



THE BEATS IN MEXICO

BY DAVID STEPHEN CALONNE

(Book Review)



The place that Mexico occupies in the literary imagination of foreign visitors, particularly those from the United States, is a question that receives periodic attention from a range of disciplinary standpoints and approaches. While it is not uncommon for scholars to focus on a specific period within the long history of cultural relations between Mexico and the US, including the postwar era, such studies tend to limit their considerations of the Beat generation to a chapter

or two within lengthier works. In *The Beats in Mexico* (2022), David Stephen Calonne aims to correct that trend by presenting an extended study of the influence Mexico had on the Beat generation, including several previously neglected writers whose inclusion adds nuance to the popular understanding of the place of the Beats in twentieth-century US literature.

From the very first page, Calonne situates his study within the broader framework of literary history and scholarship—and the reader should place his book on the shelf next to the many others to which it is indebted, from early studies such as Drewey Wayne Gunn's *American and British Writers in Mexico* (1974) and Cecil Robinson's *Mexico and the Hispanic Southwest in American Literature* (1977),¹ to more recent entries such as Helen Delpar's *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (1992). As Gunn and Robinson both take a long historical perspective from the Spanish Colonial era to their present moment, Calonne's book is more akin to Delpar's, whose focus is confined to the US-Mexican

Nathaniel R. Racine
Texas A&M International
University, USA
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief



<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1431-8629>

¹ Originally published in 1963 as *With the Ears of Strangers: The Mexican in American Literature*.

cultural exchange during the interwar period. The very subject matter of *The Beats in Mexico* requires Calonne to draw similar historical boundaries in defining his approach to the postwar era, but more important is the way he contributes to an understanding of the commonly held ideas, or *topoi*, of Mexico in the foreign imagination. Delpar borrows this concept on the rhetoric of travel writing from Susan Noakes, who defines *topos* as “a commonly held notion about someone or something which is accepted as true virtually without question and carries rhetorical weight because of this special status accorded it by a particular audience” (qtd. in Delpar 1992: 200–201). The *topos*, then, “is intelligible because it embodies an *old* idea, although it may be embedded in a text the thrust of which is to present ideas or facts which are *new*” (Noakes 1986: 141). In the context of this discussion, the old ideas about “Mexico” find their way into the new writings of a new generation in a new era. The interpretation of any country by any foreign writer will almost always engage with prejudice and stereotype in one way or another—and Calonne’s book provides insight into how the Beats simultaneously embraced, perpetuated, and reshaped the *topoi* of Mexico’s representation by US writers. This pattern of old ideas embedded in new forms characterizes the interwar period as much as it does the postwar period—and these *topoi* remain visible today in the still customary descriptions of Mexico as having a uniquely ‘authentic,’ ‘colorful,’ or ‘picturesque’ character. Calonne recognizes the “clichéd view” of Mexico “which the Beats extol” (Calonne 2022: 222), while also illustrating the contrasting ways in which Beat writers also engaged with Mexico—its culture, literature, history, traditions, archaeology and ancient mythology—in thoughtful, productive ways, underrecognized contributors to the larger history of cultural relations between the two countries.

Although Mexico has long been a destination for foreign writers across generations, its relevance to the Beats—and to the US counterculture more generally—is deserving of further study (Calonne 2022: 1). It should be added that, when the Beats are mentioned in such discussions, scholars almost always limit their focus to well-known figures such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. While Calonne does not ignore these prominent figures, he dedicates himself to emphasizing the influence of Mexico on a wider range of Beat writers, most notably women. He frequently returns to this point, emphasizing that “While the male Beats are well represented in a variety of anthologies, histories of Beat literature, and university course offerings on the American counterculture, female members of the movement have been marginalized” (2022: 90). Even a cursory glance at the table of contents

will reveal that a full third of the book's nine chapters are dedicated to female authors—and they are not relegated to a separate section of the book, but listed alongside their male contemporaries. Arranged in “roughly the order in which the Beats each arrived in Mexico across the decades” (Calonne 2022: 17), the chapters introduce readers to, in order of appearance: Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William S. Burroughs, Philip Lamantia, Margaret Randall, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Bonnie Bremser, Michael McClure (with a guest appearance by Jim Morrison), and Joanne Kyger.²

Calonne readily admits that the Beats “have rightly been accused of excluding women from their ‘club’ and of misogyny” (2022: 99), but the inclusion of Randall, Bremser, and Kyger is important not only for their role as women among the Beats, but also for their larger contributions to the cultural exchange between Mexico and the US. Kyger and Bremser, for example—alongside Burroughs and McClure (and Morrison)—incorporated indigenous shamanism into their works. Even more importantly, Bremser emphasized the role of the *curandera*, or female shaman, a figure who “has often been obscured in histories of shamanism” (Calonne 2022: 168). Although certainly not the final word on any of these customs, such examples illustrate how foreign visitors do sometimes play a role in the recovery and preservation of such “important spiritual tradition[s]” (Calonne 2022: 226).

Randall, on the other hand, is remembered for her role in founding the influential, bilingual Mexican literary journal, *El Corno Emplumado* (1962–1969), and one immediately thinks of the many other women throughout literary history who played critical roles in conveying an understanding and appreciation of Mexico to a US audience in similar ways. One thinks of Katherine Anne Porter and her *Outline of Mexican Arts and Crafts* (1922), as well as Frances Toor, who founded the journal *Mexican Folkways* (1925–1937), or perhaps Margaret Shedd, who was among the founders of the Centro Mexicano de Escritores in Mexico City in 1951.

One of the strengths of Calonne's book is that he maintains his focus on his chosen subject matter while simultaneously providing frequent opportunities for his readers to contemplate the much longer history to which his study belongs. There is a lengthy list of writers shuffled among the pages of *The Beats in Mexico*, including: Rudolfo

² Another work which overlaps with—and merits some comparison to—*The Beats in Mexico*, is Glenn Sheldon's *South of Our Selves* (2004), which focuses on poetry written by US writers in Mexico during the 1950s, containing chapters on William Carlos Williams, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and Robert Hayden.

Anaya, Gloria Anzaldúa, Homero Aridjis, André Breton, Ernesto Cardenal, Carlos Castaneda, Stewart Chase, Robert Creeley, Diane di Prima, Édouard Glissant, Graham Greene, Langston Hughes, Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, Denise Levertov, Malcolm Lowry, Charles Olson, Nicanor Parra, Octavio Paz, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, John Steinbeck, John Lloyd Stephens, Lew Welch, and William Carlos Williams, among many others. Whether or not the reader is an admirer of the Beats, their writings, or their worldview, Calonne suggests the many ways in which these nine writers are inextricably linked to the broader movement of literary history whether in Mexico, the US, or the world. The extensive endnotes provided by Calonne invite one to consider the myriad possibilities for future research, allowing the reader to make connections beyond the pages of his book. For that reason, *The Beats in Mexico* rewards careful reading and scholarly imagination.

Furthermore, the narrative Calonne provides is well organized, accessible, and very readable. Each one of his chapters begins with an introductory outline and ends with a summary conclusion, an approach that readers will recognize from his earlier book, *The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats* (2017). Although Mexico certainly contributed to that “spiritual imagination”—and the country is therefore mentioned almost out of necessity in that earlier study—here, the project’s focus is on the importance of “Mexico” both as an idea and as a place: “The border with Mexico for the Beats signifies not just an imaginary line on a map but rather entry into the Other, the unknown,” while simultaneously remembering that “The Beat response to Mexico was by no means monolithic” (Calonne 2022: 15, 16), an important balance that Calonne maintains across the nine chapters of his book.

That very same idea of the border, however, is also frequently the source of the “clichéd view” of Mexico that Calonne critiques elsewhere. Just as the Beat response to Mexico was not “monolithic,” neither is Mexican culture. Calonne is well aware of this, noting that the Beats “traveled widely throughout Mexico—from Baja to Mexico City to Oaxaca to Chiapas to San Miguel de Allende to the great archaeological sites of the Yucatan—and the country became an inspiration for their literary creativity” (Calonne 2022: 16). These several places mentioned, alongside the dozens more where the Beats and others have travelled before and since, represent a vast diversity amid the regional geography of “Mexico” and, perhaps, a way of helping readers see through the old *topoi* and into the new perspectives the Beats offered to their own era.

Given that many readers are likely unfamiliar with the regional variations within Mexico, however, *The Beats in Mexico* would have benefitted from the inclusion of a map to indicate the overlap and divergence of places visited and routes traveled. Left implicit in the various chapters, Calonne could have done more to emphasize the importance of the different landscapes and peoples encountered by travelers within Mexico, as the local settings of the Beats' experiences undoubtedly played a role in their representations of Mexico and would surely add to the reader's understanding of them, both individually and collectively.

In the end, however, what *The Beats in Mexico* offers is an important standpoint from which to revisit the place of "Mexico" in the literary imagination of foreign visitors to that country. In his concluding chapter, Calonne reminds his readers that "Mexico still has many things to teach us. Given the threats posed by the often ignorant, reactionary political climate in the United States, it is essential to emphasize our sense of kinship with this great country and its people, and to celebrate the humanitarian values which the Beats—not always perfectly—sought to affirm" (Calonne 2022: 226). Any book that contributes to that endeavor is of great value.

Abstract: *The Beats in Mexico* (2022) by David Stephen Calonne is reviewed here in terms of its contribution to the larger body of academic studies that explore the representation of Mexico in US literature. Calonne's study distinguishes itself by emphasizing the importance of overlooked female writers among the Beat generation, including Bonnie Bremser, Joanne Kyger, and Margaret Randall, who appear alongside more familiar names such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. In doing so, Calonne expands the discussion of the Beats in important ways and, furthermore, offers a welcome contribution that enriches the conversation around the understanding (and misunderstanding) of Mexico by US writers and intellectuals. Given the continued tensions between the two countries, it should be of great topical interest as well.

Keywords: Beat Generation, Mexico in Literature, book review, David Steven Calonne

Bio: Nathaniel R. Racine is an assistant professor of English in the Department of Humanities at Texas A&M International University in Laredo, Texas, and the Co-Editor-in-Chief of the *Review of International American Studies*. He holds a PhD in English from Temple University in Philadelphia and a professionally-accredited Master's degree in Urban Planning from McGill University in Montréal, Canada. In 2018–2019 he was a Fulbright Postdoctoral Scholar to Mexico. His recent work draws from the fields of geography and urbanism to understand the cultural exchange between the US and Mexico from the interwar period through midcentury.

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