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978-0-521-88694-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan

Edited by Kevin J. H. Dettmar

Excerpt

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KEVIN J. H. DETTMAR

Introduction

No other figure from the world of American popular music, of this or any other era, has attracted the volume of critical attention, much of it quite original and perceptive, that Bob Dylan has. Just as significantly, no popular-culture figure has ever been adopted into the curricula of college and university language and literature departments in the way Dylan has; critics have called James Joyce “God’s gift to English departments,” but Dylan is no less deserving of that designation. As early as 1972, articles started appearing in scholarly journals analyzing the songs of Bob Dylan, using the methodologies of literary studies; perhaps more surprisingly, *Scholastic Magazine*, with its audience of secondary-school students and teachers, featured an article on Dylan back in 1970. Dylan biographer Clinton Heylin calls his oeuvre “the most important canon in rock music”; this praise may actually understate the case, for arguably Dylan’s is the most important canon in all of twentieth-century American popular music. And Heylin’s unembarrassed use of that politically charged term “canon” serves to suggest, too, that Dylan has long since passed into the Academy, making a *Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* a logical addition to this distinguished series.

David Gates’s description of Dylan as “the man who did to popular music what Einstein did to physics,” while initially sounding like hyperbole, really isn’t (62). (The error, if there is one, isn’t in the parallel between these two innovators, but in equating these fields of innovation.) Dylan brought the long lyric line back to popular American song, much as Walt Whitman had restored it to populist American poetry a century earlier; and against the clear-sighted, sometimes childlike lyrics of the folk tradition, Dylan imported the French symbolists’ strategy of suggesting rather than delineating his subjects, a style of lyrical impressionism fully consonant with the introspective (and sometimes hallucinogen-enhanced) listening styles of the time. Equally important as these two factors, Dylan from an early age boasted the voice of a seemingly old man – seemingly the very voice, to steal a phrase from Greil Marcus, of “old, weird America.” In an era when pop (and even

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folk) stars were, as today, meant to sing like the nightingale, Dylan instead sang as the crow. But that croak, it seemed, contained a depth of feeling and passion and anger and joy and wisdom and disillusionment not hinted at by the songbirds; it came as a revelation. And it sounded like the voice of Truth.

As early as 1968, critic Nik Cohn could write, “Almost everyone has been pushed by [Dylan] . . . and almost everything new that happens now goes back to his source. Simply, he has grown pop up, he has given it brains . . .” (174). Dylan’s influence has by no means weakened in the intervening years: One of the most talented and inventive American guitarists to achieve fame in the past decade, Jack White (the White Stripes, the Raconteurs), declared in a 2006 issue of *Rolling Stone*, “I have three dads: my biological father, God and Bob Dylan.” And Gen-X director Todd Haynes’s 2007 Dylan biopic *I’m Not There*, starring such Hollywood heavyweights as Cate Blanchett, Christian Bale, Julianne Moore, Richard Gere, and the late Heath Ledger, made self-conscious and explicit the mythological dimension that has always been an important part of Dylan’s influence. Another new generation of musicians and artists is now falling in line to pay its devoirs to Dylan.

For Dylan’s 1974 tour with the Band, 5.5 million people (nearly 4 percent of the US population) sent money by mail for advance-purchase tickets. While no longer enjoying that level of popularity (and given the fragmented state of American popular music today, no single artist does, or could), Dylan has recently been experiencing one of his periodic surges in appeal. New writing issues forth seemingly every month, some occasioned by Dylan’s tell-some memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One*; Martin Scorsese’s *No Direction Home*, produced first as a multi-evening television special and then as a DVD, attempted to take the measure of Dylan’s achievement for a general audience, albeit considering only the earliest years of his career. Even Dylan’s satellite radio program has provided a new kind of evidence of his influences, and provoked a new wave of writing.

The introduction to a *Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* must take up the vexed question of Dylan’s status as a poet: the degree to which he is, and is not, a poet, perhaps in the context of other “rock poets” like Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith, Paul Simon, and Lou Reed. Dylan himself has always insisted that he’s not a poet – “Wordsworth’s a poet, Shelley’s a poet, Allen Ginsberg’s a poet” is his response to being labeled a poet himself; and yet to some extent owing to the institutional needs of American colleges and universities, who first brought Dylan into the classroom under the only available rubric, as a “poet,” some confusion exists about the status of his, and more largely rock, lyrics as poetry. As Robert Christgau has sensibly sought to remind us, “Dylan is a songwriter, not a poet . . . ‘My Back Pages’ is a bad poem. But it is a good song . . .” (“Rock Lyrics” 63).

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Like Christgau, I would argue that Dylan is not a significant poet; but his contributions as a literary artist, understood more broadly, are of the first order. Hence this central paradox: Dylan is recognized as an important literary artist without ever having published a significant work of traditional “literary” merit (though some would now make that claim for the recently published memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One*). But Dylan’s work is literary, I would want to argue, in the most fundamental of ways: his is a sensitivity, and a sensibility, that turns almost instinctively to the resources of literary language in order to manifest itself, “transmuting,” as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus brashly proclaims, “the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life.” At the close of the “Defense of Poetry,” Shelley declares poets “the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration,” “the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present,” “the words which express what they understand not”: and in this sense only, perhaps, Dylan is a poet. Without claiming him for a prophet, a designation he’d surely disdain, at the same time Dylan’s writing has proven, time and again, to be prophetic, giving a shape and substance to those gigantic shadows of the future. And giving staying power and currency to the lessons of the past: “Masters of War,” which suffered perhaps from straining just a bit too hard, sounding just a bit too paranoid, when it was released in 1963, gets more prescient every day. Every single day.

English departments first tried to put Dylan on the syllabus, and in the curriculum, as a poet because that was the nearest category available at the time (in the late 1960s and early 1970s); but as English departments have subsequently moved from literary to cultural studies, expanding the provenance of literary analysis into the sphere of popular culture and the everyday and broadening our understanding of “the literary,” Dylan’s status as a subject of literary inquiry has proven to be fully justified. What critic Andreas Huyssen has described as “the great divide” separating the texts of high and low culture in the early decades of the twentieth century has in large measure been bridged in the postmodern public sphere that Dylan inhabits; and so too in the academy, if somewhat belatedly, the arbitrary exclusion of the “low,” the popular, from scholarly regard, is now a thing of the past.

In this revitalized, democratic and demotic environment, Dylan’s work has become more valuable than ever in the literary classroom: his songs provide a wonderful set of texts in which to explore issues of intertextuality (borrowing as freely as they do from Dylan’s forebears in the popular music traditions), irony, the rhetoric of political action, the limitations of formalist analysis, modernist textuality, the congruence of modern authorship and celebrity, and autoethnography, among others. If any reader of *The*

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Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan were to approach it with concerns about Dylan's credentials as a "literary" artist, those concerns would be laid to rest, I believe, in the chapters that follow. Let me turn now to those chapters.

The volume opens with a "Chronology of Dylan's Life." To a degree almost unprecedented even among celebrity-hungry and privacy-craving media figures, the biography of Bob Dylan is enveloped in clouds of myth, much of it self-generated; as Benjamin Hedin has written, "Dylan's creation myth is elaborate and well publicized" (3) – to which he probably should have added, "fantastic, self-contradictory, and often willfully, gleefully, demonstrably false." That said, there are of course a number of verifiable landmarks in his life and career to date, and those are conveniently sketched out in the "Chronology."

Part I of the *Companion*, "Perspectives," is comprised of nine chapters attempting to take the measure of Dylan's achievement and influence, as well as to place his work within an ongoing artistic and political tradition. Each identifies a "through-line" in Dylan's career, tracing a particular motif, concern, or influence in Dylan's work, or a response to his work, tracing it through the forty-plus years of Dylan's professional career. Dylan is famously a multi-faceted artist (Bernard Paturel: "There's so many sides to Bob Dylan, he's round"); he is also something like John Keats's "chameleon poet," all mask, no "essential" substance. Dylan has claimed, "I'm only Bob Dylan when I have to be"; and as Clinton Heylin writes, "The ability to reinvent who Bob Dylan was, and is, remains the primary characteristic of his art" (Behind the Shades 716). This combines, however paradoxically, with his fans' belief in his authenticity, transparency, and confessional sincerity.

Against a backdrop of familiar chord progressions and instrumentation, Dylan has relentlessly pursued his critique of the hypocrisy of American ideology, urging us, always, to do more to realize the great dreams upon which this nation was founded. Dylan stopped writing topical songs shortly after the release of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* in 1963, just as the British were poised to invade American popular music, but he never stopped writing political songs; and just as not all topical songs are political, so too a song needn't be topical to have political importance. This distinction has too often been ignored. Dylan is the most political of our popular artists, and the most popular of our political artists. But he requires us to understand the term "politics" in its largest sense; and as a result, I have resisted the temptation to treat Dylan's politics as a separate category, choosing instead to underscore the political conscience that runs through his body of work, and to integrate discussion of Dylan's politics throughout these chapters.

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David Yaffe opens the volume with a chapter on “Bob Dylan and the Anglo-American Tradition,” with special consideration (echoed in Eric Lott’s contribution on *Love and Theft* and Martin Jacobi’s chapter on Dylan’s collaborations) of the recent accusations of plagiarism leveled at Dylan’s work. Both when acknowledged and when hidden, Dylan’s debt to the traditions of Anglo-American popular music reach back to nineteenth-century musical practice and beyond, including folk, vaudeville, and minstrelsy. During the rediscovery of “roots” music that has characterized the past decade, Dylan’s work has once again become newly suggestive and valuable; the consistent testimony of every new session man to play with Dylan, that rehearsals inevitably “[turn] into a whole series of informal workshops on American song,” serves to suggest his value as a living repository of the popular music repertory, as well as an artist who can recombine and redeploy that repertory in fresh and surprising, sometimes revelatory, ways. During informal jam sessions in which he participated in the early 1980s, Charlie Sexton writes, “[Dylan] would just pick up his guitar and start singing and playing without any introduction or explanation . . . I’d keep asking him, ‘Is this one yours?’ and he’d just mumble in that gravelly voice, ‘Nah, it’s from the Civil War.’” In a somewhat surprising turn of events, given his reclusive reputation, Dylan’s recent stint as a radio disk jockey of the old style, programming shows of thematically related music, suggests the newest outlet for his barely suppressed pedagogical impulses: Dylan is using the platform to teach his listeners about the shared musical heritage that lies just below the surface of our civic union, and tipping his hat, as well, to the music that has been most influential in his own artistic career.

In “Bob Dylan and Rolling Thunder,” Michael Denning reads the Rolling Thunder Tour to tease out Dylan’s performative politics during the Reagan era. Dylan had of course recorded his first album fully in the shadow of Woody Guthrie, whom he visited regularly at the Brooklyn State Hospital after his move to New York; but he became increasingly dissatisfied with the politics-on-its-sleeve modus operandi of the protest music movement, and weary too of the internal battles between folk purists, the folk-music equivalent of “original instrument” devotees in the classical-music world, and those who believed that the animating spirit of folk music endorsed its appropriation for contemporary political struggle. During the few years in which he operated squarely within the folk/protest idiom, Dylan wrote some of the best-known songs of the era: from the campfire fatalism of “Blowin’ in the Wind” (made famous in the version by Peter, Paul, and Mary), to the newly electric anger of “Maggie’s Farm,” to explicit anti-war protest songs still (or newly) relevant today, such as Dylan’s attack on the

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military-industrial complex, “Masters of War.” Though uncomfortable always with the label “protest singer,” Dylan has found ways over the years to make his voice heard, without restricting its range; his participation in the first Live Aid event, and his role in devising the subsequent Farm Aid concerts, are related manifestations of this desire. Indeed, as Denning persuasively argues here, it is the benefit concert itself that may ultimately prove Dylan’s most durable political legacy.

In “Bob Dylan as Songwriter,” Anthony DeCurtis focuses attention on both the continuities and innovations in Dylan’s lyrical and musical production: for instance, his success in wedding the political urgency of Woody Guthrie et al. with the verbal energy, excitement, and suggestiveness of French surrealist poetry, and the second-person interrogative power of his most successful political ballads (“How does it feel?”; “You know there’s something happening, but you don’t know what it is, do you?”). While never reluctant to take credit for his lyrics (which he has consented to publish in stand-alone volumes), Dylan has never made large claims for his tunes, most of which he readily admits to having adapted rather freely from traditional sources; the title of his 2001 album *Love and Theft* is a wry nod to his lifelong love of, and theft from, the very tradition of which he is guardian, a topic given special attention in Eric Lott’s chapter on that album, which closes the volume. But it is also generally conceded that Dylan has few if any peers as a pop lyricist; and attention to those lyrics, as well as Dylan’s songwriting methods, commands DeCurtis’s attention here.

In a relatively truncated time frame, Dylan was required to negotiate the transition from East Village coffee houses to international stadium concerts; and as iconic as his greatest albums remain for his fans, no rock performer’s shows are more cherished by his fans than are Dylan’s (only Bruce Springsteen really comes close). In “Bob Dylan as Performer,” Alan Light vividly evokes what it’s like to attend a Dylan performance. Not that the shows are always transcendent; Dylan’s tours over the years, and the current Never Ending Tour (begun February 1988), have been famously uneven: revelatory one night, perfunctory (or even embarrassing) the next. But Dylan has committed himself to conducting his musical education in public; and “like a rolling stone,” he refuses to stand still artistically, constantly challenging himself with new arrangements, new band mates, new phrasing and vocal colors, even new lyrics to the songs of his back pages. Dylan’s most famous “instrument,” of course, is that distinctive, unlovely voice; in his first national review, Robert Shelton called the voice “anything but pretty,” and it remains the most-often (and colorfully) described voice in American popular music, of which Joyce Carol Oates’s description may be the most evocative: “frankly nasal, as if sandpaper could sing.” Though primarily

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regarded as the most significant songwriter of his generation, Dylan identifies himself as a performer first; as he explained in a 1991 interview, “What got me into the whole thing in the beginning wasn’t songwriting . . . What interested me was being a musician . . . being a musician was always first and foremost in the back of my mind.”

Though he has a well-deserved reputation as a loner, a study of Dylan’s career also suggests the degree to which his creativity is dependent upon collaborative working relationships with other musicians – even, as Martin Jacobi provocatively suggests in “Bob Dylan and Collaboration,” when one of those “other” musicians is an earlier version of himself. Dylan’s formal songwriting collaborations are quite few (notably, with Jacques Levy on *Desire* [1976]); but his imagination seems to be sparked, in unpredictable ways, by informal interactions with other musicians, whether casual jamming, tour rehearsals, or the jamming-cum-rehearsals that often pass for Dylan recording sessions. This chapter also considers Dylan’s more formal, sometimes more enduring working relationships with a varying roster of musicians, groups, and artists, such as the Hawks, the Band, Joan Baez, the Rolling Thunder Review, the Grateful Dead, the Heartbreakers, and the Traveling Wilburys.

Few of Dylan’s celebrated collaborations have been with women; and the most famous of those, with Joan Baez, quickly became so one-sided that “collaboration” hardly seems a fit description. Barbara O’Dair, in “Bob Dylan and Gender Politics,” mounts a suprisingly sympathetic reading of the status of women in Dylan’s work. If Dylan was the fortunate inheritor in the 1960s of a newly liberated landscape of sexual and gender relations, he is also in some ways its spoiled child. Many critics and fans have tried, in many different ways, to deny or explain away Dylan’s sexism, and yet nagging doubts persist; though often dismissed as anger toward specific women rather than a fear or mistrust of women more generally, the cumulative record of forty-plus years begins to suggest otherwise. Sometimes, Dylan’s retrograde sexual politics are indistinguishable from simple egotism: including the plaintive (and beautiful) ballad “Sara” on the album *Desire*, for instance, and mustering the nerve to sing “Sara, Sara / Whatever made you want to change your mind?” – while at the same time engaged in one of his serial extramarital affairs – is an embarrassing example of blaming the victim, and one not reducible to simple misogyny.

The formalist critic Christopher Ricks is one of the few who continues to defend Dylan from all charges of sexism; but songs like “Rainy Day Women #12 and #35,” with its nasty biblical allusion (Proverbs 27:15, “a continual dripping on a rainy day and a contentious woman are alike”) and its rewriting of the New Testament story of the woman threatened with stoning

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at the well, with women now doing the stoning of poor Dylan (“Well, they’ll stone you when you walk all alone / They’ll stone you when you are walking home”) – as well as its atmosphere of good ol’ boy music-making – is hard to defend. Of course Dylan the songwriter and biographical subject is not identical to the persona in his songs; it would be wrongheaded to hamstring one of the most imaginative and innovative songwriters of our time by insisting on a direct equation between Dylan’s own attitudes and values and those given voice in the narratives of his songs. Recounting her own experiences as a feminist-in-the-making encountering Dylan’s work – especially, the (for feminists) notorious “Lay, Lady, Lay” – O’Dair manages to suggest how a feminist might still make room in her heart for Dylan.

A thoroughgoing religious thinker who is most comfortable with heterodoxy – his brief periods of orthodoxy, both Christian and Jewish, look like aberrations from this distance – Bob Dylan is the spiritual twin of the English Romantic poet William Blake. In “Bob Dylan and Religion,” R. Clifton Spargo and Anne K. Ream treat not just Dylan’s involvement with Christianity and his relationship to Judaism, nor do they simply consider his three explicitly Christian albums that followed in the wake of his 1979 conversion (*Slow Train Coming*, *Saved*, and *Shot of Love*). Rather, they tackle as well the larger religious logic of his most challenging work (“Highway 61 Revisited,” “Gotta Serve Somebody”) – what Christopher Ricks has called “Dylan’s visions of sin,” and his effective fusion of Judeo-Christian teaching onto something like an American political-civic religion. Like most of his positions on questions of great importance, Dylan’s relationship to religion has shifted markedly, and often unpredictably, over the years; Clinton Heylin has described his career as “a very personal battle to construct a world view that retains his faith in both God and humanity” (*Behind the Shades* ix) – but he neglects to add, a world view that also reflects his profound skepticism of each. Dylan’s most recently expressed understanding of the relationship of his faith to his art seems to balance brilliantly the different calls of each: “I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. I don’t find it anywhere else . . . I don’t adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists . . . I’ve learned more from the songs than I’ve learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs.”

The songs – Dylan’s songs – have by now become part of the lexicon of higher education, as well. As the New Critical method of “close reading” came to dominate American English departments, alongside the establishment of American Studies programs – and as the political unrest of the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War protests forced their way into college classrooms – just at the right moment, the well-wrought lyrics of Dylan’s sophisticated pop songs presented themselves as a legitimate means for

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making the teaching of American literature and cultural history “relevant.” In “Bob Dylan and the Academy,” Lee Marshall deals with the mutual construction of Bob Dylan’s oeuvre and the critical apparatuses by which that work has been interpreted. Dylan’s impressionistically suggestive, surrealistically charged songs proved wonderfully amenable to the close reading techniques championed by the New Critics, and his self-conscious adoption of literary, and especially biblical, allusion suggested his genealogy from the great poets of the English-language and Western European literary traditions. Dylan not only repaid close reading, but suggested in his own work the benefits of a careful literary apprenticeship. It was no mere caprice that in 1997 Dylan was first nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature; in the words of the nominating letter, “His words and music have helped restore the vital, time-honored link between poetry and music, and have so permeated the world as to alter its history.”

However, the narrowly formalist reading of Dylan’s work favored by the New Critics requires the suppression of its obvious, anti-establishment political message; and advocates of “cultural literacy” within the Academy have too often approached Dylan’s music blind to what Richard Goldstein calls their own “pop illiteracy,” wresting the songs from the political, historical, and cultural contexts that are so integral to their functioning. Dylan has, of course, remained the privileged popular-culture subject of academic discourse to this day; as Benjamin Hedin shrewdly observes, “The excited teenagers and college students who stayed up all night hoping to decipher ‘Maggie’s Farm’ became professors, journalists and other leaders of the educational hierarchy.” The absorption of a popular-culture subject into university structures always involves both benefits and costs; owing to his early adoption by English professors, Dylan’s is the most carefully studied body of work in all of American popular music (and Dylan has repaid the favor, naming his 2001 album after a work of literary and cultural criticism). But this scholarly work must stay cognizant of what Goldstein has called the “Rolling Tenure Revue,” and the discipline of “Ph.Dylanology”: a warning not that Dylan’s work doesn’t hold up to careful scrutiny, but instead that his songs are not the “well wrought urn” of New Critical ideology, but instead songs forged in the crucible of personal, national, generational, racial, sexual change, and can only be understood as such.

Thus while he seemed the perfect object for New Critical analysis, Dylan’s music consistently, insistently gave the lie to one of New Criticism’s central tenets: namely, the apolitical nature of all great literature. Though as careful in his artifice as any great writer, Dylan simultaneously wrote incisively about political hypocrisy, making him a popular-culture prophet for a culture that seemed to have lost its way, challenging equally those standing on

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either side of the “generation gap.” Now that the generation that grew up with Dylan comprises the nation’s ruling class – Dylan and his cohort recently turned 65 – he has been transformed into the perdurable icon of sixties idealism, artistic commitment, and rugged individualism. This has led to some confusingly contradictory gestures: Dylan has been inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and at the same time has unabashedly transformed himself into a commercial brand, with his satellite radio program *Theme Time Radio Hour with Your Host Bob Dylan* and, more outlandishly, his TV commercial advertising lingerie for Victoria’s Secret. Cultural critic David R. Shumway explores the contours of Dylan’s ongoing self-creation and self-promotion in “Bob Dylan as Cultural Icon.”

Richard Goldstein has written of the disservice to Dylan’s artistic legacy wrought by the unthinking worship of Dylan the Icon: “He’s the emblem of his generation’s splendor. Beatified in his youth, he’s cruising toward sainthood today.” In fact, one might argue that this canonization began decades ago; as early as 1969, Dylan’s mythic persona had begun to interfere with his receiving honest critical appraisal, as reflected in the fawning reviews of the second-rate *Nashville Skyline*. Goldstein’s call for the rigorous criticism Dylan’s rigorous oeuvre deserves is as urgent today as ever: “I don’t believe in Dylan. His words are not the Word. And I come not to worship him but to complicate him.”

For an artist with nearly thirty studio albums to his credit – not to mention six official live albums, a handful of film soundtracks, and an entire cottage industry in bootlegs, both black-market and the ongoing Columbia-authorized “Bootleg Series” – choosing a handful for closer discussion is an excruciating assignment. But that’s precisely what we’ve done in Part II, “Landmark Albums.” The eight albums spotlighted here begin to suggest the range and achievement of Dylan’s recording career; each of these short pieces approaches one watershed Dylan album from a personal perspective and in a personal voice, helping to show, among other things, *what* and *how* Dylan’s music means for those who love his work.

College and university courses in the US and Europe devoted to the study of Dylan’s work are now so common as no longer to count as a curiosity. By far the majority of these courses are taught within departments of English or literature; the reasons for this are touched on in Lee Marshall’s chapter on Dylan’s relationship to the Academy, but the short answer is that Dylan came to public prominence at precisely the moment that departments of English were seeking to break down traditional barriers between “high” and “low” culture, and his highly literate and literary popular songs provided the perfect texts for classroom use and scholarly analysis. Hundreds of schools