

*Sutras & Bardos: Essays & Interviews on Allen Ginsberg, the Kerouac School, Anne Waldman, The Postbeat Poets & the New Demotics*

By Jim Cohn

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It's a cliché, of course, to say "the Beats go on." For several decades now, cultural critics, biographers and reviewers have echoed the cry "the Beats go on." Behind the banner newspaper headlines and the slick magazine stories about the Beats and their cultural descendants, there's an unmistakable germ of truth. On blogs, in bookstores, bohemian haunts, and college classrooms, the writers of the Beat Generations—plural—go on and on and on with little sign of diminution or atrophy. Perhaps no one in the United States today understands and appreciates the poetic durability and the cultural elasticity of the Beats better than Jim Cohn, the author of *Sutras & Bardos: Essays & Interviews on Allen Ginsberg, the Kerouac School, Anne Waldman, The Postbeat Poets & the New Demotics*.

Born in Highland Park, Illinois in 1953—three years before the publication of *Howl*, four years before the publication of *On the Road*—Cohn grew up and came of age in the aftermath of the initial flowering of the first wave of Beat Generation writers in the mid-1950s. Old enough to have experienced the 1960s, and yet young enough to have been shaped early in life by the development of digital technology and the computer, he's a pivotal figure linking generations and schools of thought.

Drawn almost instinctively to Allen Ginsberg's poetry and to his personality, Cohn studied with Ginsberg at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, and worked as his teaching assistant in 1980. Ginsberg has been a lifelong influence on his own poetry, his own teaching, and his sense of citizenship, along with pivotal figures such as Anne Waldman, Amiri Baraka, and a slew of other poets, from Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound to Ted Berrigan. Cohn pays homage to these figures in his new, refreshing book that brings together 20 essays and five interviews, many of them previously published in journals and reviews such as *Logos*, *The Arts Paper* and *Paterson Literary Review* and newly revised for inclusion in *Sutras & Bardos*.

Cohn's book has several distinctive characteristics that make it appealing, and even compelling, reading. It's intensely personal and deeply autobiographical with the author's own dreams, reflections, and journeys in search of poetry, poets, and the poetic. "In Valparaiso, I visited Pablo Neruda's home, high on a steep hillside," Cohn writes in an essay on the 150<sup>th</sup>-anniversary of the publication of *Leaves of Grass* (24). At the same time, *Sutras & Bardos* is profoundly theoretical. "Form is an extension of *emptiness*," the author writes. "Poems take place in a space nothing can fill" (21). Elsewhere, he notes that literary movements have "*porosity*, or openness, such that certain poets are viewed interchangeably" (172).

Scholars and students of the Beats will probably find his terms useful, though they may also find some of them, such as “porosity,” new and perhaps even unusual. Cohn always defines his terms. Sutras, he explains in the introduction to the book, are “a distinct Eastern literary form that employs minimal syllabary and is unambiguous, pithy, comprehensive, continuous and without flaw.” Bardos, he adds, are “the intermediate or intimate transitional or in-between or liminal states after death and before one’s next birth.” There’s plenty of food for thought here.

Cohn is generous in his appreciations of writers, including his own contemporaries and near contemporaries such as Eileen Myles, Ingrid Swanberg, David Cope, Gary Gach, Marc Olmstead, Eliot Katz, and Antler, the pen name for Brad Burdick, the author of *Factory*, published by City Lights, and a former poet laureate of Milwaukee whom Ginsberg described as “one of Whitman’s poets and orators to come.”

“Poetry comes from all over the world in all times from all peoples,” Cohen writes (58). Moreover, he has produced a book with real verve and with poetic language that resonates from beginning to end and with provocative ideas on nearly every page. In the essay, “Embodying Knowledge (Robo-Mona Lisa, An Allegory),” he writes about the “*promiscuous rubbish* of the present” (7). It’s a phrase that demonstrates how well he learned from Ginsberg, especially Ginsberg’s ability to coin phrases like “hydrogen jukebox.” “Promiscuous rubbish” comes from the same brand of imagination as “hydrogen jukebox.”

In *Sutras & Bardos*, there are insights into the private lives of Ginsberg, Waldman, Berrigan, and others, as teachers and as poets, and revelations about the intimate world of poetry at Naropa. Cohn manages to appreciate *When I Was Cool*, a memoir meant to shock readers about sex and drugs at Naropa. He even manages to make kindly comments about the author, Sam Kashner, who aimed to expose the flaws and foibles of Ginsberg and crew. “In a way, he was dead-on about those days,” Cohn writes of Kashner. “You could live to regret ever having stepped out of your world and into those of the poetics faculty” (41). Heroes abound in this book, but it doesn’t offer unalloyed hero worship.

Cohn writes about the night in 1975 when the Buddhist monk, Trungpa Rinpoche, ordered the poet, W.S. Merwin, and his companion, Dana Naone, to take off their clothes at Naropa, an incident that became a “cause célèbre among poets and artists” (174). *Sutras & Bardos* is not, however, a compilation of outrageous behaviors, regrets, and misgivings. Cohn is not out to unmask the famous and the infamous, but to offer a portrait of a sustainable and sustaining community that was rooted at Naropa and that moved about the country, from Wisconsin to New York and beyond.

The essays and interviews in *Sutras & Bardos* are overtly political. Cohn believes and even insists that the Beats and the Postbeats must be understood in the context of their time and place: the original Beats in the context of the cold war and McCarthyism, and the Postbeats in the context of the War on Terror and “androidization,” which he defines as “the transformation of humans into machines” (5). Cohn is a partisan, not a disinterested spectator. Like Ginsberg, he’s a foe of all kinds of tyranny and a defender of “underground or suppressed cultures” (77). But he doesn’t offer propaganda, and even about his favorite crowd, the poets of the world, he has a balanced perspective. “Poets are not the most social people,” he explains in an interview

that Rob Geisen conducted with him in 2008. He adds, “In fact, they do their best socializing in poems” (75).

Cohn uses the format of the interview effectively. His voice is almost always informal and conversational, even when he’s talking about bardos, androidization, and porosity, and especially in the interviews with him. In the last interview in the book, conducted with Randy Roark, Cohn includes one of his own poems, “George Washington Bridge, Lower Level, Clear Day,” and writes clearly and candidly about its origins and development. He’s an insightful critic of his own work, and explains that “George Washington Bridge, Lower Level, Clear Day” was for him “like Walt Whitman on LSD.”

Cohn mostly does not draw attention to himself or promote himself. For him, the Postbeats are post-narcissistic and post-egoistic. They are not out to seek self-aggrandizement. But he does honor his own contributions, and while he reveals the influences of Ginsberg on his own work, he also describes his influences on his teacher and mentor. In 1984, he introduced Ginsberg to an audience of deaf poets—an experience that did not irrevocably transform Ginsberg but shaped him in subtle ways.

If there is one essay in the book in which Cohn crystallizes his thinking it would probably be “Postbeat Transcendence,” written in 2010, in which he argues that “Revolutionary spiritual pluralism is a core element on Postbeat literature” and that Postbeat poets address “sacredness of place and natural resources” (119, 129). Of course, some of the characteristics that Cohn ascribes to the Postbeats can also be found in the original Beats. Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Snyder all appreciated the sacredness of place—the sacredness of America itself—and the value of natural resources.

*Sutras & Bardos* does not end the discussion of what it means to be a Postbeat writer. Cohn’s comments about Bob Dylan and Patti Smith, for example, which appear in “Postbeat Transcendence” only scratch the surface of the subject. But here as in Michael McClure’s seminal work, *Scratching the Beat Surface*, Cohn’s cultural, historical, and intellectual scratching of the Postbeat surface go a long way toward creating an understanding of a literary movement that has broken new ground even, as it has continued on the original path carved out by Kerouac, Ginsberg, Snyder—and McClure, too, who read at the Six Gallery in 1955, participated in the Human Be-In in 1967, and who is at the age of 79 still writing and still proof that the Beats do go on and on and on.