If countercultural literature is meant to “counter” a culture, what happens when another culture borrows that critique? This talk addresses that question by examining the cultural translation of the Beat Generation in Turkey. Since the 1990s publishers, editors, critics, readers, and others dissatisfied with what they feel to be a more conservative trend in Turkey have turned to the Beats and other countercultural forebears for alternatives. Drawing on concrete examples from the translation history of Allen Ginsberg’s Howl, the discussion of the concept of the “hobo” in Jack Kerouac’s classic On the Road, and on the recent obscenity trial of William S. Burroughs’s The Soft Machine, I argue that Beat concepts such as personal freedom, spatial mobility, and the importance of the individual that may seem self-evident in a Western context become rearticulated when deployed in Turkey. This unexpected return of Beat nonconformity and protest into new cultural and temporal conditions offers a unique opportunity to rethink both the cultural logics that made the Beats possible in the first place, as well as the possibilities they might still hold for social critique in our globalized twenty-first century.

Erik Mortenson spent ten years as an assistant professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Koç University in Istanbul and is now a senior lecturer at Wayne State University’s Honors College. He is the author of Ambiguous Borderlands: Shadow Imagery in Cold War American Culture (2016) and Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence, which was selected as a Choice outstanding academic title in 2011. His new book, Translating the Counterculture: The Reception of the Beats in Turkey, will be available from Southern Illinois University Press in the spring of 2018.