket Poet series, paperback volumes of poetry cut to fit into the back pocket of their owner's denim jeans—or sized, in other words, for going easily “on the road.” Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* was published as volume 4 of the Pocket Poet series, and the ensuing censorship trials surrounding its publication further foregrounds the stakes of early Beat politics, while providing a valuable cultural backdrop to Ferlinghetti's eventual veneration of Cuba's early revolutionary culture.

Ginsberg himself had arrived in San Francisco in 1954 bearing a letter of introduction addressed to Rexroth from William Carlos Williams. On account of Williams's significant reputation, this letter granted Ginsberg immediate access to the Circle and its corresponding political and cultural scene. Everson explains that it was Rexroth who originally “attracted Ginsberg [to San Francisco]. He liberated Ginsberg, you might say. Ginsberg came from an environment where people like Lionel Trilling, people like that at Columbia—they weren't radical in any sense. They were politically liberal, but Kenneth was *radical*.”¹⁹ The political