

The Typewriter is Holy: The Complete, Uncensored History of the Beat Generation
by Bill Morgan.
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Reviewed by Tom Pynn – Kennesaw State University

Everything belongs to me because I am poor.
--Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

The above quotation is cited by Allen Ginsberg at the end of his essay, “A Definition of the Beat Generation” as “the essence of the phrase ‘beat generation’” (239). Anne Waldman’s anthology *The Beat Book* (1996) begins with a revised version of the above essay in which Ginsberg credits Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes with identifying their time/generation with the appellation: “beat generation” (xiii). He then proceeds to identify five other significant markers of “beat generation,” concluding with some remarks about common themes. Given this, how are we to understand Bill Morgan’s claim that “they [all the usual suspects: Burroughs, Kerouac, Corso, et al.] were all close friends of Allen Ginsberg, and by applying my definition they are linked to the genre by that friendship, and *that alone qualifies them for Beat-hood status whether they like it or not*” [my emphasis] (xix). Further down the page, Morgan reiterates this exclusive categorization:

The only definition that truly holds up to serious scrutiny is this: The Beat Generation was essentially a group of friends who gathered around and interacted with Allen Ginsberg. *Among themselves they formed* smaller groups and merged with other literary circles from time to time. Many of the groups split and reformed, but each of them at one time or another was included in the fellowship of Ginsberg’s immediate circle. (My emphases) (xix)

Am I to suppose, then, that even Ginsberg’s own viewpoint is to be subordinated to Morgan’s typology?

“Whether they like it or not” seems more arrogance than a serious attempt to identify and explicate the wide-ranging cultural phenomenon that is known as the Beat Generation. When I seriously consider the people who worked within the parameters of said culture, I find that many expressed views on the topic of who they thought they were and what they thought they were doing. Kerouac himself altered his conception of Beat Generation at least two times, from the initial conversation with Holmes in which the emphasis was placed on furtiveness and an expressive personal vision of the world, to the mid-fifties emendation when he described beat in terms of the Orthodox Christian (Roman Catholic) concept of beatitude. In *Scratching the Beat Surface*, Michael McClure identifies two important aspects of the Beat surface neither of which

have to do directly with friendship or fellowship as necessary and sufficient causes: “the landscape in the case of Gary Snyder, the mind as nature in the case of Allen Ginsberg,” and “[w]e wanted voice and we wanted vision” (11 and 13, respectively). But I digress.

Yet I am not digressing because for contemporary scholars of Beat Culture identifying the important texts, figures, themes, and ideas is a large part of our work. Thus, there have been many accounts of what the phrase “Beat Generation” means – means for those who were there, means for those who came after the fifties, means for us who appreciate and admire what this cultural phenomenon was about and what it has bequeathed us all. I object strenuously to Morgan’s reductive definition (is the problem with the logical project of definition itself?), but just as strenuously defend his participation in the conversation. It seems to me, then, that the “Introduction” sets up expectations that are not fulfilled.

One way that I sympathize and intellectually support Morgan’s thesis is that the Beats were very much committed to the personal and opposed the impersonal status quo. Indeed, opposition is important to the beat project: humanism vs. militarism, organicism vs. mechanism, pluralism vs. exclusivism. Referring again to McClure’s essay on the 6 Gallery reading: “None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill, militaristic silence, to the intellective void—to the land without poetry—to the spiritual darkness” (13). Snyder reiterates the desire to break with dominant culture when he notes that the fifties was “one of those few times in American history that a section of the population has freely chosen to disaffiliate itself from ‘the American standard of living’ and all that goes with it—in the name of freedom” (10). Of course, for many Beat culture artists, Snyder is expressing an aspiration based on Beat core values more than giving as description of how things are/were. Morgan, late in the book, does state the centrality to the Beat project of the personal when he writes that, “The true Beat rebellion was against the notion that freedom, prosperity, and security had to come at the expense of humanity. Personal liberation for every person was, to them, paramount; social connectedness held less appeal” (248). The work of Beat culture artists, whether they would be included in Morgan’s idea about who is in Ginsberg’s immediate circle, has very much to do with championing the unspeakable visions of the individual and rejecting the conforming pressures of American society. It is also the case that many female and African-American Beat culture artists as well as scholars on women and African-American Beats inform us that “social connectedness” was an important part of their experience of what might be called a Beat ethos.

Morgan is correct, I believe, when, in quoting from Susan Cheever’s *American Bloomsbury*, he connects the Beats with the Transcendentalists who were also “intoxicated with freedom, with leisure, and with the possibilities of life devoted to thought and pleasure” (xv). Morgan, however, breaks the comparison with the Transcendentalists by claiming that “there is one important distinction between the story that Cheever tells of the Transcendentalists and the one I’ll tell about the Beat Generation. The history of the Transcendentalists seems to be a spaghetti bowl of personalities, each strand nearly equal in importance to the finished dish” (xv). I disagree with Morgan when he reduces the meaning of Beat Generation to friendship and

fellowship within Ginsberg's immediate circle. I also find it vaguely disconcerting that someone outside looking in can define the depth and breadth of people's relationships, of their intimate friendships with each other. This seems both unseemly and a rejection of the very desire for freedom that is at the heart of both Transcendentalist and Beat cultures. Furthermore, it's not exactly clear what Morgan hopes to gain, either in filling out his narrative or giving a deeper historical dimension to his narrative, by eliciting Cheever's viewpoint. It also seems odd for Morgan to invoke a work that includes women in a prominent position in conceiving of the Transcendentalist movement when Morgan does not afford women an equal place in his account.

What seems to complicate matters is that later in the book Morgan writes that

[d]etermining when *a literary generation* begins or ends is arbitrary [my emphasis]. Was the Beat generation born with the meeting of Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac in 1944, or with the murder of David Kammerer later that same year? Was the Six [sic] Gallery reading in 1955 the beginning, middle, or end of the age? Kerouac himself believed the era ended as early as 1949. Were the deaths of Cassady and Kerouac the final chapters, or did the end come later. After Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso were all gone? There is no tidy closure for this group, only the later years of each of the participants. (232)

One cannot have it both ways. Either there is only one way of conceiving of the identity of the Beat Generation or there is more than one. If Morgan steadfastly identifies "Ginsberg as the locomotive that pulled the others along like so many boxcars," then the end must be Ginsberg's death. Furthermore, Morgan's reductive argument seems to be a case of the fallacy of atomism. Thanks to the existential rebellion, with which many of the Beat artists sympathized, the rise of both postmodern and post-structural thought, as well as the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, some of us now reject Cartesian mechanism and accept that things are not isolated, separate and distinct. Things share family resemblances while keeping their respective uniqueness intact. The same logical point can be made about Beat culture. There is no doubt that the Beats were a community that published, performed, and resisted together, but to reduce the meaning of the Beat Generation to the immediate circle of friends around Ginsberg is to do violence—logical, moral, and aesthetic—to the various figures that together constitute Beat Generation as a cultural phenomenon.

Leaving this aspect of Morgan's thesis aside, there is the important question—to the "Beats" themselves as well as to Beat Generation/culture scholars and serious students of Beat culture—of the relationship of friendship/fellowship to the work. It seems to me that any claim to a "complete" history must take the work—poetry, novels, plays, film, painting, songs—into account. Once done, one can then ask, "What does friendship add to the work? How do friendship and work illuminate each other? While Morgan throws us tidbits here and there—Kerouac's naming of Ginsberg's poem "Howl" as well as the small magazine *Big Table*, the original title for the Burroughs/Kerouac novelistic collaboration, Burrough's conception of interzone—there is no substantive and critical look at the important works either of Ginsberg or

those in his immediate circle. This, then, leaves open the question concerning the relationships amongst Ginsberg, his friends, and their respective relationships. Following John McPhee's conception of consociate, Beat consociates are those who shared, sometimes *intimately* shared, similar aesthetics, politics, and ecological concerns as well as the working concerns of publishing, teaching, editing, and writing. Any complete and uncensored history of the Beat Generation must be inclusive rather than exclusive as BEAT is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a generational one if it means anything at all.

Once we get past the "Introduction," however, *The Typewriter is Holy* is a readable and informative bio-history. If one is already familiar with the basic figures, texts, and themes, one will find nothing new in Morgan's pages. Even some of the pictures he includes are familiar; however, if one is in an introductory course on the Beats, then one will find the book an accessible and informative beginning to one's Beat studies. While at times repetitive, Morgan does tell a good story as he has shown in his previous books on the places where the Beats met, traveled, and socialized. In the 250 pages—hardly a "complete" history—the author provides enough detail to give students a glimpse of important figures, events, texts, and themes while at the same time allowing the instructor to fill in, amend, and challenge the book's details. Thus, it is a usable classroom text.

The downside, however, is that Beat scholars will notice what is excluded just as much as what is included. Even if one accepts Morgan's thesis, which I don't believe is entirely defensible, one may find it hard to accept his exclusion of African-American Beats and Beat consociates as well as female participants simply by saying that Ginsberg didn't know many African-Americans and women. He explains that "the reason for the lack of African American representation in the group was similar to the reason that few women were associated with them. Ginsberg simply didn't know many black writers in the forties and fifties" (161). For me this isn't much of a reason unless one has a very restrictive conception of knowing and friendship. Furthermore, Morgan's claim ignores the substantial collaborations Ginsberg had with Bob Kaufman, particularly on *Beatitude*, and his close though problematic relationships with some women including Elise Cowen and, even more significantly, Anne Waldman. Such a characterization of Ginsberg's relationships with African Americans and women is at least contrary to his later claim, on the same page, that "Allen funneled poems by his friends to young editors like LeRoi Jones and Diane DiPrima [sic] in New York City and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and John Wieners in San Francisco" (161). Just as Ezra Pound acted as a helpmate to his friends, Ginsberg also played the same role in post-war America. What seems arbitrary to me is Morgan's inclusion and exclusion based on a very slippery and non-conceptualized working notion of friendship.

Morgan's omission of women is just as problematic. He tells us that "we should think of the Beat Generation as a social circle created by Allen Ginsberg and his friends instead of as a literary movement. This will explain why so few women writers are identified with it, DiPrima [sic] being the exception" (153). Not only does he make a contrary claim when he later claims that "determining when a literary generation begins or ends is arbitrary," but also ignores recent

work by Beat scholars to reveal the women who were present and are considered a part of the Beat Generation (232). There is much more at stake in identifying the important texts, figures, events, and themes of Beat culture than simply establishing who's in and who's out. It's hard for me to fathom why Morgan wants only a small group to be THE Beat Generation when opening the field gives us such a rich and complex picture of a larger scene, in other words, a stronger understanding of Beat Culture. Therefore, I suggest that instead of an ostensive definition of Beat Generation, we simply treat/use the term as a heuristic by which we can gauge not only inclusion but also precursors, influence, and legacy.

I recently picked up a copy of the Winter/Spring 2010 edition of *Poetry Flash* while perusing the bookshelves at City Lights Books and noticed an ad for Christopher Felver's BEAT, a collection of photographs. In the ad David Shapiro is quoted as saying that Felver, albeit "a late member," is nonetheless part of "this resistance which is a permanent revolution." So, for Shapiro at least, Beat Generation/culture is an on-going project of revolution. Furthermore, it suggests that the Beats, much like Henry Miller or Walt Whitman or William Blake or a countless other human beings who have fought to claim their humanity through creativity, are part of a larger process of creative or spiritual evolution and not simply limited to the exigencies of their respective times or the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. I wonder what Bill Morgan would think of that.

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a good history of the Beat Generation writers and the diverse courses their careers and personal lives took. The Typewriter Is Holy. Bill Morgan. FREE PRESS. A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
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