# RECONSIDERING MARGINS - THE WOMEN OF THE BEAT GENERATION

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***Rezumat***

*Lucrarea descifrează pozitia si rolul femeilor din generatia Beat in contextul general al perioadei 1950-1960 si in cadrul specific al acestui grup cultural. Din acest punct de vedere, studiul discuta categoriile culturale de femeie-autor si de femeie-personaj, accentuand asupra spiritului lor de rezistenta in fata discursului masculin sau a normelor patriarhale. Mai putin faimoase decat barbatii generatiei Beat, mai putin prezente in fata camerelor de luat vederi si cu productii literare de dimensiuni reduse, femeile generatiei Beat au transmis generatiilor ulterioare un model al emanciparii si nonconformismului . Activand intr-un spatiu centrat pe o cultura a masculinului, aceste figure marginalizate au revalorizat, din pozitia lor periferica, constiinta ideologica a decadei si au rescris regulile literaturii boeme.*

In the mid 1950s, the women writers of the Beat Generation were considered of secondary importance to the development of the Beat group and had an exclusively peripheral position in the mythology of the movement. Their artistic contribution was not considered noteworthy for publication and their status was derogatively resumed to inferior terms like “chicks”, “girlfriends “or “common –law wives’. Recent critical work did justice to these formerly marginalized figures and demonstrated the extent to which their work and cultural presence shaped the ideological consciousness of the decade and rewrote the rules of literary bohemia.

Despite their libertarian attitudes and ideology of permissiveness, the representatives of the Beat generation activated in a male-dominated milieu, whose defiant masculinity accompanied by male chauvinism which inscribed their cultural productions into a strict patriarchal pattern. This reflected into a Beat ethos which placed women in inferior positions and assigned them secondary roles. Adequate enough to be muses, mothers or lovers, women were nevertheless unfit as artists. As Michael Davidson remarked, in spite of the Beat ethos of communal tribalism, there is a rigid gender distinction inside the community. Barbara Ehrenreich goes a step further and in *The Hearts of Men* identifies examples of male chauvinism in the Beat literature but considers that



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Beat ethos nevertheless offers the possibility of liberation through alternative roles. She also identifies a recontextualized Angel-Prostitute paradigm –the beatific whore in the writings of the male Beat writers. The subcategories of this principle are the fellaheen women –poorly educated or uneducated women who barely speak English and the chick-who welcomes sexual experiences without asking for a marriage commitment.

The Beats are definitely “beat” in the way they conceive of sex as “the only holy and important thing in life" but are unaware of being squared-headed when presenting women as chicks “awfully dumb and capable of doing terrible things ". In the overwhelming majority of cases, women are depicted as flat characters, denied any real involvement in the public sphere. Apart from keeping a man sexually satisfied, the only task a beat woman is assigned is “making breakfast and sweeping the floor". (Kerouac, *On the Road* 56, Ginsberg, *Selected 80-1*)

In most cases, women are presented as sexual playmates, ready to offer and feel erotic pleasures either on door mats in shabby shacks or at ten thousand feet at Mount Matterhorn. “[…] shore, come on with us and we’ll screw ya at ten thousand feet, and the way he said it was funny and casual, and in fact serious, that the girl wasn’t shocked at all but somehow pleased” (Kerouac, *The Dharma* 27).

When captured in snapshots of blissful domestic existence, a woman (like Christine, Sean Monahan’s wife) is better valued if she is “a beautiful and honey-haired girl”, who manages to agree with her husband “in every detail about how to live the joyous life in America without much money”. In between a child and a fully accomplished woman, she is even sweeter when wandering “barefooted around the house and yard, hanging up wash and baking her won brown bread and cookies”. The climax of her industriousness as a dutiful wife consists in her tolerance and benevolence toward the wild parties thrown by her husband in their old wooden house”, in which bizarre artists discus naked and or her ability of “making food out nothing” (161).

In Ginsberg's poetry, apart from *Kaddish* and *White Shroud*, there is little room for other women figures. Corso is even more extreme in his grotesque approach of mother figures and Kerouac admits bluntly his sole interest in the feminine: "As far as young women are concerned, I can't look at them unless I tear off their clothes one by one"(Kerouac, *Visions* 23)

Equating the feminine aspect with the static preservation of domestic order, Burroughs opposes the instance of status quo immobility with the bolder one of a renegade and advocate of liberty. Love is considered a manipulative



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instrument conceived by diabolical female minds, meant to trap male sexuality . For Burroughs, the term love is replaced by a sexuality no longer veiled by illusions or false sentiments.

The writer sees women were less than human, rather instruments of manipulation sent from outer worlds, diabolic creatures attempting to conquer the planet. Since their only beneficial role in society was to perpetuate mankind, if man was able to find a find a form of parthogenesis, they could be eliminated altogether.

In a suggestively entitled essay "Women: A Biological Mistake", Burroughs concedes to the fact that he is widely interpreted as a mysogynist and suggests a science fictional scenario of " the sexes fusing together into an organism" as "the next step "towards human perfection (Burroughs, *The Adding* 50 ) Burroughs's misogynic character has always been intensely praised or utterly hated by followers and detractors alike. More than demanding the subordination of the feminine principle to the masculine one, Burroughs considered that the complete separation between sexes could be the most desirable solution for their peaceful yet separate existence.Despite this seemingly narrow perspective upon women, there is an emancipatory dimension to his theory; the act of imaginig a group of homosexuals as separated from women, does not exclude the possible of lesbians organizing themselves in gynocentric communities. Subsequently, Burroughs's *The Wild Boys* may be interpreted as the anticipatory counterpart of feminist political fantasies like Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man,* since all these novels show a deep interest in politicized violence.

Consequently, one of the best strategies to correcting the faults would be to read Beat male texts through the lens of feminist criticism. Instead of simply repeating overtly sexist comments about women' s inadequacy and inability to live up to male standards, one should probably highlight Ted Joans's delightful satire of " Jivey Leaguers, Creepniks, Folkniks" who are represented as less macho, less charismatic, less sexually potent than the idealized male-written novels. In Joan 's acceptation of the term ,a Jivey Leaguer is a " half-way cat whose sole concern is to be a part of everything which he puts down or cashes –in-on as it suits his eternal search for girls in his well –dressed –to-bore-tight faggotair clothes". A Creepnik is someone " always on the scene digging lonely young chicks, pets that are left alone, and other valuables that he can steal". Finally, a " Hipper –than –Thounik " is an " overread writer or painter of sorts who speaks as an astute authority on every subject, even sex, which she knows only from books".(Joans 86)



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The decade certainly did not need female intellectuals and any attempt from a woman to surface with literary productions was either snubbed or sneeringly reviewed. The critic Anatole Broyard complained about girls "who wore their souls like negligees that they never took off" and university teachers patronizingly dismissed women writings for being too existentialism-oriented. (as qtd in Knight 68)

Yet, red diaper babies refused to conform and preferred to write anarchic verse instead. Rebels were raised between the walls of convent-like all girls schools and lesbian intercourses were happening between students and their teachers. Girls felt life was also sexual and tried to compensate their ignorance of sexual matters either by extensive reading of obscene material or by hanging out with male gangs. For a woman, being by herself in an apartment, away from the protection of parents or husband was inconceivable, having sex was outrageously adventurous and birth control procedures were sure to bring about public disgrace.

Both a patron and a muse of the Beat spirit, Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs was a figure of central importance in catalyzing the various directions of a countercultural attitude. A handsome woman of strong convictions, she found it impossible to go along with the rigid principles of her wealthy family and the constraints of an excessively protective family. In her apartment at 421 West 118 th, she stayed with Eddie Parker-the boyfriend, John Kingsland, her sixteen year old lover and Hall Chase. This unorthodox group was often visited by Columbia student Lucien Carr and his girlfriend, Celine Young , Jack Kerouac , Allen Ginsberg and the predominantly homosexual William Burroughs. In that haven populated by drug dealers , hobos, hustlers and prostitutes, Burroughs's and Joan's love affair will start and follow its course, ending and culminating at the same time in Joan's incidental death after a William Tell act. Her death was the moment to stir the demons in Burroughs and, haunted by the ghosts of a horrid past, he turned to writing as the only instrument to keep the evil at bay

In the turbulent world of the beats, Carolyn Cassady, the legendary wife of the legendary Neal Casady had many roles to fulfill. As Neal's wife, she had to go over her husband's innumerable infatuations with temporary male and female sexual partners. LuAnne Henderson and Diane Hansen were only two links of a longer chain of marital infidelities. Bearing a sometimes moody Neal was not an easy job for a woman, while following him on his journeys, and she did her best to support emotionally her husband caught into drug dealings and sentenced to prison. As a mother, raising three children, she struggled to act as



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the breadwinner of the family, raising them as best she could, on and off the road, as the wanderings of her husband would require. As a friend of most Beat members, Carolyn never overlooked the possibility of a romance with Jack Kerouac. Dealing with an embarrassingly protective husband and a careless spender and womanizer only seconds later asked for an enormous amount of patience nd understanding to re-assemble the broken pieces of a normal relationship.

After the publication of *On the Road*, Kerouac experienced both the exultation and the pressure of becoming a public figure. The public perceived him as being as an "ecstatic, virile, latter-day cowboy, relentlessly and expertly driving fast cars across the broad face of America, a Lothario whose sexual drive and appetite for drugs were limitless, an iconoclastic hipster with radical values."(Watson 213) The maintenance of this newly gained success was a heavy burden for the shy, conservative, mother –figure oriented Kerouac. The sex bomb myth that made women go wild at the sight of the author of *On the Road* was deconstructed and refashioned in a derisive manner by Carolyn Cassidy's *Off the Road*. She describes him as a " somewhat inhibited lover" (35) and dealt a heavy blow to his masculine initiative of selecting female lovers when she presented him as the "picked male" rather than the "picky one. "

Diane di Prima' s *Memoirs of a Beatnik* goes a step further in acknowledging women 's real involvement in the shaping of the Beat counterculture. Rather than being molded, as in male representations, women are the one with initiative, capable to assert themselves by the act of writing. More free spirited and opinionated than any woman of the 50s, Diane di Prima has always had strong political beliefs and no fear in voicing literary thoughts in her active correspondence with Ezra Pound, Kenneth Patchen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg. Her cultural interests covered many fields, ranging from the study of Zen and meditative composition to the erotic autobiography- *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, her first book *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* and her active publishing contribution to the journal *Yugen* and *The Floating Bear.*

Her extraordinary versatility and flexibility enabled her to start various projects at the same time. She was either staying with Timothy Leary's psychedelic community at Millbrook or traveling in the Volkswagen van trailing her children across America, getting involved in charitable events while staging political ones. Only towards her 60s did she renounce this hectic lifestyle for a more contemplative attitude. Her Zen religious practices were



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then paralleled by her literary workshops and her courses on the master program in Poetics.

Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters* is an emotional account of the author's coming of age in the background of an inspiring yet desperate group under the crust of a rigid and conservative America. The memoirs give equal attention to other characters such as Elise Cowen and Hettie Jones and capture Kerouac in a decisive moment of his existence: his becoming a celebrity in the aftermath of his On the Road. This woman icon of the Beat generation must have greatly disappointed her parents. The well off Jewish family had high expectations for their only child and they could not have possibly expected their bright daughter to drop out before getting her B.A. or to hang out with the alcoholic, bohemian writer Jack Kerouac.

The sinuous process of Hettie Jones' maturation is poetically described in her *How I Became Hettie Jones*, a memoir blending poetic sensitivity and dramatic realism, while fusing intimate reflections with humorous insights. Dividing her time between editing Partisan Review and Yugen and organizing poetry reading sessions in bohemian bars, Hettie Jones gave birth to two biracial children, fathered by LeRoi Jones.

Joane Kyger's movement to San Francisco coincided with the rush of events culminating in the *Howl* obscenity trial. After a four hour staging in Kyoto practising Zen Buddhism and writing poetry, she returned to San Francisco were she engaged actively in the poetic literary scene, writing poetry and giving public readings.

England's prodigy child Denise Levertov started her poetic activity at the age of twelve and received kind and enthusiastic responses from public figures of the period. Compared to Rilke and Brahms, the baby of the new romanticism was welcome by T.S.Eliot and Kenneth Rexroth. The contact with the European poetry from a very early age matured her talent and refined her artistic tastes.

Her first book of poetry, *The Double Image* , crystallizing her experiences as a war nurse was rated by some as " overly sentimental ", yet gave a good measure of her "strong social consciousness and...showed good indications of the militant pacifist she was to become"( Gould 124) Her moving to the United States gave her a plus of strength in poetic voice and most critics acknowledged that her second book of poetry *Here and Now* had a more sinewy energy, while her publication of her next book *With Eyes at the Back of Our Head* finally establishes her as an American poet. When Robert



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Creely began to publish her work in The Black Mountain Review, in the public consciousness she became forever associated with this literary circle.

Joanna Mc Clure's free spirit and poetic sensitivity was molded by her living with Michael McClure at the heart of the Beat scene in North beach, by the long discussions about art and philosophy, her extensive readings, and the influence of her Beat mentor Kenneth Rexroth unleashes a new type of poetic energy in her.

A beautiful account of the bohemian life style in the 50s, together with the intimate details of her initiation into a Beat ritualistic existence is given by Janine Pommy Vega's *Seeds of Travel.* This first person narrative text offers a sensitive insight into love making scenes and family revelations in a world of temporary sexual commitment and transitory relationships.

Brenda Frazer is an authentic example of Beat rebellious living style. Her bleached hair, ragged jeans emaciated face are only the few of the physical characteristics of a Beat girl ravished by abusive drug usage and prostitution.

One of the most influential women on the Beat and post Beat literary scene was undoubtedly Anne Waldman, director of both the Seminal Poetry Project in New York and The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied poetics at the Naropa Institute of Boulder, Colorado. Her precocious talent in poetic manifestations while still in her teens brought her close to the key figures of bohemian streets in Greenwich Village (Gregory Corso, Diane di Prima, Allen Ginsberg, Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, Michael McClure and Brenda Frazer)After meeting Gary Snyder and William Burroughs in 1967 and 1968 respectively, she considered herself part of what was to be termed "second generation Beat". Mentioning the hardships she encountered in asserting her countercultural affiliations and fighting against the prejudices she states:

> The 50s were a conservative time and it was difficult for artistic bohemian women to live outside the norm. Often they were incarcerated by their families, or were driven to suicide. Many talented women perished. But male writers of this literary generation were not entirely to blame, it was the ignorance of a whole (Waldman 98)

Searching for acceptance on the part of the male writers led her to the exploration of a "hermaphroditic literature, a transvestite literature and finally a poetics of transformation beyond gender."(Waldman 67) And yet, she acknowledged the tremendous help received from her mentors, and the great benefit she derived from their wisdom of writing, friendship and support.



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Sharing much of her father's s vision and attitude, dealing with largely similar subjects, though driven by the same adventurous spirit and deploring the same solitude and alienation, Jan Kerouac, the only child of Jack Kerouac nevertheless claimed to be a writer with her own literary voice. Her autobiographical novels *Baby Driver* and *Trainsong* strikingly resemble her father's narrative principles, though one can unmistakably detect a less confessional propensity, a less emotional involvement in the writing and a more detached depiction of the subject. Familiar with the life on the road, fully accustomed to the excitement of dropping acid or to the boredom of staying in juvenile detention centers, Jan Kerouac started writing her memoirs in an attempt to come to terms with herself.

Imagined as a sequence to her memoirs, *Baby Driver* deals with Jan 's initiation in a world of junk, free sex, with the trail of advantages and disturbances following it. *Trainsong,* published in 1988 was imagined as a sequel to the previous one, a vivid account of her journeys from Camden to Casablanca and then to Berlin. On freight trains or by car, on a direct route or on winding roads, her "spontaneous" life was both hard and indelible.

Better known for her poems, Joanne Kyger also produced remarkable prose pieces in her *Japan and Indian Journals*, which chronicle the exciting adventures as well as the fact of daily existence of Snyder, Ginsberg and Orlovsky. Capturing the period of her marriage to Snyder, this collection of essays is read by some critics as a "kind of captivity narrative, the controlled maintenance and development of a relentlessly invisible/isolated self" (Skinner 109)

She combines the reflexive, meditative style of Buddhist extraction with the jocular attitude of a woman-girl.

> Gary says that women are always associated with water, and holes are mystic entrances. The well is essentially a woman's thing. And the well as knowledge. Well I don't know. Well I do know. Contemplation and awareness. Are you well. Well. Well, well, well, how nice to se you today. (Kyger, *Japan* 34-5)

Her recent collections, *Phenomenological*(1989) and *Just Space*(1991) voice more Beat influences and carry on the Beat mysticism, while continually infusing it with a sense of adequate modernity. It is problematic to label Kyger "a Beat poet", yet one cannot deny the depth of beat influences in her literary productions. Acknowledging her indebtedness to the cultural manifestations reunited under the term "Beat", Joanne Kyger also takes pride in her own



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uniqueness. Her originality consists in her desire to assert her own singularity while at the same time preserving the sense of belonging to a cultural community.

> Making up a literary history is the phenomenon of looking back and tryng to make a picture of a puzzle. So trying to ask someone now "what did it feellike then"-I didn't think about it in that way, I thought about it as a practice of my own writing that I was interested in, and certainly a lot of the ideas that came through the Beat generation…No doubt that it was a great cultural stirring that was going on, the phenpmena of painting and writing and jazz( Russo 5)

The literary productions of women writers challenged social conventions about gender roles and sexual taboos and constituted the seeds of a proto-feminist movement. Lenore Kandel was a representative of the incipient feminism of the 1950s, whose prophetic and incantatory voice bridged the counterculture of the Beats and the aesthetics of the hippies, by enriching Beat art with the more daring tones of the 1960s. *The Love Book*, her 1966 collection, is an unabashed and defiant literary feat, displaying uninhibited gestures in overtly sexual terms. It was confiscated and the author charged on obscenity grounds, a few years after the trials of Ginsberg's *Howl* and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch.*

This second generation Beat writer who proclaimed love as the god of the new age came to symbolize the muse of poetry in the age of political activism. Her poetry book drew on hippie romanticism and feminist liberating impulses and focused on slang words denoting heterosexual intercourse, while investing them with mystical connotations. Accused that her Dionysian poems of psychedelic sex and mystical love should be censored for their use of forbidden sex words and their bold depiction of love-making scenes, she replied that four letter words have a beautiful meaning, unlike war, Vietnam, bomb and hate which are the real obscenities.

The feminine discourse of Beat writers, though rebellious and emancipatory to a certain extent, also replicates the repressive constraints on women which they apparently rejected. Oscillating between sexual emancipation and submissive subordination, their art goes through different stages and phases. One may identify either passive conformity in sexual attitudes or the happy acceptance of the traditional and patriarchal deification of women. On the other hand, one should not overlook the uninhibited language structures and the celebration of self-gratifying sexual impulses. The



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conjunction of models of sexual freedom with the unconditional adoration of images of paradoxical liberation and a new type of subjectivity , although indebted to a central masculine status, also violates the rules of patriarchal oppression. As Ronna C Johnson rightly remarked, the emancipation in purpose and intention is not matched by adequate, transgressive practices and attitudes.

> The proto –feminist glorification of female subjectivity is simultaneously negated by the traditional gender roles that limit female sexual abandon. (Johnson 233)

Mothers or daughters, wives or sweethearts, the women connected to the Beat circle form a heterogeneous group, impossible to label by white and black characterization. They enriched and diversified the personal lives of the Beats and had a seminal influence in refining the literary expectations of their partners. Shaping and being shaped in the process of cultural affiliation to the countercultural trend, they added their unique touches to the Beat cultural productions.

In a period in which rebellion was a romantic behavioral pattern demanded or expected from men, Diane di Prima conjured anarchy through Magic, Alchemy and healing but must importantly, through writing.

For her, the future of literature does not lie in the discovery of a new type of postmodern theory originating in Western thought. She considers that an infusion of Buddhist logic would solve the frustration experienced by the postmodern individual and vision, trance and the recycling of old materials into a blending of vision, words and sounds might be a solution to this crisis.

Unlike the male members of the Beat Generation who met both with the delights and the annoyance of being famous and bestselling, Diane di Prima has never known the angst of fighting the tiresome publicity. And this is, partly, because she has never enjoyed an excessive amount of academic or public attention. This statement is fully demonstrated if we consider that her 1960 poems appeared in underground press and only her 34$^{th}$ book, *Recollection of My Life as a Woman* appeared under the imprint of a corporate publishing house. When she finally signed the contract with Viking in 1993, she also became acquainted with the constraints imposed by large corporations. She had to renounce her former contract with the feminist newsletter called *Mama Bear's News* and endure the humility of having the language of her novel turned from vernacular into Standard English.



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A versatile theorist, philosopher, teacher, activist and writer, di Prima produced an impressive body of work. Her first book *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* (1958) was followed by *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), *Revolutionary letters* (1971), *Pieces of a song* (1990), *Loba* – a long serial poem republished by Penguin in 1998 and her most recent *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (2001). Apart from these volumes, she is also a contributor to more than 300 literary magazine and newspapers and she has published in about 70 anthologies, translated in thirteen languages (Knight 345). The more unjustified seems then the lack of literary critics to take a real and profound interest in her work. This might be due to the fact that contemporary male Beats living in the same cultural milieu "stole the limelight" and made critics devote them their entire attention to the detriment of women writers. On the other hand, the history of literature records a long tradition of under-appreciated female writers. Modernist women artists, for example, are relevant examples on this issue. On the other hand, Italian American scholars such as Fred Gardaphe, Helen Barolini, and Mary Jo Bona proved that Italian American literature produced by men and especially woman received very little academic attention

A poet priestess, leader, activist, mother, feminist, publisher, Buddhist woman, teacher and student at the same time, Diane di Prima was a feminist avant la letre, and an artist who refashioned the Western male – white oriented culture forever

*Memoirs of a Beatnik* offers a vivid characterization of her life in New York city, in Timothy Leary's experimental, psychedic community at Millbrook and of her journeys across the country in a VW Bus to San Francisco.

*Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969) is her fictionalized autobiography recounting in detail her Italian-American ancestry as well as "the way in which she and her friends" "made art, smoked dope, dug the new jazz and spoke a bastardization of the black argot" (69). Her life as a bohemian poet, her freewheeling sexuality are two taboo topics given considerable attention in the novel. The revelation of her sexuality is recounted in undertones of brash courage and, at some other times, of innocent candor. She has no qualms admitting to being sexually aroused or "having the boots" but in some other cases she is extremely cautious with the information disclosing her private life. For instance, she gives few details about her marriage to Alan Marlowe, a man she did not love, and who threw away her letters and journals soon after they met. She preserves the same tone when mentioning about her affair with LeRoi



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Jones and there is extreme ambiguity in her recollection about their temporary involvement.

> I thought of myself as Jones's mistress in the European bohemian tradition. I had lovers before him, but I didn't fall in love until I met him, and after him I didn't fall in love for a long, long time. He had political commitment and passion. The relationship was creative and inspiring for both of us(101).

*Memoirs of a Beatnik* is a cultural portrait of a decade and a self-portrait at the same time. Committed to the life of an artist from early adolescence, she dropped out of college and started an adventurous life, seasoned with innumerable love affairs with partners of both sexes. It is a book about the value of art and experience, about the pains and passions of a woman artist and a mother. It is at the same time a visceral insight into the nature of sex, drug and freedom. Painful or intimate details concerning her life, such as her marriage to a homosexual or the desire to have a child by LeRoi Jones are all recounted in the book, in a candid yet passionate tone.

*Memoirs of a Beatnik* is an exercise in emancipation in more than one way. First of all, discussing sexual life in her family would have meant a public disagree, "an inconceivable breach of etiquette" ( di Prima, *Memoirs* 48). Secondly, discussing openly about sexual affairs outside marriage was an act of immense bravery in 1969. By doing so, not only did she violate the cultural taboos of her family that said that a decent girl does not leave the paternal nest before she is married, but she also defied many other cultural prohibitions that forbade lesbian sexuality or abortions.

A more quiet form of transgression deployed by di Prima may lie in her writing about herself in the first place. Writing as an American woman with Italian undertones demonstrates her desire to surpass the limits which demand silence from herself and from her family. Di Prima breaks the tradition and code of silence and exposes the secrets of her family while exposing herself, her body, her pleasures, her sexual habits.

*Memoirs of a Beatnik* can be considered an authentic feminist epic poem and a classic of the turbulent Beat years. Offering a complex panorama of the bohemian life in the 1950s, the book is above all a personal account of a woman artist.

Her more recent *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* provides an accurate picture of her artistic and intimate relationships with him, her decision of becoming pregnant by him against his wishes. The volume stands out as an



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impressive collection of family portraits. Her Italian grandmother Antoinette, her mother Emma, her maternal grandfather, Domenico Mallozi, the Italian-born anarchist and atheist, Marlowe, her husband are distinct and vigorously outlined characters of her autobiography.

*Recollections* gives a free account of the first three decades of the author's life. Born to a Italian-American family and raised in Brooklyn, Diane di Prima spiritually renounced the conservative tradition of her family and immersed herself in the bohemian life of the early 50s Manhattan. Her fascinating narrative is about the becoming of a woman, through the triumph of imagination and the courage of sexuality and experimentation.

The book chronicles the effervescences of the countercultural movements taking place on the East and West coast in the 1950s and 1960s. A revolutionary woman in both her private and public life, Di Prima offers some emotional portraits for Merce Cunningham, Frank O'Hara, Audre Lorde, Trisha Brown. Candid at times, daring in most cases, the volume gains in authenticity through the intense cultivation of the colloquial and lyrical idiom altogether.

*Recollections* is structured as a mixture of journal writing, fragments of poems, and unsent letters taking the form of an evocative style. One of the defining moments in her life as an artist is the choice between art as human and art as a divine process, as magic. It is the staging of Michael McClure's *The Blossom* by The Poet's Theatre, and the frenzy, the chaos and the magic arising from art which will convince her of the necessity to create art as Logos and not as a form of entertainment.

The tone modulates with each story, moving from the candid one while recounting her love affair with Bonnie the painter to the tragic story of Freddie Herko's demise. The quest of feminity in a revolutionary age takes her from various stages of spiritual development. She learns how to react or fight against the prejudices of a racial society. She also learns how to understand art and its conditioning. The recollections of her meeting with Wallace Berman or the artist/witch Cameron are some events paving her way as a real artist. The process of maturation would not be complete without her return to insights into childhood and maternal feeling the story about her grandfather Domenico Mallozi, the Sicilian anarchist, and her initiation into the mysteries of the universe through Dante an Bruno, the emotional story of her five-year old daughter Jeanne and her telekinetic powers are only a few stories to prove her sensibility and her subtle artistic inflections.



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Her personal journey is projected onto the late 1950s America, a site of creative eruption, in which the arts were breaking rules and a new ground in culture. On an artistic scene dominated by men, Diane di Prima maintained an active life and learned the demanding way of the art in general. In a period in which the close scrutiny of the decency patrol left nothing unchecked, she had the courage of having lesbian and sexual intercourse and an illegal abortion.She was one of the catalysts of the West Coast communal scene, actively contributing to the radical politics and the consciousness-expanding strategy of the period.

*Recollections* employs a more fragmented, less unitary compositional technique. The writing is formed by journal entries offering captivating reflections on her life as a poet and activist in the context of the 1950 New York. In a cultural milieu in turmoil with war protests, Civil Rights demonstration Second Wave feminism and sexual liberation campaigns, Diane di Prima was more than an observer. She was politically and emotionally involved in those moments. Her activities were closely linked to two important revolutionary figures of the decade. Her prolific relationship with LeRoy Jones fulfilled both at the physical and spiritual level. The founding of the poetic journal *The Floating Bear* and her collaboration with Jones, might have had a definite impact upon his contribution to contemporary poetry and Black liberation. Through her longtime friendship with Andre Lorde, di Prima contributed indirectly to the emergence of black lesbian feminism and to the development of the consciousness of colors. The book explores the implication of a childhood trauma of ethnic nature on her future development. Her artistic dilemma was first uttered by her father before Diane's leaving home for college.

"Now, don't expect too much. I want you to always remember that you're Italian. Not that we weren't any good, but however good we were, we could be held down. Or back. An underclass". (Di Prima, *Recollections* 65)

This cultural inferiority felt as an Italian added to the low status of a woman. However, the transgressive nature of her writing lies in her desire to surpass the limits of ethnicity and womanhood. When describing the moments of tension or inner struggle, her tone moves from a self-reflexive one to contradictory. The value of her memoir consists in writing history as it is lived, thus preserving the complexity of phenomena and the sense of "immediacy" in action.

Few women have enjoyed the same amount of attention on the part of the Beat men-poets. Allen Ginsberg acknowledged:



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> Yet, it's all right to blame the men for exploiting the women – or, I think the point is, the men didn't push the woman literally or celebrate them… But then, among the group of people we knew at the time, who were the writers of such power as Kerouac or Burroughs? Were there any? I don't think so. Were we responsible for the lack of outstanding genius in the women we knew? Did we put them down or repress them? I don't think so… Where there was a strong writer who could hold her own, like Diane di Prima, we would certainly work with her and recognize her.(Ginsberg, *Journal* 157-8)

Diane di Prima's art is the enduring expression of a strong yet sensitive woman artist who evolved from the early years of Greenwich Village through Beatness, jazz and drugs into the revolutionary protests of the 1960s and early 1970s. From flower power and Vietnam war, her literary career, seasoned with Buddhism, Hinduism and Zen would take her into the maturity of the 1980s.

When di Prima's work was reviewed within the larger body of Anglo-literary productions, it sometimes received some negative comments. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, George Butterick considers that her literary productions were never the embodiment of solid literary theory or poetic a style (16), but the reflection of a lifestyle,. The most insightful analysis of her work is offered by Blossom S. Kirshenbaum who places her in the larger Italian American context. The critic demonstrates the way in which her "very Italian" work moves away from the conservative norms of her ancestry into the realm of unconventional thought and subversive ideology.

It is almost common knowledge that in the Beat milieu, women never received the same appraisal as their male counterparts, or at least a fair share of approval and recognition. Some, like di Prima and Joyce Johnson published many volumes of poetry or autobiography, other featured briefly in anthologies and magazines. When public recognition (at least partial) did come along for few of them, they had to struggle a lot to outgrow the status of "minor characters", or "chicks" expected to sit quietly and listen, be sympathetic, prepare food and ensure the sexual satisfaction of their male companions. The lack of respect for women in the postwar years was an unquestionable matter, preserved as such by all social or gender categories (women included) and taken over even by the most rebellious cultural elements. The Beats were no exception to that. As Gregory Corso once admitted:



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> There were women, they were there. I knew them, their families put them in institutions, they were given electric shock. In the 50s if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female your families had you locked up. There were cases, I knew them, someday someone will write about them (Knight 141).

In such a hostile milieu, women concealed their poetic expectations and artistic talents, hid their pregnancies and raised money for abortions on their own, sometimes even supported financially the men, thus enabling them to pursue freely their artistic interests. Under best circumstances, Beat women assumed the Romantic role of muses and sources of inspiration for their male friends, lovers or husbands. A truly archetypal Beat Woman (see Watson 270), di Prima is the perfect combination of bold independence, daring sexual experimenter, drug use and bohemian pioneering.

Winner of the 1983 National Book Critics Award for best autobiography, Joyce Johnson produced in *Minor Character* a memoir of love, and maturation. It is a story of passion and adventure about the men and women who made the concept of Beat famous, projected upon an almost sacrosanct space and time. On a blind date in Greenwich Village set up by Allen Ginsberg, Joyce Glassman met Jack Kerouac in 1957. The relationship between the 21 year old girl and the anonymous 35 year old Kerouac lasted for two years. The structure of the memoirs displays a series of letters the lovers sent to each other, interwoven with many commentaries on Johnson's side, who reflects on what it meant to be young and in love in the tumultuous years of the 1950s. Apart from this central event in her life, Joyce Johnson also describes the period before her meeting Kerouac (Jewish family life on New York's Upper West Side) and after this event (the sense of loss, her becoming a mother and an artist).

Unlike most feminists who consider *On the Road* a specimen product of male hegemony, Joyce Johnson 's appraisal of it is more generous and somehow more maturely balanced. She draws attention to the social context in which the book was written and to the sense of prophecy it pioneered. For both male and female readers, On the Road brought the news of a sexual revolution- the same revolution that was to grant innumerable rights to women and gave birth to women's liberation movement. It gave the word "choice" a new meaning, and regardless of their sex , people were presented with the possibility of being free to experiment. Rather than strictly following parental patterns, the new generations were now encouraged to expand their needs and diversify their intentions.



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The memoir is remarkable for the intuition with which it portrays the young and vulnerable Kerouac before and during the year when *On the Road* was hailed as the symbol of the youth counterculture. It also displays a moving portrait of a young woman trying to gain experience by fighting against coercive gender rules. Her will to become an artist is a powerful thread along the story. When she met Kerouac, she was working on her first novel and after they parted, she went on to write with three more novels, while pursuing her interests in investigative journalism as well.

The memoir also describes the love affairs between Joyce's best college friend Elise Cowen and Allen Ginsberg and gives a particular attention to the unique bohemian feeling of Greenwich Village and Barnard College. The coercion experienced in family and college make her detach from the world outside. In this world fraught with the sense of coercion, even grammar was taught under restrictive rules.

> […] no writer who break such rules are ever named. Effect is something we girls have no right to. Only after years of laboriously equipping each sentence with subject and predicate, as with boots and umbrella, can we hope to earn it. Perhaps not even then (Johnson, *Minor* 54).

Bored with the dullness of grammar lessons, she found refuge in the culture of jazz and clubs and is lured and confused at the same time by concepts like Jungian, Existentialism and Abstract Expressionism. Coming of age in the companionship of men, she feels frustrated when comparing the little freedom experienced by women to the amount of liberty experienced by men.

> […] in the ripening atmosphere of some midnight or endlessly beery afternoon came the moment when the absolutely right and perfect, irreducibly masculine thing was said onrdemonstrated unforgettably… (Johnson, *Minor* 39)

Her entrance into the realm of real life is made gradually, as she moves from the mystique of fascination to the sordidness of existence, from the evanescence of pure thought to mundane triviality. Her reflections upon gendered emotions are both emotional and convincing.

> I'd learned myself by the age of sixteen that just as girls guarded their virginity, boys guarded something less tangible which they called Themselves. They seemed to believe they had a mission in life, from which



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> they could easily be deflected by being exposed to too much emotion (Johnson, *Minor* 96).

Joyce Johnson's first novel, *Come and Join the Dance* was published in 1962. It presents a week in the life of Susan Leavit, in between her last examination and her graduation from college. Apart from the dull experiences of a bookish existence, she is enchanted with the new experiences of sexual self-discovery. In the end, Susan chooses the real life over a livresque existence and rejects the standards imposed upon her. She intentionally fails the gym class, implicitly her graduation exams and chooses the total freedom instead.

Her second book called *Bad connections*, published in 1978, deals with the life of a divorced mother. Molly is in her mid thirties and works as an editor. The change is the narrative person (the novel fluctuates between her 1st and 3rd person) emphasizes the tension experienced by the woman, in her determining whether her life would be more meaningful in the company if man on or her own.

More than one decade later, Johnson published *In the Night Café* (1989) a novel which explores the end of the Beat era in Greenwich Village. The love story between Joanna Gold, the protagonist (shaped most probably after Johnson herself) and Tom Murphy (based on Jim Johnson) and his unfortunate death in a motorcycle accident are the highlights of the story projected on a beautiful mosaic of artistic, political and sexual events ending the 60s.

Raised in a family with strong bohemian connections, Anne Waldman is more than another artist joining the New York City scene in the tumultuous years of the mid 1960s. Her energetic and passionate personality got her involved in innumerable cultural projects of overwhelming value for the Beat generation. For many years, she was the main organizer of a series of readings and workshops. The manifestation was called the Poetry Project at St. Mark's church in the Bower and it was famous because it reunited important Beat artists with younger artists. It also occasioned fruitful exchanges of experience between generations, giving them all the chance of experimenting new writing strategies or modes of perception. A few years later, together with Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. Unlike the other women whose lives were related to the Beat generation one way or the other, Anne Waldman never produced an autobiography. Only her recent *Vow to Poetry* includes a generous selection of her essays, interviews and poetic manifestos, thus offering a good insight into the personal and artistic life of



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Anne Waldman. Devoted to poetry throughout her whole life, she is the recipient of many grants and awards. She won a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Poetry Foundation and the Shelley Memorial Award for poetry. She used poetry as an end in itself but also as a means to explore the sense of community, with its spiritual and political life.

Though less famous than the men of the Beat generation, less present in front of camera lens, the women of the Beat generation were nevertheless important in transmitting the Beat cultural legacy. Carolyn Cassady and Jan Kerouac, Mary Fabili , Helen Adam are only a few of the women whose art reflected the mood of the 1950s and the ennui of a generation. Before the emancipation brought about by the second feminist wave, and anticipating it in more than one way, these women made their way to San Francisco and Greenwich Village. Their unconformity on the literary level was matched by their shocking life-style. Staying unmarried yet living with men, going in for a literary career rather than manifesting interest for household activities, giving birth to biracial children or raising families while "commuting" on the road, these women repelled the aristocratic common sense of their upper class families and the public taste in general.

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