



## The Beatrice Davenport Morands

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## Preface

Born of unique circumstance and sustained curiosity, the following essay summarizes an ongoing research project of mine. I am far from an historian, and my efforts here come from a personal place of interest rather than one of scholarship or academic intent. While living in Pasadena and working at Caltech during the late 1990s, I, like most residents, became aware of the mythic Morand sisters, two of the more unique figures who inhabited the city during its mid-century heyday. Though their story would certainly intrigue anyone, my interest sharpened when I discovered certain overlaps between their areas of theoretical interest and my own. Nevertheless, the means by which I gained access to the Morand archive was brought about entirely by-accident. While getting my morning coffee at Caltech's campus café, I had made the casual acquaintance of a Huntington Library archivist who was assisting a professor on campus (Caltech maintains a research fellowship with the library). One day, in the course of conversation, I happened to make passing reference to the Morands. The archivist grinned mischievously like some character from a cloak-and-dagger novel, and asked me if I would be interested in looking over a yet-to-be-disclosed collection recently donated to the library. Since that serendipitous day, I have slowly and rather amateurishly pieced the sisters' story together, weaving the still-incomplete yet fascinating picture that I submit in this modest dispatch.

# The Beatrice Davenport Morands

## {Part One: An Introduction}

In the summer of 1998, during repairs to a water-damaged finger joint in the basement of the Gamble House—Pasadena’s landmark Greene & Greene home built for David and Mary Gamble of the Proctor & Gamble company—a small pantry was discovered beneath two adjoining floor panels. The heretofore unknown compartment, which may have been designed as a natural icebox, contained a rather unexpected find: seventeen perfectly preserved journals penned by the Beatrice Davenport Morands. Well-ensconced within aristocratic Pasadena social lore, the Morands had spent nearly a decade moving among elite cultural and scientific circles immediately after World War II. They were arguably two of the mid-century’s most enigmatic female thinkers, and the insights gained from the Morands’ recovered journals (currently housed in the nearby Huntington Library) should afford them the credit they deserve for their influence on many dominant figures of their time.

Beatrice Davenport Morand and her identical twin sister, who went by the same name, lived in and around the Pasadena area from approximately 1947 to 1957, moving from home to home depending on their current standing and immediate circumstances. Popular amongst an eccentric but cultured set, the sisters lived for a period of time at the Parsonage (Jack Parson’s bohemian occultist estate along Orange Grove Boulevard), in Constance Perkins’ Neutra-designed house while it was being built, and in the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Millard House, while Alice Millard was away on a year-long excursion. However, it was neither their keen sense for interesting people, nor their taste for distinguished architecture that makes the sisters noteworthy; what makes the Morands so unique was that, as far all of their friends and acquaintances knew, Beatrice Davenport Morand was only one person.

Upon entering Pasadena’s social circles in 1947, the sisters were first mistaken for an Anthroposophist due to a story one of them told at a garden gathering regarding the “promise of biodynamic farming.” In another story, the sisters were rumored to be the unclaimed daughter of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman as a result of a passing comment one of them was said to have made at a midnight poker game at the Wrigley mansion. However, as time went on, Bee-Dee, as her closest friends called her, presented herself as a well-educated Radcliffe girl with a wry sense of humor, a disdain for matrimony, and a fiercely adamant belief in, as she put it, “the necessity of crafting a cinematic self.”

In the summer of 1948, a letter written by Barbara Dougall—a former Pasadena Rose Queen—to a good friend recently relocated in Chicago captures Beatrice in action: “A creature like no other I have yet to meet in Pasadena, the likeable Ms. Morand has the charisma of a preacher, the wit of an east-coast Jew, and the mind of a Stanford professor. Everyone, even Liddy and Rex, is quite taken with her, so it is my intention to get to the bottom of her being uncoupled by way of an invitation to lunch!”

Enigmatic, insightful, and high-spirited, the Morands were able to jump from white-linen San Marino baby showers to black-cloaked occult gatherings without much flap—knowing nearly everyone there was to know, while calmly popping up everywhere one

needed to be without a single double-sighting. However, what truly made an impression on nearly everyone they came to know well was neither their skillful socializing nor their somewhat unusual etiquette; what disarmed others was their unique philosophy of the fictional self. The Beatrice Davenport Morands had what might be considered a proto-Warholian interpretation of how photography, film, and television would determine culture.

A 1949 journal entry states rather matter-of-factly, “If a man of power today might ever wish to hold that power tomorrow, he best be ready for his image on the television to determine it—not his thoughts or his ideas, but the manner in which he manages himself while speaking live to the manifold audience of this great nation.” This passage preceded the first televised presidential debate by six years, an event agreed to have been the determining factor in Kennedy’s election to the presidency.

Another shrewd insight from that same year reconsiders the photographs from the Farm Security Administration in a very unique manner: “One might see the FSA photographs, particularly that of Evans, Lange, and Vachon, as being of their time and without sentimentality. However, as they trickle into Hollywood these artifacts have fast become the new reality in a fictional recounting of our recent past and evolving present. More of a guide than a documented truth, these testaments of America will only be true when the set-dressing matches the photographs’ landscapes, and the faces of the actors match the photographs’ poverty-stricken subjects crease for crease, stain for stain!”

The Morands’ ideas quickly became known to a small group of thinkers, and the sisters began to receive offers to talk at intimate intellectual gatherings. The most important of these took place at the Parsonage in 1951, where one of them delivered a talk titled “In light of character representation.” This brief lecture opened thus: “In the near tomorrow, one will have a self drawn from cinema or television with or without one’s approval, allowing pre-formed notions of individuality to move with the flow of representation opposing reality.” The entire talk lasted precisely thirty minutes—with Morand holding a stopwatch for effect—and ended with an audible exhalation and a final exclamation: “No longer than a television show!” to which she received a standing ovation from the small group.

An impression of the talk was recounted in the unpublished diary of another speaker visiting Parsons, the young Marshall McLuhan, who, following the publication of *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, was testing out his own lecture materials before bringing them back to the University of Toronto for his forthcoming Communication and Culture seminar. His observations are illuminating: “Not only was Miss Morand acutely aware of television’s potential within America’s politics of the image; she was able to clarify the differing effects of still and moving imagery, as well as live and recorded narratives on the average person’s sense of being. She offered a number of interpretations that I have yet to consider, each rather valid. Further, but perhaps more odd than intellectually impressive, she made her point as if on live television—as if she were acting out the lecture instead of simply delivering it.”

After four years in the Pasadena area, the Morands were becoming known as important thinkers, carefully navigating their position from being part of society to being part of social science. With the secret of their identity paramount to their success, the sisters cautiously entered new circles and made new connections that would allow their theories to flourish—their primary goal from the start.

## {Part Two: Pasadena Prodigies}

Beatrice Davenport Morand and her twin sister, Beatrice Davenport Morand, were intensely disciplined time-keepers and scrupulous note-takers, so much so that they were able to maintain a façade of singleness in the public's eye for more than a decade. The process they established required them to set their schedules for the following day, meeting at either midnight or 3 a.m. depending on that evening's scheduled events, in order to make certain they would never be in the same area, let alone the same place, at the same time. At these nightly meetings they also exchanged the day's notes, allowing each to read up on the other's interactions in order to maintain an exact balance of shared knowledge in people, activities, and information. For example, their notes, written in Gregg shorthand to limit their legibility at a glance, would convey information in such a manner: "Frank M continues complaint about older son's tantrums - confides he is angry at wife - touched shoulder twice - conversation 20 minutes."

The twins functioned like two adjoining cogs in a Swiss timepiece, never falling out of pattern, never missing a connection, and never operating independently. A handwritten memo from Stephen W. Royce, then owner of the prestigious Huntington Hotel, to his night manager on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1952, that reads "Morand attending, be certain to have a car ready with engine running at no later than 10:30," offers a glimpse into the Beatrices' precision and predictability, as well as their social standing amongst the elite—a key component to why they may never have been accused of functioning in an unorthodox manner. As a result, the Morands tirelessly went everywhere that was anywhere, and dutifully engaged with everyone who was anyone. Surprisingly, the Morands were not social climbers, nor were they looking to wed—in fact, by all private accounts they found men repugnant—instead, what they seemed most impassioned about establishing through their connections was a legitimate platform for a theoretical position that, as they put it, "views the self as external idea, rather than interior experience, in order to survive in an age of totalized representation."

Masters of debate and forensics, the Beatrices would often launch into a friendly challenge with whomever they were speaking. "In this day and age of Freud and pictures," they would open, "when I say I am 'happy', you hear a lie. However, if you see me in a state of happiness, you are confronted with a truth, correct?" This would often prompt an intellectual sparring match, leading the sisters to one of a number of their absolutes: "The industrialized world no longer consists of subjects who can define their being through the 'I' or the 'self' alone; instead, we look to what the 'studios' present to legitimize our person, add to it, sculpt it, function as blue print." However, as time passed, the Beatrices' research began to more cogently bridge social science and psychoanalysis, allowing their ideas to evolve beyond the simplistic implications of media, into a more dimensional philosophical stance, as illustrated in this journal entry from 1954: "A rapidly diminishing introspective landscape is caused by mass culture, resulting in an ontological confusion, or identity crisis, wherein the person's self is faced with a new and cluttered field of possible other selves operating as a measuring stick of appearance, tone, gait, stance, and overall manner."

Aside from the occasional McCarthyite accusing them of being more Marxist than media theorist, the Beatrices finally began to receive intellectual attention and respect for their ideas. Their growing popularity resulted in invitations to take part in a number of critical

gatherings; one of the most important of these occurred at the home of physicist and Nobel Laureate to-be Richard Feynman. Feynman, who was teaching at Caltech and had recently divorced his second wife, had begun hosting get-togethers every last Sunday of the month, inviting artists, intellectuals, and, scientists to eat, play music—Feynman loved to play the bongos—and share brief lessons on “anything you think to be interesting, curious, or altogether new.”

So, on the evening of June 26th, 1955, in Feynman’s Altadena living room, one of the Beatrices delivered the sisters’ magnum opus; a ninety-minute lecture titled “Your Grandfather Stood Differently, and Your Children Will Too.” The lecture aimed to present America’s past, present, and future along a timeline of increasing popular influences; influences defined as “externalizations of a new and newer reality”. Structured in three acts and designed to run the length of a feature film, the Morands sisters’ “living room lecture,” as it has come to be known, offers us the most comprehensive understanding of their theoretical positions.

Their notes for the lecture—recovered in their journals—reveal how radical their interpretation of the social and psychological impact of media was for their time. They opened with the Homestead Act of 1862 as the “critical foundation” for the first Sears, Roebuck, and Co. catalog some thirty years later in 1894, a cultural transition which, the Morands argue, “allowed distance and absence to make implausibility wholly plausible in America.” They later elucidated this concept in broader terms, “from delivering a house through the mail in 1909, to delivering a nuclear bomb halfway around the globe fifty years later, to potentially delivering a man to the moon—this century’s remote claims and guarantees have forever transformed our belief in that which is neither present nor proven in advance.”

The second act introduces a series of “contemporary systems” that the average person had come to “accept and internalize as reflective of the self.” These were commercial photography, celebrity culture, and “the necessity and intimacy” of television. Each system is defined as a “required externalization of a new reality” for the “average contemporary American,” whom the Morands aptly describe as, “the first true buyer of ideas, made almost entirely of the image of other images.” The notes illustrate a detailed matrix wherein these three systems operate across society, establishing visual, aural, and procedural models for individuals to follow—a process they describe as “parenting.”

The last act presents their most abstract theories, outlining a future of “perpetual dialoging” between what they call “idea-authors” (a brand and its advertiser in one) and “original-ideas” (individuals as consumers) that will generate rapid cultural change at “the speed of editing.” The most intriguing and prophetic example of this broader concept was that of a “permanent adolescence” in culture, a trend they see the seeds of in America’s post-war generation, whose social and cultural rebellions were normalized as a result of idea-authors immediately mimicking them in the marketplace. They describe this cycle as “greatly accelerating” in Darwinian terms as idea-authors inevitably get younger and younger, arguing that “a successful and respected idea-author will have to be the same age or younger than all original-ideas, the final outcome being “adolescent authors dictating adult habits”, a relationship the Morands are careful to describe as “not a culture of adults acting like children, but a culture wherein the youth define the marketplace, continually evolving the social mores.”

### {Part Three: The Collapse of Genius}

By the fall of 1955 things had begun to become exciting for the Beatrice Morands. They took part in a respected, although slightly nationalistic, panel discussion titled “The Impact of American Entertainment on the Free World” at UCLA; they delivered a well-received talk titled “Self as Cinema” at the Rotary Club of Los Angeles; and in early December they embarked on their first book, tentatively titled “You Are Idea” for The Vanguard Press, NY—an opportunity that came through Marshall McLuhan, who had stayed in touch with the twins since first meeting them in ‘51. It was a very productive time for the sisters, and as a result, a period of deeper discipline regarding their identities. Though the Morand sisters were able to maintain the illusion of being one woman for nearly a decade by being exceptionally organized, as demand and public awareness increased, their system became upset, setting in motion a series of changes in how they operated.

In order for the twins to focus on writing their book and maintain their rigorous social appearances, they needed to shift their patterns. “B1 will perform Mon., B2 Tues., Weds. we will alternate based on preparedness, then return to the regular rotation of 1-2-1-2 and so on ‘til the next Weds.” reads an utterly mechanical entry dated January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1956, followed by a series of hand-drawn calendar months with color codes indicating which sister went out and which stayed in to write. Although the Beatrices had always been deeply preoccupied with never being found out, these fears began to increase noticeably in 1956. For example, their habit of moving around from place to place had been interpreted as a bohemian trait, but after reviewing their journals it becomes clear that it was to avoid exposure. Their level of precision and degree of forethought offer insights into everywhere they lived—choices which at first appear to be about quality of living and architectural taste, instead reveal themselves to be about levels of privacy and numbers of access points for both entry and exit. Notations dated from January 4<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, 1956, show an elaborate inventory of hours and minutes associated with the address 653 Prospect Crescent. The times, ordered much like a punch clock’s, monitored their immediate neighbor’s comings and going during the first month the sisters resided in their final Pasadena residence, the secluded Millard House just next door, at 645 Prospect Crescent. What the twins clearly believed was that if they were to continue to come and go as one person, they would now need to know the comings, goings, and general habits of everyone that might be watching them.

In April of 1956, while deep in research for their book, the Morands were offered a very promising opportunity, a commission to write a series of articles analyzing media’s influence on social structures for the *Los Angeles Times*. The offer came directly from Norman Chandler, who, after hearing about their ideas through an encounter with Feynman at the Hughes Research Facility, quietly attended their Rotary Club lecture. Chandler had always been very concerned with how to keep his paper at the forefront of modern concerns, often putting his politics aside to consult a diverse group of social scientists, psychologists, media theorists, and Madison Avenue types on their views of how information would be conveyed in a changing and expanding America. His initial impression of Beatrice Morand was conveyed in a detailed letter to one such consultant, the Stanford-based media scholar Joseph Klapper. “That speaker Buff was going on about at dinner was Beatrice Morand. Have you heard of her? She graduated from Radcliffe, and may have worked with Skinner, but that’s all I know at this point. We

attended a talk of hers and were both impressed. Aside from being very detailed in her theories, she was also a bit of a showman. To make a point, she led off with a proclamation that at first seemed downright irrational, something like ‘the thing that is a thing that is nothing is the thing we know to be more real than anything authentic,’ followed by a planned pause that allowed the audience to ruminate on what appeared to be nonsense. Then she pulled out the Maltese Falcon from that Bogart film! Joe, the room fell from silent to airless. She had made her argument by way of our collective knowledge of this fake object and its fictional merits. I think she would be very interesting for you to speak with. I also think the two of you would nearly come to blows on many issues. I am having her write for us, so let’s see how that goes. Do share what, if anything, you know of her.”

The series for the LA Times ended up as a three-part analysis divided into the subjects of print, radio, and television. The pieces were groundbreaking in their assessment and vision, and as a result, they were never published. Chandler was so influenced, and perhaps threatened, by the ideas in the essays that he decided it would be strategically better to keep the materials private. Further, as a result of the usage contract the Morands had signed, if the articles remain unpublished, their contents were no longer theirs to use publicly. The twins were beyond devastated; after four months of intensive work, the majority of the research for their book was taken from them, with litigation threatened if a single line from the articles appeared in future publications. This loss of ownership of their ideas pushed them into a spiral of paranoid delusion: “Our obituary was written on heavy stationery with embossed names and ornate ampersands that bled black ink into the boiling water in which it was drowned. This gag order—this licit noose—this corporate sickle—will be our elegy.”

Although the journals only hold fragments of the article’s contents in the form of notes and brief passages, what can be gleaned points to models of a media-fed culture well ahead of its time. “Less draconian but no less pervasive, a news-state much like Orwell’s Oceania waits on the horizon,” reads one note under the header “Omnipresent Informational Telecast Systems.” It is assumed that their notes and earlier drafts were destroyed in the months following the Chandler incident as the twins rapidly came undone. Isolating themselves inside the Millard house, they turned inward, imagining spies entering their yard and small insects with tools for listening in on their conversations. The delicate balance that had allowed the two to be one had collapsed, sending the sisters careening from reality, as their fears grew more Kafkaesque. “Today we only discussed the radio waves with our eyes, we are learning to share ideas more instantly, and without them being able to tune in” reads a line in a series of daily notations from an obsessive section of their last journal, titled “Remedies for Sharing without Losing,” a daily, sometimes hourly chronicling of their status in the house.

If it were not for one connection to the outside world, it is plausible the sisters might have perished that year in the Millard house. However, thanks to a neighbor of unique stature—Mrs. Louise Gibbs Gamble, the heir to the Gamble fortune, and resident of Gamble house only a few blocks away—they had someone looking after them. Although there is no record of how well Gamble came to know the twins, it is clear that they first met soon after the Chandler incident, when the sisters were holed up in the Millard House. A recollection from one of Mrs. Gamble’s former staff members offers the clearest picture of how Gamble came to find the twins. Gamble regularly monitored the well being of the neighborhood’s Greene and Greene homes, of which hers was the most prestigious. One morning, following a very bad wind storm that had brought a number of

trees down the night before, she took it upon herself to survey the Arts and Crafts homes for damage. On her route, she decided to also check on the Millard House—which she believed to be empty—in case any of the many trees populating its garden had fallen into its Mayan-style walls. While her staff waited, Gamble, to their surprise, entered the house and stayed most of the afternoon. As she headed back to her house later that day, she thanked her two attendants for waiting, and said in a stern tone that her service team had come to respect, “Ladies, we have some good to do, but it will be done between us and without mention.” Over the following months, Gamble visited the Millard House regularly, with her staff bringing food and various sundries along. However, no one other than Mrs. Gamble went past the house’s tall exterior walls.

The relationship between Gamble and the twins is almost completely opaque, as Louise Gibbs Gamble never mentioned the twins in any letters or diaries, and all the Beatrices’ allude to is “a nun” who came to them “dressed as an aristocrat” in an undated late entry. Most likely, both sides made the conscious decision not to record any information about the other, out of respect and, to varying degrees, fear. However, what came of the Morands can be discerned from a series of Telexes sent from Gamble to Mexico at the same time as Alice Millard’s return. Based on her communications, the sisters—who had fallen into a deep paranoid depression—were sent to the National Autonomous University of Mexico, where Gamble had them treated within the psychoanalytic section of the medical school, which was overseen by her friend, Erich Fromm (whom Gamble came to know many years before in New York, after being deeply moved by his *Escape from Freedom*). Gamble, who was meticulous with her many philanthropic projects, appears to have made certain the sisters were very well cared for, as well as safely hidden from the rest of the world they had briefly stirred with their uniquely brilliant and fragmented minds.

### {Epilogue}

Nothing resembling what might be the Morands’ writing has surfaced in the Chandler archives as of yet; requests for records from the National Autonomous University of Mexico have so far been denied; and no record of the Morands exists at Radcliffe. However, there has been one key find in Cambridge, a summary record of twin patients in the files of B. F. Skinner, the lauded and controversial behaviorist, that offers some insight into the twins period prior to Los Angeles. The summary, dated a month before the sisters emerged in Pasadena, follows the observation of “identical twin sisters, suffering from schizophrenia and delusions of grandeur.” The brief write up might have been used as a legal document to recommend custodial oversight. Although it is not confirmed that Skinner is speaking of the Morands, the summary points to an answer regarding who they might have been, and why they lived as they did. “There is still no reality for either twin. They continue to speak to the radio and television, believing they are being spoken back to. Further, they live as one and claim to think the same thoughts. There is still no concrete connection to reality, unless said reality is one of pictures and stories imagined in pages of a magazine or on a movie screen. They live in their minds.”