

The Impossible Manifesto: Tracing the Manifesto Form through Avant-Garde and Beat Writing

**Jimmy Fazzino
University of California, Santa Cruz**

For the wildest hipster, making a mystique of bop, drugs and the night life, there is no desire to shatter the “square” society in which he lives, only to elude it. To get on a soapbox or write a manifesto would seem to him absurd.
John Clellon Holmes, “This Is the Beat Generation”

In *Rogues* Jacques Derrida writes, “Now, just like the constative, it seems to me, the performative cannot avoid neutralizing, indeed annulling, the eventfulness of the event it is supposed to produce” (152). Given that the writing of a manifesto is a fundamentally and necessarily performative act (that is to say, it creates the very movement or worldview it attempts to describe), this paper will seek to explore the implications of Derrida’s thinking of *performativity* for the avant-garde and, by extension, the larger tradition of radical, dissident art in twentieth-century Europe and America. What happens when an avant-garde group attempts to break with tradition, to produce an *event* in the strongest sense of the term, only to be confounded at its inaugural moment by a manifesto that remains programmatic, conditioned, and conventional? In dealing with this central question, I will address Derrida’s earlier assertion in *Specters of Marx* of a certain “unconditioned” performativity that he sees operating in the *Communist Manifesto*, and where my discussion of the manifesto attends to its formal and stylistic properties, I will be building largely on the work of Janet Lyon and Martin Puchner in their recent books on the manifesto form. Lyon, in particular, describes the manifesto as a form with rather porous boundaries, and her expanded conception will become especially relevant as I turn, finally, to a number of Beat texts.

As Lyon points out, for an avant-garde group to produce a manifesto is to position itself squarely within an entire *tradition* of oppositional artistic practices. And as the manifesto becomes the dominant mode of self-assertion and self-representation among the historical avant-gardes, the form will become increasingly self-reflexive. Larionov's Rayonist manifestoes, for example, bear subtitles like "A Manifesto" or "A Futurist Manifesto" (emphasis mine), thus seeming to recognize the irony of announcing the radical singularity of an aesthetic project with a manifesto form that, only four years after Marinetti's "Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," had already become somewhat banal. In his 1918 "Dada Manifesto," Tristan Tzara begins by highlighting the tired predictability and general inconsequentiality of the form. He writes, "To proclaim a manifesto you have to want: A.B.C., thunder against 1,2,3, lose your patience and sharpen your wings to conquer and spread a's, b's, c's little and big, sign, scream, swear, arrange the prose in a form of absolute and irrefutable evidence" (297). Parodying the rabid contrarianism typical of the form, Tzara eventually took to writing manifestoes on behalf of fictional characters with names like Mr. Antipyrine and Mr. AA the Antiphilosopher.

We should, no doubt, expect from the Dadaists this playfully ironic stance toward the manifesto, which clearly signals a growing awareness of its numerous contradictions and limitations. But while the Dada manifestoes practically revel in their futility, it seems that other iterations of the form do manage to open up a space of possibility for the unconditioned *event* to be made manifest. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida writes:

[The *Communist Manifesto*] does not consist in merely foreseeing (a gesture of the constative type) but in calling for the advent, in the future, of a manifesto of the communist party which, precisely in the performative form of the call, will transform the legend of the specter not yet into the reality of communist society

but into that other form of real event (between the legendary specter and its absolute incarnation) that is the Manifesto of the Communist Party” (103).

How can it be that the *Manifesto* calls, not for the “advent” of the Communist Party, but for the advent, “in the future,” of a communist manifesto? Why would specter be transformed, not (yet) “into the reality of communist society,” but into what Derrida calls the “real event” of a manifesto? I believe Derrida’s statement—which is itself as circuitous as the temporal logic of the manifesto form he attempts to navigate—*performs* the necessary and productive displacements at work in the manifesto. If the *Communist Manifesto* were to have called forth the specter *at once*, if it had conjured the ghost only then to exorcise it, its performative call would have *at once* exhausted the force of the unconditioned future-to-come. What Derrida instead sees operating in the *Manifesto* is a deferral of the event that in turn serves to create the conditions under which such an event might be possible. The “real event” of this *manifesto-to-come* and this *revolution-to-come* will, in fact, be a spectral event, unlocatable, oscillating between “the legendary specter” (*There is a specter haunting Europe . . .*) and its impossible “absolute incarnation.”

With the quasi-exception of Bob Kaufman’s neo-Dada “Abomunist Manifesto” (a remarkable text about which a great deal more could be said than space here allows), the Beats never produced anything like a manifesto in the strict sense. In spite of, and indeed perhaps as a result of, this fact, many Beat writings contain what we might call a *manifesto function*, as key figures like Ginsberg and Kerouac constantly felt themselves compelled to redefine their artistic and social practices and to reassert their opposition to postwar American conservatism. These acts of self-definition and self-representation appear everywhere in their work: in introductions and afterwords, poems and novels, in letters, speeches, and interviews. For the purposes of this

paper, I would like to discuss three disparate but equally revelatory instances: 1) John Clellon Holmes's *Times Magazine* article, 2) the address given by Kerouac at a 1958 forum at Hunter College on the question "Is There a Beat Generation?" and 3) Ginsberg's Beat masterpiece, "Howl." I hope to show that Holmes's and Kerouac's highly equivocal attempts at self-definition enact similar processes of deferral and displacement as those described by Derrida in his work on the *Communist Manifesto* and that the temporalities of Ginsberg's poem, along with its unresolved tensions between individuality and collectivity, resonate powerfully with previous discussions of the manifesto by Lyon, Puchner, and others.

Holmes's article begins with a report of an even earlier report, immediately recalling the temporal displacement I have been looking at in the manifesto form generally. It reads, "Several months ago, a national magazine ran a story under the heading 'Youth' and the subhead 'Mother is Bugged at Me.' It concerned an eighteen-year-old California girl who had been picked up for smoking marijuana and wanted to talk about it" (10). So, it is already apparent that the existence of what Holmes will next define as a "Beat Generation" has already been substantiated, but not yet identified or legitimated as such, by the popular press. Holmes's task, then, is to put a name to the face. Still speaking of the girl in the magazine story, he continues, "While a reporter took down her ideas . . . someone snapped a picture. In view of her contention that she was part of a whole new culture where one out of every five people is a user, it was an arresting photograph. . . . It was the face of a Beat Generation" (10). It should be noted that Holmes does not explicitly attempt to create the Beat Generation *ex nihilo* through the performative force of a manifesto like Marinetti's "Futurist Manifesto." Rather, his *Times* article instead insists that such a generation, this "whole new culture," has been developing organically across America for years, and, as represented by the eighteen-year-old Californian, it has now finally come of age.

Holmes sees the “face of the Beat Generation” everywhere he looks. But so should his readers, for “that clean young face has been making the newspapers steadily since [the war]” (10). What connects the young men and women of the Beat Generation is not a shared identity or even a shared lifestyle; rather, these “individuals” have become a “generation” through the shared experience of being “brought up during the collective bad circumstances of a dreary depression, weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war” (10). Holmes’s particularly inclusive vision of “beat-ness,” however, contains some notable and surprising exclusions. As Ann Charters has pointed out, “Nowhere in this early article did Holmes refer to Beat Generation writers, because he did not think of himself or his friends Ginsberg and Kerouac in this way, although he shared with them the new sensibility he had described” (xx). Holmes does not identify himself as a Beat, nor, it turns out, does he believe the Beat Generation to be a literary or artistic phenomenon. Not a single artist, poet, or performer can be found among the myriad hipsters and hooligans who populate Holmes’s article, and I believe this is absolutely necessary. The pathos of Holmes’s account lies in the voicelessness of the Beat Generation, in its “reluctance to name itself, its reluctance to discuss itself as a group . . . its reluctance to be itself” (22). Only as a non-Beat among non-Beats can Holmes speak on behalf of an entire generation of Beats. For a “true” Beat, by definition, would be either unwilling or incapable of doing so. Only by his self-exclusion and a certain disavowal can Holmes let the Beat Generation “be itself.”

Despite Holmes’s own “reluctance” to identify himself and his friends as “Beat,” after the publication of Ginsberg’s “Howl” and Kerouac’s *On the Road* a few years later, the term will, of course, become more or less synonymous with those two figures and their close circle of poets and writers. Kerouac will be named “King of the Beats” and “Spokesman of a Generation” and

solicited for countless interviews and public appearances during which he will inevitably be implored to explain the meaning of “Beat” and “the Beat Generation.” A humorously poignant example of Kerouac’s attitude toward his sudden fame is provided by an address he was asked to deliver at a 1958 forum at Hunter College on the question “Is There a Beat Generation?” His speech was later reworked and published as a well-known essay in *Playboy* magazine, but when placed back into their original context, Kerouac’s equivocations and ambivalences become even more revealing.

We see, for instance, that Kerouac begins his speech with a bizarre preamble. He first suggests, “The question [Is there a Beat Generation?] is very silly because we should be wondering tonight, ‘Is there a world?’ They asked me to write an article about the Beat Generation, and it’s supposed to be about my relationship to the Beat Generation and all that stuff. And it’s a very funny article. I’ve never made a speech, so I’ll read it. Okay?”¹ These displacements of the question at hand, the question of the Beat Generation, become a useful trope for Kerouac on such occasions, allowing him to deflect the pressure of being the official commentator and critic of his and his friends’ work while at the same time *performing* an intensely personal version of beat-ness and beatitude that lies at the core of his writing. His challenge at the forum is similar to Marinetti’s challenge in writing the *Futurist Manifesto*: how to write oneself and one’s own history into a call for change or renewal that must remain sufficiently open and unconditioned. Just as Marinetti’s manifesto begins, “We had stayed up all night, my friends and I” (186), Kerouac lets his audience know straight away that the *only* response he could possibly offer them is a personal one. His voice booms as he finally launches into his address: “This article necessarily will have to be about myself. I’m going all out!” His

playful pronouncement states the obvious: that a speech about the Beat Generation, delivered at a forum on its questionable existence by the man many nonetheless believe to be its spokesperson, would, of course, “necessarily” have to be about Kerouac himself.

I would suggest, though, that, even more so than Kerouac’s speech or Holmes’s article, Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” attempts several strategies for approaching the problematics of self-representation that may also lead us to a better understanding of the manifesto in its generic form. We might think of “Howl” as a *lyric* manifesto, one in which the “We” that typically structures the manifesto is constituted and dominated by an “I.” The first line (*I saw the best minds of my generation . . .*) immediately registers this controlling vision of the poet. Standing on what Lyon calls the “fulcrum” of the present tense, he alone surveys the ruins of the past and the infinite potential of the future. The poet’s presence haunts the very structure of long opening section of “Howl” in the way it drops off after the first line but continues to inflect each subsequent line in the long chain of “who”s that follows: “I saw the best minds... // who bared their brains to heaven... // who chained themselves to subways...” etc. (126). “Howl,” as a lyric manifesto, is very much in line with Kerouac’s assertion at the Hunter College forum that his explanation of the Beat Generation would necessarily have to be about Kerouac himself: not just a bid for the elevated status of the poet or artist, but more importantly a strong suggestion that any collective movement or struggle must arise out of the singularity of the individual. In many ways, Ginsberg’s thinking approaches that of the various movements of the historical avant-garde. “Howl” concerns itself with only “the best minds” of his generation: those members of a spiritual vanguard who, “destroyed by madness,” sacrificed themselves in search of an absolute freedom.

The opening line of “Howl” (*I saw. . .*) positions the poem as a *prophetic* vision of the

past, set in an eternal present. It thus resonates with what Lyon suggests are the dominant temporal modes of the manifesto, which rewrite history “in the manner of chiliastic prophecy [and] place a group’s apocalyptic present tense at the fulcrum of a self-ordaining future” (16). The present tense of “Howl” seems to exist outside of or beyond history. The apocalyptic vision of the poem can therefore coexist with the poet’s exalted portrayal of the 1950s American counterculture. At the same time he lauds “the best minds” of his generation, he is describing the perpetual conflict between the freedom-seeking, creative individual and Moloch, the oppressive beast of capitalist social order. Ginsberg begins to translate his singular vision of the nature and role of the poet in American society into universal terms, which has also been a major challenge of the manifesto form in general, as Lyon suggests when she speaks of “negotiating universalism” in the manifesto (39). The same problem of representation is operative in Holmes’s article when he attempts to name and speak on behalf of a generation that might prefer to remain silent and anonymous. The question raised by Holmes, implicit in “Howl,” is how to create a community of what Holmes calls “instinctive individual[s]” or a collective of those who “distrust collectivity” (10).

Of course, to discuss the Beats solely in terms of the trajectories of European experimentalism is to tell only part of the story, just as it would be to consider the manifesto solely as a product of the twentieth-century avant-garde. The Beats can be set at the center of an American tradition of literary experimentation that paradoxically roots them in Whitman’s 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* as much as in Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto*. While Marinetti asks, “Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday” (187), Whitman asserts, “America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics . . . [It] accepts the lesson

with calmness” (5). In acknowledging that writers like Ginsberg and Kerouac, like Philip Lamantia, Amiri Baraka, Ted Joans, and others, take part both in the tradition of the European avant-garde *and* in an American tradition of Whitmanian populism and radical visionary democracy, we might see something truly unprecedented begin to take place.

Notes

1. I have transcribed Kerouac’s words from the audio recording of his address that appears on *The Jack Kerouac Collection*, CD, Rhino, 1990.

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