



Clive Matson

The Beat Aesthetic and Why We Need It Today¹

“Being present to your material”² and being present to your response—while it hasn’t been articulated—is a strategy embraced by many Beat writers. Some follow it as far as its extreme: “being present split second by split second.”

The Beats didn’t come to this tactic by accident. It arose alongside their interest in Zen, which calls for attention to the moment, as does Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s “First thought, best thought.”³ And alongside their love of jazz. Ornette Coleman’s raw, edgy improvisations show precise awareness moment to moment, John Coltrane in “My Favorite Things” amps the melody by breaking into short, ecstatic riffs—at the end of long note. You can’t predict the riffs. These lyrical moments seem to come from a stream running through all humanity.

Kerouac reframed Yeats’ and then Burroughs’s “automatic writing” as “spontaneous prose”⁴ and these may be literary versions of improvised jazz. Kerouac was outspoken in his love of the music and of his jazz-like style. McClure’s *Dark Brown* displays the strategy throughout. “No ease to truth. I half admit it” and “Are we joined forever or is that lies?”⁵ – noting the feeling in the moment and letting his words change as the emotion changes—“I deny. Love. Deny. Defy oh love. In blackness a forest, oh damp earth...”⁶ The same in some di Prima stanzas, “the sidewalk is crumbling into diamonds / in the sky a mouth is opening to take you finally in.”⁷ John Wieners is replete with examples, “A vision of heaven or a version of hell?”⁸ and so is Alden Van Buskirk, “Darkness everywhere or are my eyes gone out.”⁹ “Compass,” by Ruth Weiss, uses a similar strategy throughout, “the woman who lived at the bottom stone of ... she

who was older than any stone there ... yellow is life and red is death ... the wings of the monster ... she was gone ... we stood in the sunlight, blinded”¹⁰

We called this “stream of consciousness,” likening the style to James Joyce’s. It might, more accurately, be a “stream of the unconscious.” The material is not manipulated. We’re not managing it, or timing the insights, or revising it with intelligence or wit, or summarizing. Instead our faculties are alert and helping the content stream out. “Hear the jazz of the universe, it’s these wet streets / spangled with lights. Splash!”¹¹ Include this listening as a component of “being present” and it becomes, for self-knowledge, a depth-plumbing tool.

Being “honest” during the 1960s among Beats was an agreed-upon necessity, no doubt arising as a reaction to dishonesty in mainstream culture. “That’s not really you” was Noah Goldenberg’s demand of his friends and – as shown in conversation with Ginsberg and Herbert Huncke – of himself.¹² Not only did that decade brew McCarthyism, government was broadening its support of corporations and marketing techniques, often insidious ones. “Winston tastes good like a cigarette should,” and like memes, were commonplace. Television was spreading across the country, broadcasting similar, patently false messages. Poetry and prose – in order to have veracity – needed to counter the mistruths of the culture.

I didn’t hear Ginsberg, or anyone else, use the phrase “being present.” Honesty, though, was invoked frequently. The Van Buskirk phrase “or are my eyes gone out”¹³ is not different from being honest in a moment of anxiety. And “honesty” was demanded. Dylan underlined it: “But to live outside the law, you must be honest.”¹⁴ We accepted this dictum, too, while living within the law. Honesty is essential to being present. If there’s an untruth, the writer is not present—something else is.

In Snyder’s flash, after an exposition on the geology, geography, and history in his piece about Victoria Falls—ten million years of plates uplifting, a hundred thousand years of forest evolution – he exclaims, “Rome *was* built in a day.”¹⁵ He’s present to his response to the material.

This Snyder quote includes another aspect of the Beat aesthetic: belief in the self. And in its unrestricted expression. It’s acceptable and necessary to be the person you are in your writing. Witness the variety of Beat presentations: McClure becomes “meat” and “plasma” and “gesture,”¹⁶ Van Buskirk idolizes the demonic spirit Lami,¹⁷ di Prima converses with wolves in *Loba*,¹⁸ Ray Bremser takes on the entire establishment in “Poem of Holy Madness, Part IV,”¹⁹ Ginsberg’s iconic “I am I, old Father Fisheye”²⁰ plays on his fatherly mentoring and hints at a penchant for manipulation.

Belief in the self probably comes, in literature, from Dickinson and from Whitman. Look at the familiar, idiosyncratic lines of Dickinson—“I heard a fly buzz the day I died”—and notice how they contribute. In Whitman the self is central, even overwhelming, but nonetheless powerful. The Beats lived in the age of Carl Jung, who honored individual play as source of creativity, and Carl Rogers gave us the adage “The most personal is the most universal.”²¹ These concepts were ubiquitous, if largely unvoiced, and gave legitimacy to self-expression.

The culture evolves in mysterious ways. I mention what was on the air as well as what was written or spoken. Marx, of all people, explains that history is not driven by dominant personalities.²² Social forces are acting already and the personalities – like Marx himself, who refused to write *The Communist Manifesto* until he was pressured by a group with Engels who had assessed his verbal gifts²³ – the personalities may become iconic because they articulate what's already in motion. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior's "I have a dream" was largely composed on the spot, as he revised and added to a prepared speech.²⁴ He had turned a fresh ear to the truth that others earlier in the program, and no doubt he himself, were already feeling.

"Being present" is easy to state. It becomes a challenge when we ask, "How?" What part do we make present? Our heart? Our mind? Our body? Our history, the culture, mythologies, spirits, and ancestors working through us? But the exhilaration, of reading poems that were present, cannot be denied. Neither can the wish to emulate the mentality. To follow the high was a demand in itself – an intrinsic demand. The pay-off is to become authentic.

Some impetus for "being present" probably comes from a general movement of American literary culture away from Europe. This movement was crucial to the Beats and to their Modernist predecessors. Ginsberg was tireless in passing on what he had learned from Williams and Pound and, by extension, from Eliot. Use your own language. Value your own perceptions.²⁵ Williams' work gave us primal examples. Pound's Imagist dictum, to "compose by the music of the phrase, not the metronome,"²⁶ also directed attention away from European styles to American speech, and e. e. cummings was a forerunner with casual, even offhand-seeming language. Pound's dictum locates the self in the foreground. The place of consciousness is in our bodies and psyches.

"The line is an expression of your breath."²⁷ This phrase originated with Olson and the Black Mountain School. Ginsberg and di Prima repeated it frequently,²⁸ and the foundation was laid by Williams, who often suggested poetry has a bodily component. What are the social forces at work here? The impact of Nietzsche, Freud, World War I, the breakdown of God's word, the faltering of Europe as our cultural guide. Instead we look to the wisdom and intricacies of our own psyches and bodies.

The rebelliousness of the Beats added some fierceness to Modernism. Of course, Modernism came as a reaction against nineteenth century templates – for the expression of our nature. Eliot's perfect rendition of the template in "Prufrock,"²⁹ "Let us go then, you and I, while evening is spread across the sky" is not followed by "like Scheherazade's golden veils framing rainbow portals to your heart"—or some such! It's followed by the destruction of the template: "...like a patient etherized upon a table." Well, now! What is the patient? What do you see spread across the sky? It's a challenge to be real. The gauntlet has been flung.

Suspicion and fear permeated the social and governmental atmosphere of the 1940s and 1950s. It deserved to be rebelled against—people need to express who they are. However political or not the Beats were, they challenged the common prescription of how to live.³⁰ They brought into consciousness a vision of people who have a full range of emotions, with vibrant,

various sexuality, and impulses, like wanting to dance and sing and play. To appreciate Kerouac, life is an adventure.

In the 1950s America was propelled—beyond the needs of World War II—into a prosperity where “white picket fence” conformity was not necessary. To the burgeoning American spirit, that was an aggravation. The walls were down. The field was open. Williams added “No ideas but in things,”³¹ and this echoes Eliot’s “objective correlative,”³² which proposes that any internal sense has recognizable, physical reflections in the world. Both draw attention inward.

We didn’t hear Ginsberg state, at the time, “Make the private world public.”³³ It was a later formulation. But it perfectly describes the broad impulse of the Beats. It challenges us to discover just what is the private world. Some young people today rise to that challenge. Some are even writing like the Beats without having any training—even without knowledge of the Beats.

The time itself may engender this reaction. We need to be real in the face of legal lying by corporations and by the government.³⁴ “Late-stage” capitalism becoming more invasive in making money—faster and faster—probably influences us, too. The rich may recognize this world will not survive much longer. They need to accumulate much more, while they can, to build survival bunkers.

Real connections between people are missing. “Make the private world public,” is essential, along with being present. What can you trust, when the government has legalized its own dissemination of lies? And, under Obama, government has dispensed with habeas corpus – anyone can be imprisoned indefinitely without recourse to a hearing or a lawyer, simply on suspicion.³⁵

The young American poet Andy Halsig affirms and adds to Ginsberg’s line “America, I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel,”³⁶ Anna Avery wants anyone walking down the street to understand what she writes.³⁷ These are to the point. We need to make real connections. That’s more effectively done with the evolution of Beat mentality into Leary’s “Tune in, turn on, drop out.”³⁸ It’s democratic in an ultimate sense – a directive for everyone. For writers, it means a writer is not an elite who has privileges, but a person who articulates what we’re feeling. That’s change-making.

A main motivation—conscious or unconscious—for writing and appreciating poetry is to rise in class. This means learning, whether by going to school or hanging out with artists, how to participate in seductive discussions that have no other value. Students come to class with an apparatus—at the ready—to extract meaning from poetry. “I don’t know what you mean by that!” was Huncke’s complaint.³⁹ He meant, bolstered by the atmosphere of the time, that it was bad writing. We should know within the first few lines what you’re writing about—without having to solve a puzzle. Pound’s “Direct treatment of the topic, whether subjective or objective”⁴⁰ means just that. The urge to refine our nature and rise in class is everywhere. And the Beats were nothing if not against rising in class.

Di Prima’s “Rant”⁴¹ proposes that we are born with a cosmology. Our selves and our bodies have integrity from the beginning. “Rant” brings into view the underpinnings of the entire

Beat movement. Today we add awareness that marketing penetrates every aspect of our lives. Di Prima's "The only war that matters is the war against the imagination"⁴² may have already been lost. "It so easy to photo-shop your life into something perfect" notes Samantha Evans.⁴³ Perfection gets posted and reposted on social media, becoming another digital brick in a new wall of conformity. It's not a "white picket fence," it's a set of sophisticated images implying a norm that's probably unattainable. Huge numbers of people are complicit on their devices, joining the dance all around the world.

Our world is collapsing. This calls for rebellion. This fits Snyder's assertion that whenever homo sapiens stops hunting and gathering, settles in fertile land and, as at the Tigris and Euphrates, establishes a civilization—with a hierarchy and collective socialization—a ground-level tide of humanity does not like it.⁴⁴ Snyder's essay gives legitimacy to movements within a culture and applies as well to global culture. What's at stake is life.

When we agree that "the place of consciousness is in our bodies and psyches" we are throwing down the gauntlet to global colonization. Our minds are not to be managed by outside forces. The powers of persuasion are so great that they call for every bit of rebellious honesty we can muster. The global trance seems to want us to continue business as usual.

"Climateben" gives a summary of what's happening.⁴⁵

1. The oceans are being killed.
2. Forests will soon be gone.
3. Fertile soil is disappearing.
4. Megafauna risk extermination.
5. Insects are vanishing.
6. Climate chaos is inevitable.
7. Extinction is now.
8. Plastic is in our blood.
9. None of this is front page news.

Climateben left out how pandemics are likely, how social unrest is deepening, how the gigantic gap between rich and poor is widening, and how nuclear war has become more likely. What the times demand is system-wide change. Business as usual makes the problems worse.

No one knows what will happen. We haven't, as a species, organized to confront the collapse. How much time do we have? Estimates range from one year to seven years, from 2050 to the end of the century. Will the global trend toward fascism be reversed?

Against that reversal may be that fascism feeds on feeling overwhelmed. There's too much information. We've never had to deal with an amount even close to what confronts us now—and misinformation compounds the problem. The instinctive response is to withdraw and protect the hearth.

Most every year the predictions give us less time. Why? We find out more, and we also learn how the forces potentiate each other. When we analyze one aspect, in isolation, our prediction is more gradual than when we include other influences. A fire in the Amazon creates smoke that holds in solar heat that melts the glaciers faster.

Everyone knows what's happening. Everyone must have—hidden within our denial—a tide of unresolved grief over the destruction of our habitat. Plus a quantity of anger over how inept our governments are. Many wonderful corrective efforts are underway, but they are small in comparison with the tide of “business as usual” rippling around the world. “Making the private world public” should acknowledge the grief, shame, and anger that we feel.

Making the private world public, across all styles and social boundaries, gives us a chance of working together. When our connections are real, we have the ability to build something. Sharon Doubiago asserts, “Beat writers changed my life” by giving her a vision at odds with the conformity of the 1950s.⁴⁶ Are we hearing a similar cry today?

Paracelsus' insight applies: “What is kept hidden inside will destroy you. What you let out will save you.”⁴⁷ And di Prima helps with her directive, “History is a living weapon in your hands.”⁴⁸

The Beat's call across the decades, in summary, reduces to the common saying, “Wake up. Wake up.” Be present to who we are as best we can, be present to what we feel, be present to what we face—without flinching. This fits the original Modernist and Beat impulse.

In Van Buskirk's words, “A cry, this cry, to you.”⁴⁹

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¹ This essay, slightly revised here, was first delivered as a paper at the European Beat Studies Network conference in Nicosia, Cyprus, October 10, 2019.

² The phrase arose in discussion of Michael McClure's *For Artaud*, Bay Area Public School class “The Beat Aesthetic and Why We Need It Today” at Omni Commons, Oakland, June 2019.

³ <https://sensitiveskinmagazine.com/first-t/hought-best-thought-richard-modiano>

⁴ On October 24, 1917, a woman, Yeats' bride Georgie Hyde-Lees, brought “automatic writing” to his attention. This method was popular at the time among spiritualists as a way of communicating with the dead. Yeats was taken with the power of the writing; both he and his bride engaged in automatic writing for years. Yeats later published Hyde-Lees writing under his own name in *A Vision*. Burroughs and Kerouac brought the method into the literary world and gave it further legitimacy, <https://www.beatdom.com/beats-can-teach-us-writing/>

⁵ McClure, “Oh Why Oh Why...,” *Dark Brown*, The Auerhahn Press, San Francisco, 1961, page 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 16.

⁷ Diane di Prima, *Floating Bear*, circa 1964.

⁸ John Wieners ephemera seen in bookstalls on Lower East Side, New York, early 1960s.

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- ⁹ “Last will and” in *LAMI*, The Auerhahn Press, San Francisco, 1965, page 34.
- ¹⁰ Weiss, Ruth, “Compass,” *can’t stop the beat*, Divine Arts, Studio City, California, 2011, p.116-117.
- ¹¹ Matson, Clive “Poem to a Funky Night” *31 New American Poets*, ed. Ronald Schreiber, Hill and Wang, New York, 1966.
- ¹² *P.c.* The conversation took place in my apartment on 114 St. Marks Place on the Lower East Side, New York City, one afternoon in 1964, and is mentioned in summary in *The Herbert Huncke Reader*, ed. Benjamin G. Schafer, William Morrow, New York, 1997.
- ¹³ Van Buskirk, *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ From the album *Blonde on Blonde*, Columbia Records, 1966.
- ¹⁵ Snyder, Gary. This line was read from a prose piece about Victoria Falls, Africa, on October 27, 2016, at University of California, Berkeley. Snyder evidently realized the wide applicability of the line, which also appears in his poem “Wildfire News” in *Wildness, Relations of People & Place*, ed. Van Horn, Gavin, and Hausdoerffer, John. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2017, page 11.
- ¹⁶ “The Gesture...,” *Hymns to St. Geryon and Other Poems*, The Auerhahn Press, San Francisco, 1959, page 19.
- ¹⁷ *LAMI*, The Auerhahn Press, San Francisco, 1965.
- ¹⁸ *Loba Parts I - VIII*, Wingbow Press, Berkeley, 1978.
- ¹⁹ *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, ed. Donald M. Allen, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, page 352.
- ²⁰ “The End.”
- ²¹ Di Prima, Diane, *Pieces of a Song: Selected Poems*, San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1990, pp. 159-161.
- ²² Karl Marx, *Di Deutsche Ideologie*, 1846.
- ²³ As presented in the film *Der Junge Karl Marx*, Raoul Peck (dir.), Nicolas Blanc et al. (prod.), Diaphana Films, 2017.
- ²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Have_a_Dream
- ²⁵ Reck, Michael. A Conversation Between Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg. *Evergreen Review*, vol. 12, no. 55 (June 1968) pp. 27-29, 84-86.
- ²⁶ Ezra Pound “A Few Don’ts of an Imagiste,” *Poetry. A Magazine of Verse*, March, 1913, Vol. 1, No 6, pp. 200-208.
- ²⁷ “Projective Verse,” *The New American Poetry*, *ibid.*, page 386.
- ²⁸ Ginsberg, Allen, and di Prima, Diane. New York City, 1961-1968, *p.c.* The line is also quoted in *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Bill Morgan, Philadelphia, Da Capo Press, pp. 208-209.
- ²⁹ “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *Poetry. A Magazine of Verse*, June, 1915, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 130-135.
- ³⁰ *P.c.*, Dr. Daniel Goldstine, The Berkeley Psychotherapy Institute, October 3, 2019.
- ³¹ William Carlos Williams, “A Sort of a Song,” 1927 (first usage by Williams of a phrase that was used multiple times: *The Wedge*, 1944 and in various versions of his poem *Paterson* 1946-1958).
- ³² T.S. Eliot, “Hamlet and His Problems,” *The Sacred Wood*, 1921.
- ³³ http://c250.columbia.edu/c250_celebrates/remarkable_columbians/allen_ginsberg.html
- ³⁴ Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2008 signed into law by President Obama.
- ³⁵ President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) into law on December 31, 2011
- ³⁶ Halsig, Andrew, “America Part Two: In Honor of Allen Ginsberg”, 10/06/2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChviKkgqgAk> 6:26.
- ³⁷ *P.c.*, Expressions Gallery reading, Berkeley, California, 2018(?)
- ³⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn_on,_tune_in,_drop_out. Heard by the author at a show on Second Avenue NYC circa 1967.
- ³⁹ *P.c.*, New York City Lower East Side, 1962-1968.
- ⁴⁰ Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” *Pavannes and Divisions*, 1918.
- ⁴¹ Diane di Prima, “Rant,” *Pieces of a Song: Selected Poems*, City Lights, San Francisco, 2001.
- ⁴² “Rant,” *ibid.*
- ⁴³ *P.c.* at “Writing Highway 395” June Lake, California, August 2019.
- ⁴⁴ “A Passage to More than India,” essay, *Earth House Hold*, New Directions, New York, 1969.
- ⁴⁵ #climateben, Facebook, September 2019
- ⁴⁶ Sharon Doubiago, “For David,” Big Bridge, Issue 11, <https://bigbridge.org/issue11/dmmemorydoubiago.htm>
- ⁴⁷ *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus the Great*. 2 vols. Edited by Arthur E. Waite. London: James Elliott, 1894. Reprint, New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1967.

⁴⁸ Di Prima, “Rant” *Pieces of a Song: Selected Poems*, City Lights, San Francisco, 2001.

⁴⁹ “Lami, leather nightingale,” Van Buskirk, *ibid*, page 91.