

## THE BEATS

Kerouac. Ginsberg. Burroughs. These are the most famous names of the Beat Generation – but in fact they were only the front line of a much more wide-ranging literary and cultural movement. This critical history takes readers through key works by these authors, but also radiates out to discuss dozens more writers and their works, showing how they all contributed to one of the most far-reaching literary movements of the post–World War II era. Moving from the early 1940s to the late 1960s, this book explores key aesthetic and thematic innovations of the Beat writers, the pervasiveness of the Beatnik caricature, the role of the counterculture in the postwar era, the involvement of women in the Beat project, and the changing face of Beat political engagement during the Vietnam War era.

STEVEN BELLETTO is Professor of English at Lafayette College. He is author of *No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (2012) and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* (2017) and *American Literature in Transition, 1950–1960* (2018). He is also co-editor of *Neocolonial Fictions of the Global Cold War* (2019) and *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment* (2012). He is currently an editor for the journal *Contemporary Literature*.

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# THE BEATS

*A Literary History*

STEVEN BELLETTO

*Lafayette College*



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Then there's a BG manufactured by brazen, shameless academic  
hustlers who write silly books about it, third hand, and give  
courses on it in somnambulistic college classrooms.

Chandler Brossard

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## *Preface*

This book is a literary history of the Beat movement, which had its roots in New York City in the mid-1940s, its zenith in the late 1950s, and its legacy secured in the 1990s and after. The story I want to tell isn't predominantly focused on the biographical exploits that have become legendary in certain circles – the details of such exploits are easily found in popular histories, encyclopedias, and on the internet. Instead, this book explores something like a Beat republic of letters, an informal association of writers and artists that germinated aesthetic innovations and encouraged considerations of once-taboo subjects. This network, which existed always in tension with the underground and what dominant culture thought about the underground, was responsible for producing some of the most recognizable literary works in postwar America. My basic assumption is that the richest way to appreciate individual Beat texts is in relation to one another, so that their achievement may be seen as at once singular and of a piece with more widespread preoccupations; as the great Beat scholar Oliver Harris has put it in the context of William S. Burroughs's "early texts," one would be ill-advised to imagine that discrete texts are best "read outside the Beat context, taken out like a picture from an old frame."<sup>1</sup> What follows is a book-length examination of texts and contexts during which the concept of "Beat" emerges as a character in its own right, an elusive and ever-shifting idea that floats through these pages naming constellations of aesthetics, attitudes, formal techniques, and styles that mutated across time and space.

Readers of this book are probably already familiar with the more celebrated Beat writers: Jack Kerouac (1922–1969), Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), and William S. Burroughs (1914–1997). Originally from Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Missouri, respectively, in the early 1940s, these three converged in and around Columbia University in New York City, forming a circle of friends that would be the roots of the so-called Beat Generation. They were first brought together by Columbia

undergraduate Lucien Carr, and as I explain in the first chapter, his shocking murder of a mutual friend gave the aspiring writers their first collective subject matter. Another irresistible subject would arrive from Denver in 1946: Neal Cassady, a manic raconteur and womanizer whose boundless energy inspired the character of Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the Road*, and who would be anointed the "secret hero" of Ginsberg's "Howl." John Clellon Holmes, a fourth early chronicler of the Beat ethos in both fiction and nonfiction, entered the frame in 1948. Rounding out the group was Gregory Corso, a younger poet Ginsberg met in 1950; a decade later Corso would be routinely grouped with Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs as the four most important Beat figures. As the original generation, we can look to these writers to understand the most consequential features of Beat literary achievement – at least according to the common story.

In fact, this group was only the front line of a much more diffuse avant-garde literary and cultural movement. Peruse this book's Table of Contents and you'll get a quick sense of how from small beginnings in the New York underground, the Beat sensibility shifted and adapted as widening circles chased their own artistic visions while associating with others doing the same. To more fully appreciate the depths of the Beat movement, then, it is necessary to look at familiar writers as well as those lesser known, and to read their work in the context of one another, as pieces of a gathering postwar sensibility some called the "new consciousness." While I do offer readings of stalwarts like *On the Road*, "Howl," and *Naked Lunch*, these readings aren't intended to be flashily ingenious, but rather to show how they contributed to the rise of the Beat novel or Beat poetry. In terms of word count, much attention is given to the Big Three writers – and, to a lesser extent, Holmes and Corso – and the book tries to reckon with the decades-long critical conversations that scholars have had about these writers. But the balance of the book concerns a broader diversity of writers and texts, some of whom have received comparatively little scholarly attention, with the hope of bringing wider and more complex Beat networks into better focus. Of course, even a good-faith effort to take a wide-angle approach cannot be totally comprehensive, for as became dauntingly clear when writing this book, there are always negotiations between telling sweeping stories and drilling down into the specifics of particular texts, of acknowledging and exploring the nuances of major writers while filling in details about those who might be more obscure but still of interest (no, said my editor, it's long enough). Thus for all my

*Preface*

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visions of inclusion, there are inevitable omissions or short shrifts that are products of my own biases, tastes, and scope of knowledge. But what follows is, I hope, a capacious, not-too-shameless journey through a significant literary movement as told by its writing, a movement that is in my view among the more far-reaching of the latter twentieth century.

## *Acknowledgments*

To paraphrase Neil Young when he walked on stage to sing with The Band for their farewell concert: it's been one of the pleasures of my life to be able to spend time reading and writing about the Beats. Of course this book would not exist at all without the intrepid work of those scholars who had to convince others that the Beats were worthy of study, and who went against the academic grain to give them a fair hearing. I'm standing – tottering – on the shoulders of these giants. My experience editing *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* led to this book, and was a humbling one as I learned so much from all its contributors, who must have centuries of expertise between them. For various conversations and kindnesses, I would like to thank in particular Nancy M. Grace, Oliver Harris, Tim Hunt, Bob Lee, Todd Tietchen, and Regina Weinreich. Double thanks to Erik Mortenson, who heroically read the entire manuscript and talked it through with me. I am also grateful to Steven Moore for sharing his apparently limitless knowledge, and to Hettie Jones for granting permission to reprint images from *Yugen*.

Ray Ryan is the Malcolm Cowley of contemporary literary studies, an industrious editor and fearless champion, and I can't thank him enough for his confidence in me. Mike LeMahieu, who I've always said knows everything that I do plus a bunch of philosophy and critical theory, went through this book with laser focus and came up with some inspired suggestions.

Diane Shaw, as director of Special Collections at Lafayette College, worked with me to build a small but mighty Beat collection, which has been invaluable for my scholarship and a real treat for my students, who deeply appreciate the opportunity to work with rare editions and obscure publications. Karen Haduck, Lafayette's Interlibrary Loan maven, was able to conjure items even if they are owned by a mere handful of libraries around the world. I owe many of the images reproduced to Paul Miller, and I thank him for his assistance. I would also like to thank Lafayette's

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Academic Research Committee for awarding me a Richard King Mellon Research Fellowship, affording me the opportunity travel to archives at the Bancroft Library at UC-Berkeley, the Beinecke at Yale, and the Fales at NYU. The Friends of the Princeton University Library awarded me a University Library Research Grant, which allowed me to spend some very pleasant time in the rare books room at the Firestone. I also benefited from the research assistance of Mailinda Hoxha, my EXCEL Scholar at Lafayette.

It's not a given that you'll be gifted with generous and sympathetic colleagues in the workplace, but I've been lucky to have known a few. Carrie Rohman has been my brilliant friend for more than a decade, and has helped me think through the shape and scope of this book. Paul Cefalu is a model scholar and unblinking advocate, so it's not been too bad being across the hall from him. It's a privilege to call Lee Upton my friend and mentor: she is the kind of rare person one can only hope to emulate.

Cheers to all those friends who helped me do anything but write a book – the Whole Sick Crew under the stairs, Simba the Salmon King, the East Coast's leading authority on Robin Zander, et al. One time Travis came with me down to the Bowery to listen to some poetry, and who knew we would ever get to hear The Fugs play live? Maisie and Nina were close by as I wrote pretty much every word of this book, and it wouldn't be the same without them. This is also true of Katie, whose spirit infuses these pages; Katie: this book is for you.

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