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# On the Margins of Cool: Women Poets of the Beat Generation

Megan R. Keeling  
*College of William and Mary*

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## **On the Margins of Cool: Women Poets of the Beat Generation**

### **Introduction: What was the Beat Generation?**

The Beat Generation formed as a protest of mainstream postwar America's cultural values. The period immediately following World War II is generally characterized as an optimistic period in American history. America had emerged from one of the most devastating wars in human history relatively unscathed; because of this, it became the economic and military superpower of the world. This translated into unprecedented economic prosperity and opportunity for Americans. The form of the American Dream that emerged from this time was the belief that every man could obtain a good job and a wife and children and live in a nice house in the quiet suburbs. The cost of this apparent stability was strict cultural conformity: everyone was supposed to aspire to have the Levittown house, the corporate job, the perfect nuclear family. The Beat Generation resisted this conformity. They rejected not only the lifestyle of mainstream America, but also its optimism. In his essay "This is the Beat Generation," John Clellon Holmes writes: "More than mere weariness, it [Beat] implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself" (Holmes, 1952). Being "Beat" meant embracing the darker, more *real* side of existence, to search for experiences that one could not find within the stifling confines of the middle class suburbs.

More importantly, the Beat Generation rejected most of the oppressive ideologies that went along with a conformist, consumerist culture. The ideology of the American Dream forced anyone who didn't aspire towards it to the outskirts of society; therefore, this period was characterized by a wholesale rejection of anyone who didn't fit the mold. This was the era of Senator Joe McCarthy and the Red Scare. Labeling yourself as an outsider did not just mean social exclusion—it might even get you branded as a communist, an ally to the Soviets and guilty of treason against the United States of America. The pressure to conform was stifling, and the Beat ethos did away with it entirely. In their introduction to *Girls who Wore Black*, Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace explain that the Beats were defined by “the way denizens of postwar... Beat bohemian enclaves... rejected cold war paranoias, button-down corporate conformities, consumer culture, sexual repression, and McCarthy-era gay bashing when it was far from common or safe to do so openly” (Johnson and Grace 2). Within the bohemian enclaves of New York, San Francisco, Denver and Chicago, they experimented with drugs and free love, idealized the junkie and the criminal, and traveled all over the country and the globe in pursuit of both kicks and existential enlightenment.

Although the Beats weren't the only artists or counter-cultural thinkers in postwar America, they were the best known. Determining “beatness” depended largely on two factors: what you wrote about, and who you wrote with. Johnson and Grace specify that who made up the Beat Generation was determined by “interpersonal associations and common experiences of the postwar, cold war zeitgeist because Beat writing is stylistically and technically too diverse to constitute a homogenous aesthetic or literary philosophy” (Johnson and Grace 2-3). All Beat artists were characterized by a rejection of traditional cultural values or a criticism of postwar cultural conformity, as well as the conventions set up by the literary establishment surrounding

poetry. At the same time, the Beat movement was a lifestyle. These were the urban hipsters of America's major cities: they lived in Bohemian enclaves, gathered in hip bars or coffee shops, experimented with sex and drugs, and included other like-minded artists and poets within their social circle. For instance, even though Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich wrote at the same time (and sometimes even about the same subjects) as Beat poets Joanne Kyger or Diane di Prima, Plath and Rich are not considered Beat because they didn't live and write within the Beat community. However, relying on social circles to determine one's association with "Beat" meant that women were likely to only be included based on their associations with men, rather than their own strengths as artists or revolutionaries.

Both the constructs of ideal postwar conformity and the counter-cultural rebellion against it were determined solely through male experience. In mainstream culture, a wife was something to be attained, as much of a commodity as the house or the car. Because of this, women were unable to strive for the American dream themselves, since their inclusion depended on being married to a successful man. Similarly, women were excluded from the framework of Beat rebellion against mainstream ideas and values, which explicitly rejected this suburban family culture and the consumerist pursuit of happiness. Despite their otherwise free-thinking ethos, the Beats never questioned the gender norms that formed the foundation of postwar society, and a very similar structure of male-female relations took hold within Beat communities as well. Women often gained entry into Beat communities through whom they were sleeping with, and it was very difficult to achieve a status beyond someone else's "chick" or "old lady." The prominent male Beats—Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs—were the primary voices that defined what it meant to be Beat. Their definitions were often exclusively masculine, making it difficult for a woman to exist as a Beat *subject*; instead, women were

marginalized to the role of an accessory, mandatory figures in the Beat tableau who were certainly not capable of producing art themselves. In many ways, this should not come as a very big surprise. The mainstream media publications, curious to document this Beatnik trend, went to the men first for answers. Both within the Beat communities and in mainstream publications, the work and outlook of male artists were privileged. Because of this, women had little voice in defining what it meant to be Beat, and their work was not included into the Beat canon until much later.

Beat women found themselves in the tricky position of aligning themselves with a counter-cultural movement that rejected the consumerism and conformism of postwar American culture without questioning its rigid gender roles. Beat women were often forced to become both housewife and breadwinner for their male artist partners. They were still in charge of the domestic sphere, such as running the pad, cooking meals, washing dishes, and cleaning after parties. At the same time, they often had to find employment in order to support their partners, husbands or lovers; women's art wasn't taken seriously enough for them to devote all their time to producing it. This comes out very clearly in Diane di Prima's and Joanne Kyger's early poetry, as they express frustration with finding themselves in a situation rather similar to what they wanted to rebel against.

Despite the housework and drudgery, women beats *were* producing poetry during the height of the Beat Generation, in the late 1950s and early 60s. Some women were permitted into the "boy gang" of artists as the token woman. Because they were rather isolated from each other, there was little sense of solidarity among women artists of this time. Their poetry expresses their discontent with the gendered insensitivities and injustices of the male artists in their milieu. More prominently, it takes on the Beat narrative (which, at this time, was just

beginning to be a national phenomenon and cliché) and examines it through a female perspective. For instance, how does one “drop out” if she was never included to begin with? How does one relate to her male fellow-artists if they’ve associated her gender with stability, materialism, family, responsibility and everything else they’d like to reject in pursuit of enlightenment? Women poets’ status as both “insiders” of the Beat social circle, often based solely on the men they knew, and “outsiders” as women who took up poetry, gives their writing a unique perspective on living as a female and a rebel in postwar America.

### **The Poets: Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger and Elise Cowen**

Diane di Prima and Joanne Kyger both demonstrated the ways women wrote and resisted cultural conformity at a time when women’s voices and experiences were not part of the cultural discourse. Di Prima was an early member of the Beat scene—she moved to New York’s Lower East Side in the early 1950s after dropping out of Swarthmore College<sup>1</sup>. She became friends with a number of bohemian writers and artists; she ran a number of different Beat “pads” where she and her friends lived, wrote and slept together. She also began practicing Buddhism during this time, which would become a significant part of her life and work. She came into contact with other major Beat figures, including Ginsberg and Kerouac, and she worked as editor on a number of alternative press publications, including *The Floating Bear* and *Yugen*. She published her first book of poetry, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*, in 1957, and in 1960 she published *Dinners and Nightmares*, a collection of prose-poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> All biographical information on women Beats from Knight, unless otherwise noted.

Joanne Kyger was part of the San Francisco poetry scene, where she worked with poets such as Jack Spicer and Gary Snyder. She eventually began a relationship with Snyder, and moved with him to Kyoto, Japan, where he could continue his study of Zen Buddhism. Because the monastery forbade the unwed couple from living together while Snyder studied there, he and Kyger got married upon arriving in Japan. She lived in Kyoto for four years; while abroad, she also traveled through India with Alan Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky. She published her first collection of poems, *The Tapestry and the Web*, in 1965. The poems retell Homer's *The Odyssey*, and are influenced by her experiences living in Kyoto.

Di Prima and Kyger's poetry during the postwar period reflects a sense of proto-feminism. They use their personal experiences to explore being a woman in a sexist culture, without extending these ideas to exert any larger social change. The fact that they even wrote and published at all, however, distinguishes them from many of the women in the Beat milieu; many women writers associated with the Beats, such as Hettie Jones or Janine Pommy Vega, did not begin writing until the late sixties or seventies. Within their Beat writing communities, di Prima and Kyger were treated as "the patriarchal concept of the exceptional individual, which entails the use of specious standards of merit or 'genius' to limit acknowledgment of persons outside the white male hegemonic norm" (Johnson and Grace 4). The underlying assumption held by many in the Beat community was that most women could not produce any meaningful art, and those who did were exceptionally brilliant; this allowed men to justify praising poetry from women like Kyger and di Prima while still excluding the majority of women from writing publicly. At the same time, the prominent women never made much of an effort at reaching out to other Beat women as a writing community. Since they were accepted into these groups based on their relationships with Beat men, they relied on male approval in order to gain legitimacy

and, perhaps more importantly, to get their work published and read. Even if women did question their “exceptional” status, they were in no real position to do anything about it.

The life and poetry of Elise Cowen, especially when compared to di Prima and Kyger, can provide an example of how and why some women were unable to publish their work. The reasons why Elise Cowen never shared any of her poetry with others in her circle, even though she wrote prolifically, may be explained in part through an observation from Gregory Corso: “...[Beat women’s] 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” (qtd. in Knight 141). Cowen herself spent a lot of time in and out of mental institutions, often as a result of family pressure. She came from an upper-middle class Jewish family who, partially as a reaction to their neighbors’ anti-Semitic prejudices, took serious measures to appear as normal and respectable as possible. Her family’s disappointment that she did not live up to their ideal for a daughter, and their strong disapproval of her choice in lifestyle, had a huge impact on her life and work. Cowen was one of the “mad women” Ginsberg found himself so fascinated with, and today she is most famous for typing Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” and for being the last woman he ever really dated. After they broke up, Cowen moved between New York and San Francisco, and was an important figure in both the Beat and queer scenes in both cities. However, her mental instability grew worse, perhaps exacerbated by the tension between the life she lived as a Beat and the life her parents expected of her, and in 1962 she committed suicide at the age of 27.

Cowen lived much farther outside of mainstream respectability than either di Prima or Kyger; this may be one of the reasons why she never attempted to publish her poetry. Joyce Glassman Johnson, Beat novelist and one of Cowen’s close friends, reflects: “I’ve often thought Elise was born too soon. In a time with more tolerance for nonconformist behavior in women



she might even have survived. Elise could never conceal what she was. She could never put on a mask as I did and pass in and out of the straight world” (Johnson, “Beat Queens” 48). Johnson, who published her first novel in 1963, hints at the double standard between rebellious men and women in the 1950s. Like many of the Beat men, Cowen was unable to keep a job (though this was in part due to her mental illness), experimented with drugs, and had homosexual relationships. However, she faced far more scrutiny for these actions—unlike the men, women were required to at least be able to assume some level of social acceptability.

The subject matter of Cowen’s poems dealt far more graphically with taboo matters than that of di Prima and Kyger. The fact that Cowen had sexual relationships with both men and women—she had lived with a female lover and wrote some of her poems from a lesbian perspective—put her and her work farther outside of mainstream poetry. The lesbian eroticism evident in some of her poetry was one of the reasons her parents destroyed the majority of her poems after her death, describing them as filthy.<sup>2</sup> However, being on the margins may have also offered Cowen a greater artistic freedom, since she did not have to worry about the approval of the public or her publishers; she portrays a darker, less inhibited version of female experience.

Cowen never had to take on the role of the breadwinner or caretaker of a Beat pad, while di Prima and Kyger made sacrifices by having to support both themselves and other artists in their circles, often having to put art and enlightenment second to such material things as washing the dishes or going grocery shopping. Joyce Johnson admits that while she (and the other women) looked for “safety nets,” or ways to guarantee themselves financial stability even on

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<sup>2</sup> The complete conversation, from Skir, gives insight into the irreconcilable tensions between Elise and her parents.

society's fringes, "Elise proved to be more like Kerouac—unable to find one [a safety net], not even really trying to" (Johnson, "Beat Queens" 45). During her lifetime Cowen kept most of her work secret; her poems were largely unread even by her friends until after her suicide: "I'd show her the stories I was writing, but she'd never show me her poems. 'I'm *mediocre*,' she told me, pronouncing the word in an odd hollow French way" (Johnson "Beat Queens" 44). Her sense of her mediocrity could be the result of not being recognized as the "exceptional" woman. If the options for women writers were to be either exceptionally brilliant or to not be taken seriously, it makes sense that Cowen would have chosen to hide her poetry rather than risk being rejected altogether.

Poets such as Kyger or di Prima who did successfully write and publish were unable to fully conform to male or mainstream constructions of Beat femininity. Many of the women who fascinated the male Beats were too mad or otherwise preoccupied to ever produce and share any art of their own. In order to write as Beat poets, Kyger and di Prima had to compromise living fully "Beat," at least as it was defined by the men of the counterculture. Resisting postwar conformity by dropping out of mainstream society altogether was a privilege largely reserved for men who were permitted to be wholly active in that society in the first place. The ways in which men protested against mainstream culture, whether through criminality, Buddhism, sexuality, drug use, travel or art, were difficult for women to engage on their own.

Instead, female poets constructed a way of being Beat that included their experiences as women resisting mainstream conformity and consumerism. This included tackling issues in their poetry that pertained specifically to women, such as female sexuality and motherhood, as well as working with subjects that had been culturally assigned to women, such as food or childcare. Of course, it's not just what they wrote about, but *how* they wrote it. It is difficult to sum up the

ways in which Beat women poets expressed and defined their resistance to both mainstream cultural norms and gender inequalities in their own communities because the poetics of each woman varied greatly: “not only does the work of most women Beat writers diverge—technically, stylistically, aesthetically—from that of the principal male Beats, it is also heterogeneous in itself, with considerable deviation in aesthetics” (Johnson and Grace 2). These differences not only reflect their different life experiences, but also assert the agency of these women as independent artists and cultural commentators.

Kyger, di Prima and Cowen wrote from within the hegemonic Beat narrative while finding ways to resist it. Hélène Cixous writes: “If woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of” (Cixous 425). Fully breaking free from the male-dominated Beat narrative to write a female-centered one would have been next to impossible—during the pre-feminist era of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the language for writing as a woman, for her to “put herself into the text,” simply was not there (Cixous 416). Instead, women of this era relied on subversive methods in order to “dislocate this ‘within:’” they resisted being reduced to silent, passive chicks not only through the act of writing poetry itself, but also through asserting their experiences as women through their poetry. In doing so, they created a way of being Beat which incorporated their lived experiences and subverted male cultural and literary narratives,

While it may seem contradictory that women resisted the literary and cultural male hegemony by working within a number of the same narratives, there are a number of common

themes or problems that work throughout the poetry of di Prima, Kyger and Cowen which serve to give voice to their experiences as women in the counter-cultural community. One such theme is how each poet deals with the problem of subjectivity, or how the “I”-subject is presented throughout their work. A second theme is the poem’s “performability,” which is especially significant because it was common for Beats to share their poetry through performance. The third theme is how each poet understood and represented the female body and sexual desire. Finally, each poet dealt with the home and the domestic sphere within her poetry in different ways; often, this depended on their relationship to the home in their lives. These themes sometimes appear independently, but more often than not they work together to construct an identity that is both Beat and female. It is helpful to study the construction of their identity by looking at what Beat women were writing about. Sometimes it reflects the postwar cultural concerns that the men had; like the men, women poets wrote about spiritual exploration, jazz music or postwar militarism. However, they also forged new territory by taking on subjects that relate solely to female experience, such as motherhood or the home. By re-interpreting Beat culture through the lens of female experience, di Prima, Kyger and Cowen create through their poetry a more nuanced understanding of what it meant to reject mainstream consumerism and conformity in postwar America.

### **Mad Hipsters and Cool Chicks: Beat Constructions of Gender**

In the introduction to *Girls who Wore Black*, Ronna Johnson and Nancy Grace explain that “Beat writers are united fundamentally by their challenges to conservative postwar consumer culture and *by their formative mutual associations*” (Johnson and Grace 3, emphasis added).

The Beat Generation was as much about the individual artists and rebels who made up the countercultural community as it was about any unifying style or politics. The Beats' various, evolving self-definitions may be the most helpful way to understand what "Beat" is; however, this means that the most widely accepted understanding of Beat is from a solely, and often explicitly, male perspective. While Beat chicks were an accepted part of the Beat social milieu, they occupied a very specific, passive role that excluded them from taking on any kind of creative agency. Jack Kerouac identified two different kinds of Beat: "hot" and "cool"—and while men could occupy either type, women were always governed by what di Prima describes as the "eternal, tiresome rule of Cool" (qtd. in Johnson and Grace 7). Kerouac describes his construction of a "hot" beat in a passage in *On the Road*: "the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars..." (Kerouac 7). These were the active Beats, the ones who were the artists and the inspirations—in *On the Road*, both Allen Ginsberg's character and Neal Cassady's character fall into this category.

The Kerouac definition of "cool," on the other hand, describes a very different type of Beat: "the 'cool' (hipster) today is your bearded laconic sage, or schlerm, before a hardly touched beer in a beatnik dive, whose speech is low and unfriendly, whose girls say nothing and wear black" (qtd. in Johnson and Grace). According to this construction of cool, women in the Beat community are mere accessories for today's hipster—the "girls" belong to the hipster and his scene as much as the dive bar and the unfriendly speech. In order to fit into the Beat community, women had to occupy this type of Beat, forcing them into a culturally mandated passivity not radically different from the passivity expected of women in mainstream society.

The only role that women in postwar America were expected to aspire to was more or less limited to housewife, keeping women inside the home and away from having much influence in the public discourse. At the same time, the women who tended to represent this status, and who were most likely to achieve it, tended to be white and middle class; this is relevant to Elise Cowen's situation especially, since as Jews her family would have been considered non-white, making it more difficult for them to reach this level of middle class respectability. As Betty Friedan describes in *The Feminine Mystique*, after the second world war women in America "learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights--the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for... All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children" (Friedan 16). The frustrating irony that many women in Beat communities were forced to deal with was that even though the Beats seem to rebel against every other aspect of McCarthy-era conformity, the rigid gender roles remained no matter where they went. One of the few ways women could gain access into the Beat social circle was through who they were sleeping with. Looking only at the women in this paper, di Prima had married Leroi Jones (and had also slept with many other Beats, including Kerouac and Ginsberg), Kyger was married to Gary Snyder, and Elise Cowen is most known for being the last woman Ginsberg ever dated, as well as the typist of his poem "Kaddish." This is not to try to diminish the work of these poets, but only to show that their access into the Beat community was initially through the men who were already part of it.

The distinct masculine ethos behind Beatness shows through in nearly every aspect of Beat life. In a letter to John Clellon Holmes, Ginsberg once observed that "the social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang" (qtd. in Johnson 79).

Johnson mocks this by writing “*The social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the girl gang*. Why, everybody would agree, that’s absolutely absurd!” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 81). By changing one little word—from “boy” to “girl”—Johnson emphasizes the huge difference gender makes. This also reflects the lack of solidarity among the women writers at this time; rather than writing for and sharing their common experiences with a community of women, they often take the role of the “exceptional” woman in a group of all male writers. At the same time, we have Johnson’s “Professor X,” whose class she recalls in *Minor Characters*, telling his all-female creative writing class that if they truly wanted to write: ““you wouldn’t be enrolled in this class. You couldn’t even be enrolled in school. You’d be hopping freight trains, riding through America”” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 81). He limits his definition of a true writer to a specifically male experience—in 1953 the only people who were doing this were men like Kerouac and Neal Cassady. Though in her memoir her contempt for the professor’s smug attitude is made clear, she describes the demoralizing effect it had on a classroom full of aspiring women writers, for whom dropping out and hitting the open road would have been impossible. According to the beat construction of this, “the road tale, the male escape from civilization, is predicated on having women and domesticity to leave” (Johnson, “And then” 89). There is no room for them as agents on the open road because they only exist in the narrative as the representative of the “civilization” the male rebel wants to leave behind. The journeys which women describe in their fiction or poetry must first redefine the role of the female subject and her relation to her society before she is able to flee civilization.

This extra step could make the journey altogether impossible. For instance, in “The Long Poem” Kyger attempts to begin a road trip: “We drive up/ and out/ into the sunshine” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 17). However, the sunshine which begins the journey quickly becomes unbearable, and

Kyger is unable to continue: “But the sun is oppressive... it is too hot... / I turn to walk about but/ cannot move my feet/ they are not lead lead would become molton in this place” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 17-18). Her journey on the road ends with her being trapped, immobile—abandoned in a hellish landscape by her companion who has “disappeared” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 18). This re-imagining of the journey is far from the easy escape from civilization men are able to make. In her attempt to travel, Kyger is unable to move; she seems to melt into the scorching landscape rather than travel freely across it.

Another part of the Beat ethos which excluded women was the Beat’s construction of the “beat-down” hipster—the junkie, criminal or violent figure who lurked in the dark alleys of major cities. The Beats embraced the violent aspect of life outside of mainstream society—Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*, for instance, is filled with murder, rape, execution and other random and grotesque acts of violence. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, much of the violence against women in modern literature occurs as a reaction to the perceived emasculation of men during the postwar period. Gilbert and Gubar explain: “World War II tended to intensify a male sense of peril... and it simultaneously fostered a contempt for women as sexual objects (pin-up girls, whores, camp followers) and an ambivalence toward the mothers and sweethearts who were presumed to be safe at home” (Gilbert and Gubar 46). They also point to the increasing power and rights of women as intimidating to men, which also accounts for men’s reactions: “if the male worker was economically at risk during the Great Depression and the male soldier was physically at risk during World War II, the man in the grey flannel suit felt himself to be psychologically imperiled by the 1950s family room” (Gilbert and Gubar 46-7). Men reacted to this perceived psychological danger through art—not only in the Burroughs example, but also in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *A Streetcar named Desire*, and other



popular postwar works—by depicting scenes of violence against women, as well as glorifying the aggressive male committing the violence. The men of the Beat Generation saw themselves as “psychologically imperiled” by women in the role of mother or wife—these women represented the conformist forces which would stifle their creative and spiritual impulses. Because women were limited to *representing* postwar psychological conformity, actual women who wanted to rebel were unable to take part in this narrative. Just like the apparent foolishness of Johnson’s “girl gang,” there were no narrative precedents for the housewife-mother to abandon her home and reject suburban conformity because her experience as a person equally trapped as her husband or son has never been explored or articulated.

In the events that make up the Beat mythology, there are tales of violence against these stifling, castrating women: most famously, there was the murder of Joan Vollmer Burroughs by her husband, William Burroughs. The story has escalated into legend—showing the Beats at their most sordid. The shooting happened at an apartment in Mexico City, where Burroughs and Joan were more or less on the run from multiple drug charges in the United States. They were playing a drug-fueled game of William Tell, during which Burroughs attempted to shoot a glass off of Joan’s head. Despite his reputation for being a near-perfect shot, he missed. The story has been told and retold by both Beats and Beat historians alike, coming to symbolize Beat excess and depravity while overlooking the fact that Joan Vollmer Burroughs was essentially murdered.

More disturbingly, the tragedy of Joan Burroughs has been absorbed into the larger (and apparently, more important) tale of Burroughs as a writer. Much later, when reflecting on his life, Burroughs describes the death of his wife as a critical turning point in his life as a writer:

I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out. (Grauerholz 60)

In this narrative, Joan becomes less of a person and is elevated to the status of symbol, or a means for Burroughs to face “the Ugly Spirit” of his unavoidably dark nature. This scenario has the effect of “literalizing,” in Gilbert and Gubar’s terms, the violence of the modern man against the controlling, castrating woman, whom he must “assault or destroy” in order to achieve artistic freedom and reclaim his masculinity (Gilbert and Gubar 52). The story and agency of Joan, on the other hand, have been completely erased, deemed irrelevant against the larger story of the male artist.

### **Re-writing the Beat Myth**

Because women have been excluded from being both Beat and artists by men, they challenge the traditional definition of Beat in their own writings. Some of their writing covers new territory for the Beat generation, such as motherhood, while other pieces reinterpret counter-culture experience through a distinctly female perspective. Sometimes, this reinterpretation serves to undercut the traditional masculine viewpoint as it offers a different way to view Beat rebellion. For instance, di Prima and Joyce Johnson both take on the topic of the first reading of “Howl” in San Francisco in May of 1956. While that reading has been glorified as the first

major expression of Beat culture and aesthetics, Johnson minimizes the event: “One curious thing is that despite appearances this reading in May is not a starting point but a reenactment. The same poets, the audience arriving knowing what to expect, and thus part of the performance themselves. The ritual of a movement that’s less than a year old but maturing quickly” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 116). In this case, Johnson refuses to add to the glorification of the birth of Beat by constructing the event as a rather typical poetry reading.

Similarly, di Prima describes her first encounter with “Howl” as a wholly personal experience—culminating in *her* reading of the poem, to her friends over her own dinner table. As she starts reading the poem, she realizes: “the phrase ‘breaking ground’ kept popping into my head. I knew that this Allen Ginsberg, whoever he was, had broken ground for all of us—all few hundred of us—simply by getting published” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 176). Not only does she minimize the figure of Ginsberg the poet-prophet of the Beat generation, but she also privileges *her* reaction over that of the critics. She recognizes the genius and significance of the poem, both to her as an artist as well as the entire Bohemian community—and she does this while cooking stew for her pad-mates. Finally, the fact that it is her reading that introduces her circle of Beats to the poem, rather than Ginsburg’s San Francisco reading, constructs her as a Beat prophet: “I made my way back to the house and to supper, and we read *Howl* together, I read it aloud to everyone. A new era had begun” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 177). In her story, she is the one who begins the “new era,” rather than the distant Ginsburg. By reclaiming this story, Johnson and di Prima insert their personal experiences into the Beat narrative and destabilize the legitimacy of the male-only canon by providing a different lens through which to understand Beat.

Re-interpreting experiences that the men have defined as distinctly “Beat” allows women poets the opportunity to create their own Beat discourse. Adrienne Rich describes the process of re-vision: “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (Rich 35). While Rich meant taking another look at history from a point in the future, the women of the Beat Generation did this as their history was being made. In order to save themselves, their experiences, and their art from erasure, women poets returned to the narrative of their lives that was being written without them to include their own perspective through their poetry. The texts which the beat women re-envisioned were the cultural and literary texts written by their male peers, and their words guaranteed that their side of the Beat story would not be lost. Their ability to re-interpret the Beat experience comes from their status as both insiders and outsiders of the Beat community—both accepted and alienated by their male contemporaries. In addition to the “Howl” narrative, women’s poetry re-interpreted a number of different experiences that the men were able to define as “Beat” through a female understanding. The first is Buddhism—the Beat Generation embraced this and other forms of Eastern spirituality as a path toward enlightenment. Second, di Prima engages with the paranoia surrounding the atomic bomb—a recurring theme in the poetry of both Ginsberg and Corso. Finally, the women engaged with the jazz and bop music of the era, which had so inspired Beat males such as Kerouac and Kenneth Rexroth.

### **Blazoning Yes: Women, Buddhism and Beat Spirituality**

Women re-envisioned the Beat's interpretation of Buddhism by incorporating their own spiritual paths into their work. Jack Kerouac often argued that the Beats were first and foremost a spiritual movement, in the tradition of the American Transcendentalists. The Beats embraced Buddhism and other forms of eastern spirituality as a way of rejecting what they saw as the "unfeeling Protestant-Catholic-Jewish faith of Eisenhower's icy hearted America" (Prothero 7). This particular interpretation of these faiths was rooted in American capitalist and consumerist ideals, preaching that "the faithful could will their way to spiritual and material success" through positive thinking (Prothero 7). The Beats wanted deeper meaning and more meaningful experience from their lives, and turned to eastern meditation practices in order to achieve this.

The term "beat" itself embraces the beat down and the beatific; the reason Beats embraced life on the outskirts of mainstream society was to discover spiritual enlightenment. "Beat down" existence can be understood as an embodiment of the First Noble Truth of Buddhism: all life is suffering. For this reason, the Times Square junky held spiritual significance for the Beats because he represented the most rejected, feared and hated element of mainstream America. The beatific side of Beat could be found in an embrace of all of life's experiences as potentially transcendent. This was one of the reasons for their love of wandering; they believed meaning could be found in "the sacred splendor of cosmic companions digging the open road" (Prothero 13). Many Beats travelled not only across the country but also around the world in pursuit of deeper understanding of themselves and the world in which they lived.

For the women of the Beat Generation, Buddhism and meditation held many of the same complications and double standards as did the general Beat ethos. As stated earlier, women were largely unable to participate in the beat-down criminal underworld or the beatific journey across the country. Some of these issues come directly from Buddhist teachings. The Buddha began

his search for enlightenment by leaving his family, casting off his material possessions and beginning to meditate to find his way toward nirvana, or complete spiritual enlightenment; this is rather similar to the Beats “dropping out” as a means of getting closer to spiritual truth. Like the Beats, the Buddhist version of this constructed women as one of the “things” that were impeding the path to enlightenment, making it difficult for women to fully participate in the same way as men. Even in the earliest days of Buddhism, debate arose as to whether women could fully participate in meditation and the path toward enlightenment. In Zen Buddhism, the type practiced by Kyger’s husband Gary Snyder in Japan, nuns were considered to need more guidance in their spiritual journey: “by including women in a subordinate position defined by these Eight Special Rules, the Buddha set two important traditions in motion: Women could leave home and could practice only with other women, and women could not establish equal or independent practice places” (Schireson 5). Though women were considered equally capable of reaching nirvana, their practice was defined as subordinate to men’s practice. This type of thinking almost certainly affected Joanne Kyger’s experience at the Zen monastery in Kyoto: it was upon the Zen master’s insistence that she married Gary Snyder before they moved in together, and, though she was allowed to sit and practice her meditation, she was not permitted to be an actual student at the monastery in the same way as Snyder.

Despite the inherent sexism, Buddhism still held appeal as an alternative to mainstream Cold War spirituality, and promised Beat women a means for finding deeper experience and more spiritual meaning in life. Buddhism was an important part of the lives and art of many women in the Beat community. Diane di Prima began studying Zen and meditative writing at the age of 22, two years before she published *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*. In 1962, she met teacher Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and began practicing Buddhist meditation. She saw

Buddhism as a complement to her work as a poet: “My work, my life, is images. This is what I do. When I first began sitting zazen I realized I was clearing my mind. By practicing deeply, the images started to flow... Dharma practice and art are two sides of the same coin. Meditation is a rest from the art work” (qtd. in Tonkinson 140). Although Zen and eastern religion are not mentioned specifically in her early work, meditation did play a role in her artistic process. Buddhist images and themes play a much greater role in her later poetry as she explicitly incorporates them into her work.

The idea that meditation influenced di Prima’s work through allowing her to better view “images” in order to write her poetry evokes the Buddhist belief that words can never fully capture experience or enlightenment: “The Beats, like the Transcendentalist, were committed to sharing [their] insights with others through their words even though it is widely accepted among practicing Buddhists that experience is untranslatable, that it cannot be captured accurately in words, that language can only hint at, point toward it... All sermons, and all books, therefore, are doomed, at best, to be exquisite failures” (Prothero 20). This makes the spiritual nature of so many Beat poems and prose somewhat ironic, if in the end it is impossible to truly understand their meaning. In a lecture on Keats, Buddhism and poetry at the Naropa Institute in 1978, di Prima explains, “And then when you enter into the act of composing, at that point you have nothing—everything drops away, and you have only what you’re receiving. Your whole purpose as an artist is to make yourself a fine enough organism to most precisely receive, and most precisely transmit” (di Prima, “Lights” 21). Di Prima sees the artist, herself included, as a prophet—taking images and translating them into language for everyone else. In doing so, she includes herself in a tradition of all-male poet-prophets—starting with the Romantics such as





beatific experience that can be found in life. The dead “who sing” are more alive than those who “die while they breathe” – the people who do not seek out experience, who cannot see the emblazoned Yes.

Joanne Kyger also embraced Buddhist practice. While living in San Francisco, she studied with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi; later she would travel with her husband Gary Snyder to Kyoto, Japan, where he practiced Zen Buddhism at a monastery; she also toured Buddhist and Hindu temples and holy sites as she travelled through India and Southeast Asia. Her observations in her journals during this time suggest that this journey helped solidify her personal practice through her experiences with the many different types of Buddhist practices. She also relied on her meditation practice in order to deal with her feelings of restlessness in her married life in Kyoto: “Last night after I thought I was going to explode in Zazen I suddenly started to breathe properly. I suppose that was it—and managed to attain a strange kind of relaxation which I had never felt before. Which gives me a feeling today of hope that I can conquer these moods of wild frustration” (Kyger, *Strange Big Moon* 23). She often mentions throughout her diaries the difficulty in sitting through a meditation session (which could sometimes last for hours); she sought from meditation a means of patience and grace in dealing with the conflict that arose between her married life and her goals as an artist.

Kyger captures this impatience in a poem in *The Tapestry and the Web* called “THE DANCE,” where she describes a statue of a Ceylonese Bodhisattva, a Buddhist “enlightenment-being.” The poem is full of tension and anticipation, as she waits for the statue to make a move, “a step into the dance this progression towards creation” that never comes (Kyger, *Tapestry* 25). The statue and Kyger both exist in a place outside of time as she waits for him to take the next step; because the statue has been there for twelve centuries, however, it is clear that the next step

will never be made. She feels “an excitement from the position of his body we make one movement/ repeat it” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 25). Even though they are in the dance together, the poem is full of tension as she waits and watches the statue: “seated one heel out leans thighs bent as if he will enter into the dance... the step is his when he pleases” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 25). This poem is in part an examination of time: the statue, though it appears full of motion, will never actually move. It exists outside of time, and compels those who view it to wait with it, keeping Kyger from joining the dance herself. The impatience and tense stillness of this poem reflect Kyger’s impatience with her own Buddhist practice and experiences in Japan. Like the viewer of the statue, she is unable to join the “progression towards creation,” since she is dependent on her husband’s decisions and moves while living in Kyoto, and she is forced to remain waiting and watching for someone else to begin the dance.

### **Cold War on the Home Front: di Prima and the Bomb**

During the postwar period, fear of a nuclear attack loomed large in the minds of most Americans. Both the men and women of the Beat Generation dealt with this threat in their poetry; the men tended to view the bomb through a broad cultural or political context. In his poem to “America,” Ginsberg addresses his country: “America when will we end the human war/ Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb” (Ginsberg 4-5). In this context, he uses the bomb as an example of Cold War paranoia and military excess as he protests being forced into a culture of postwar militarism. The atom bomb is the epitome of the destruction of the “human war,” and so he uses it in the poem’s most forceful insult. Gregory Corso penned a mushroom cloud-shaped ode to the bomb, mocking America’s fear and fascination with this devastating

weapon. He mimics this all-consuming preoccupation by incorporating the bomb into religion, nature, culture—no aspect of human life is untouched by the bomb's presence. The poem opens singing the bomb's praises: "Budger of history Brake of Time You Bomb/ Toy of universe Grandest of all snatched-sky I cannot hate you" (Corso 1-2). He worships the bomb in the poem, parodying the hold it had on the American consciousness by changing fear to adoration. At the same time, he confesses his affection for the bomb, suggesting, like Ginsberg, that there is not much difference between terror of a nuclear attack and worshipful awe of the bomb's destructive power.

In her collection of short stories and poetry *Dinners and Nightmares*, di Prima addresses the issue in the chapter "Childhood Memories." Unlike Corso or Ginsberg, she does not use a political or cultural framework to explore the bomb's role in the American consciousness. Rather, she explores fear of the bomb through the perspective of the home front—the fact that a suburban family home is threatened with a man holding a bomb over that specific house represents the nature of people's fear of the bomb. Rather than being a distant, frightening concept, the threat of a nuclear attack quite literally looms over this family, putting their personal home and loved ones in immediate danger. At the same time, she locates her narrative about the bomb in a distinctly feminine sphere. The suburban home was supposed to be the stable focal point in a society beset by fears and insecurities, and the mother-housewife was responsible for keeping the home calm and welcoming for her family. By locating the H-bomb right above this home, di Prima shatters this illusion of domestic safety by representing literally the fear of nuclear warfare which hangs figuratively over these supposedly stable environments, showing that there is no place to truly escape the postwar culture of paranoia.

In the story, the first-person narrator is a little boy who sees a giant man holding an atom bomb over his house. He describes it to his mother: “Hey ma there’s a big tall man outside boy is he really big and tall he’s taller than our house and he’s got this bomb in his hand. I think he’s going to drop this H bomb on our house” (*Dinners and Nightmares* 53). The rambling run-on sentences and repetitions of simple words emphasize the youth and innocence of the speaker. Although the H bomb would probably have been considered part of the “adult world,” the child is actually the only one who can see the man and understand the danger. His mother only denies that the threat exists—though the housewife is supposed to be responsible for the home appearing stable and nurturing, the mother acts as only a superficial comfort.

He tries to tell his mother, father and grandfather about the man, but none of them believes his story. His father even answers: “Now wait a minute boy I think that’s just the outline of the tree yes that’s what it is it’s getting dark out there and it had me fooled for a minute but there’s no such thing as an H bomb you know son and there’s no man out there” (*Dinners and Nightmares* 54). The father tells his son that there is no H bomb, rather than that giants don’t exist, emphasizing the absurdity of the adults’ denial. His grandfather has a slightly different reaction: “I believe in god sonny and god will never let it happen now go play” (*Dinners and Nightmares* 55). Calling attention to the grandfather’s faith that god will protect their house seems to echo the belief that Americans are somehow more protected from an attack because they have god’s favor. By referring to god with a lower case g, di Prima makes god appear more distant, and makes trusting this god almost as futile as trusting that the giant man won’t drop the bomb. The fact that none of the adults in the little boy’s family will take him seriously is a criticism of adult refusal to address their fears. Each family member gets a similar literary treatment from di Prima—this suggests that she does not identify nor sympathize with

the housewife-mother any more than she does the family patriarchs. If anything, she sympathizes with the little boy, whose innocence gives him the ability to see past the excuses of the adult world to perceive the real dangers of the Cold War.

The poem ends with the little boy and his neighbor attempting to make the giant go away themselves. They “went to the roof and we took the clothes line and made lassos. And then Dick climbed the chimney and he yelled Hi-yo silver” (*Dinners and Nightmares* 55). The fact that the little boys channel the Lone Ranger, arguably the most all-American of all-American heroes, makes their struggle against the threat of the giant both humorous and heart-breaking. The only difference between this final scene and an ordinary day at play is whether or not the giant actually exists. By referencing the Lone Ranger, di Prima recognizes his pop cultural significance as a hero for Americans to rally behind. However, the lassos and the “hi-yo silver” battle cry have no effect on the giant. After all, their weapons are only imaginary while the threat they’re trying to combat exists, however abstractly. Finally the little boy is called inside: “I went home and they [his parents] smacked me and I went to bed and I kept thinking he might drop it in his sleep especially if he has bad dreams” (*Dinners and Nightmares* 55). The child is unable to make the giant go away, and the threat of the H bomb still looms, quite literally over his house. This fear reflects the real nature of many Americans’ fear of the bomb—the power to use atomic weapons in war is in the hands (figuratively) of men whom they have no influence over whatsoever. They are left only to worry, like the child, if a distant power will decide to deploy the bomb. In this way, the fear seems like nightmare material—abstract, fantastical terror—but the threat of a nuclear attack was very real.

By locating this story in a suburban family setting, di Prima legitimizes the fears on the home front by analyzing the fear of the bomb through the lens of the feminine, domestic sphere.

While the suburban home remains a symbol of cultural conformity, it also becomes the site of subversive criticism through the little boy's struggle against the giant. While she doesn't go as far as to examine the experiences of the boy's mother, by viewing the bomb through the eyes of a child she as the narrator adopts a different form of motherhood—one rooted in empathy for the young, rather than discipline. This is reiterated in a later poem in *Dinners and Nightmares*, when di Prima describes life after “they dropped the bomb:” “... all I did was sing good bye to my genes and start on a series of nursery rhymes for eyeless or three-headed children” (*Dinners and Nightmares* 142). In the immediate aftermath of the bomb, di Prima's thoughts go toward caring for and comforting future children, who will be deformed by the fallout. At the same time, the narrator of her story is the little boy, who is able to try to fight the giant by playing a version of Cowboys and Indians—little girls traditionally did not play games that active, and di Prima does nothing to challenge that. The little boy is able to stand in as a “‘universal,’ which meant, of course, nonfemale” figure of youth and innocence, whereas a little girl would have signified “Otherness” (Rich 44). By representing a “universal” symbol of childhood, di Prima focuses her criticism of the bomb through a maternal, and essentially feminine, lens; she offers an empathetic alternative for caring for children than the cold housewife-mother in the story. In doing so, her focus legitimizes the private, domestic sphere as a location of cultural criticism, which contrasts with the grand social and political statements made in Ginsberg's or Corso's poetry.

### **Songs and Silence: Asserting the Female Voice**

While both Kyger and di Prima performed their poems, the musical quality of many of di Prima's early poems lend themselves more easily to spoken performance than do Kyger's. Di

Prima's use of jazz-like meter emphasizes its musical, aural quality—part of the meaning in her poetry stems from the fact that these poems are meant to be read out loud. This makes di Prima and her voice integral to understanding these poems: she “physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she *inscribes* what she’s saying, because she doesn’t deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking” (Cixous 420). When she speaks on stage, or even when the musicality of her poems inspires the reader to *hear* her speak, she inserts her body into the poetic experience. Because these poems lend themselves to being read out loud, her physical presence becomes part of the performance; she insists that the viewer/reader accept her as both female and artist, repelling any doubts that she can be both at the same time. On the other hand, Kyger’s poems do not have the same distinctly aural quality—the shape of most of her poems on the page contributes to their meaning. She references weaving; like woven tapestries, her poems are visual art. This removes her physical voice from the poem, which creates a new set of tensions between her being female and an artist. Though her poems are more visual than audible—meant to be seen, rather than heard—the act of writing those poems still asserts her voice.

One way which di Prima emphasizes the aural quality of her poems is by incorporating jazz-influenced syncopated rhythms and slang into her poetry. Jazz music had a huge influence on Beat poetics, especially in the performance of their work. Jazz appears throughout the work of Kerouac especially in the many jazz club scenes in *On the Road*. The wild rhythms and free-flowing improvisation also influence the style of his prose, which he describes as spontaneous bop prosody. In his essay “Jazz Poetry,” Kenneth Rexroth defines the ways that Beat poetry could be read with a jazz ensemble accompaniment to create a new style of art. He asks: “What is jazz poetry? ...it is the reciting of suitable poetry with the music of a jazz band...The voice is

integrally wedded to the music and, although it does not sing notes, is treated as another instrument” (Rexroth 354). Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were two of the more prominent jazz poets, but other poets adopted jazz meter within their poems even if they didn’t necessarily perform or write them for performance.

Diane di Prima’s poetry in *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards* echoes certain jazz and blues rhythms in their meters, and she makes frequent use of blues-type slang. She shows that she can work within the aesthetic framework of jazz and blues inspired poetry. In one poem, she writes:

no babe  
 we’d never  
 swing together but  
 the syncopation  
 would be wild            (di Prima, *This Kind* 27).

This poem lends itself to a syncopated rhythm by including “but” at the end of the third line; this interrupts the rhythm of the almost-rhyming couplet “we’d never/ swing together.” The enjambment between never and swing also forces a syncopated pause as the reader travels to the next line. Because bop jazz is associated with uninhibited sexuality, the jazz-like rhythm also serves to emphasize di Prima’s desire for the person she addresses the poem to as well as calls attention to her own uninhibited counter-cultural sexuality. Despite the suggestion of sexual availability, the poem is actually a rejection of a potential lover. In this way, she both re-affirms and rejects her role as a sex partner for male Beats; she fits into the Beats’ hyper-sexualized construction of women while asserting her agency to be selective about whom she sleeps with.



Di Prima's use of humor in her jazz poems also emphasizes her ambivalent status within the Beat community. By combining humor and blues, she shows that she can write within Beat conventions, yet she undermines her insider status by no longer being serious. In one short poem, she writes:

In your arms baby  
I don't hear no  
angels sing  
but maybe I forgot  
to turn on  
the phonograph (di Prima, *Dinners* 115)

The enjambment, especially in "I don't hear no/ angels sing" creates a kind of syncopated rhythm which, combined with the already bluesy language of the first three lines, gives the first half of this poem the feel of a blues song. However, di Prima allows this to unravel in the latter half; the final line arrives rather awkwardly, transforming the poem from blues riff to joke. By using humor to ruin the musical effect, she undoes the effect that blues music has to glorify everyday relationships by abandoning the song-like rhythm to make a mundane point. This would have an added effect if she were reading this poem out loud as part of a performance; it may have served to subvert the traditional conception of poetry performance by highlighting ways in which she, as a female poet-performer, stood out among her predominately male contemporaries.

Folk music was another important part of Beat musical culture. Joyce Johnson writes of traveling to Greenwich Village to hear the folk musicians who gathered in Washington Square

on Sundays; these excursions were her first real introduction to the underground Bohemian world where the folk singers and the Beats lived, though not quite together. Di Prima's work also imitates the songs of these folk minstrels. "Bye and Bye" is a poem complete with a repeating chorus, in which di Prima promises to take her "lad" through her favorite spots in Beat New York. The chorus: "Honest lad/ if you'll only lie still/ we'll live in the cloisters/ bye and bye" is repeated several times (di Prima, *Dinners* 103). This poem also employs a number of medieval images, which seem to pay tribute to the medieval tradition of minstrel story tellers, which the folk singers in Washington Square were indebted to. She adopts a maternal role in the poem, treating the folk song as a lullaby for her "honest lad." By incorporating the theme of motherhood within a folk-music style poem, di Prima incorporates her own experiences as a mother into Beat poetics. Like her use of humor in the jazz poems, her assertion of motherhood within folk-like poems reveals a simultaneous insider-outsider status. While adopting the style of Washington Square bards emphasizes her familiarity with and inclusion in bohemian counter-culture, by singing of a distinctly feminine experience, di Prima asserts her womanhood and therefore her "Other" status among the artists.

Unlike di Prima, Joanne Kyger's work emphasizes the visual over the aural. She begins *The Tapestry and the Web*, her re-vision of Homer's epic, by gazing at a tapestry: "quickly/ the music sounds on my ear" (Kyger, *Tapestry* 14). The music that she imagines hearing from the tapestry at which she is looking matches the rhythm of the poem itself, inviting the readers to hear what she hears. This introduction also hints at the ever-shifting identity of the narrator: in this introduction, she acts as both the consumer and the creator of art as she views and describes the tapestry. Her emphasis throughout the collection of poems compares her writing to a silent art—that of weaving. Even her words on the page form patterns, webs. The first poem,

describing a rigid hedge maze, forms a strict narrow line on the page; as the poem devolves into a work about chaos and destruction, the words scatter across the page, giving the poem an appearance of a “demented web” (Kyger, *Tapestry*).<sup>3</sup> This suggests that the aural quality of her verse is less important than the visual experience of reading the poetry on the page, despite her earlier references to music. In a way, she keeps the emphasis on woman as visual object—rather than one who can assert herself vocally—and still works “within” the male dominated narratives Cixous criticizes. However, Kyger’s style echoes Penelope’s trick of weaving and unraveling to distract the suitors—weaving gave her agency over her destiny by allowing her to put off marrying a suitor. Through this method, she is able to critique not only the traditional *Odyssey* narrative but also her own cultural narrative, which would keep women in the same narrow paths as the hedge maze. While Kyger’s poetry is not as obviously performative as is di Prima’s, she relies on the opposite effect to amplify her meaning.

### **Resistance from within: Women’s poetic voices**

Rather than attempting to break out from “within,” as Cixous theorizes is necessary for releasing women’s voices, Kyger and di Prima rely on a more subtle subversion of masculine narratives in order to write their experiences. One important way they accomplish this is through forging a female narrative voice that seems to play along with their assigned gender roles within the Beat community, but actually serves to critique these structures. Di Prima, for instance, writes from the perspective of the “cool” Beat, which should keep her silent but actually allows her to make observations about her society from an aloof, insider’s perspective. Kyger, on the

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<sup>3</sup> For the full visual effect, see appendix 1 for a copy of this poem as it is printed in *The Tapestry and the Web*.

other hand, structures her narrative around a critical, often sarcastic look at *The Odyssey*—taking the critique of the male literary hegemony one step further.

Diane di Prima's poetic voice constructs a "cool" persona which allows her to blend easily within the Beat/bohemian community. She writes: "so here I am the coolest in new York;" but then she describes "chewing pride like cud in an Elysian field" (di Prima, *This Kind*). There is an intense self-awareness of her own coolness, but her cool status is obtained through silence. She compares herself to a cow "chewing pride like cud"—it's the pride that keeps her mouth occupied and therefore silent. The allusion to an Elysian field is also significant because it was the Classical home of the heroic and virtuous dead; being cool places her among the elite, but it also makes her silent like the dead. This is the situation of "cool" women within the Beat community—they gained access to this counterculture by fitting into the mold of the cool chick, but this access came at a cost of being unvoiced.

Di Prima's attitude toward cool is intentionally ironic—if she finds cool to be so stifling why does she strive for it in the first place? Her poetry reflects this tension between how she must act in order to fit into the Beat community and how she would act if she were uninhibited. However, according to the Jack Kerouac's definition, being cool was the only way women could exist as Beat. The girls who belong to the hipster were supposed to "say *nothing* and wear black." This definition allowed no room for women to speak out, either as poets or against the strict gender roles which reduced them to accessories.

The silencing aspect of coolness is again highlighted in a poem about an argument from *Dinners and Nightmares*. The fight between di Prima and her lover centers on doing the dishes: her male lover is too absorbed in his painting to be bothered, while di Prima is forced to put off

her work in order to take care of the chores. However, most of her anger at this injustice is internal. She curses silently, kicks the woodpile, but never really vocalizes her anger at her lover. She concedes the fight at the end, reflecting, “But I’ll get bugged and not bother to tell you and after a while everything will be awful and I’ll never say anything because it’s so fucking uncool to talk about it” (diPrima, *Dinners* 74). She bitterly blames cool for being the major reason why she stays silent. She has created an identity within the bohemian artist community as being “cool,” and becomes trapped in maintaining her cool status even at the expense of her own art.

In another poem, one of the “Poems for Bret,” she reflects:

It’s nice  
 to run a pad  
 where both of us  
 are cool enough  
 to know we’re both  
 uncool (di Prima, *Dinners* 109)

This poem reflects the intimacy between di Prima and a lover—where they can both be so confident in each other’s coolness that the charade can be abandoned altogether. She stresses equality between her and Bret; the word “both” appears twice stressing that they are equally cool and can therefore be uncool. By acknowledging that becoming close enough to someone else means that you no longer have to stay uncharacteristically silent, di Prima unmasks cool as a social construct, an act that she uses as a way into the Beat social circle. This means that the

“eternal, tiresome rules of Cool” can be broken—and they are in the very act of writing and publishing women’s poetry.

Joanne Kyger constructs her subjectivity in *The Tapestry and the Web* around a more canonical male-defined genre: she takes on Homer’s epic *The Odyssey* through the eyes of Penelope. She recreates this story through a series of threads—short images or scenes that when combined cover a wide range of times, places and experiences, and in doing so, she explores the relationship between her gender and her art throughout the text. She refuses to maintain a linear narrative; she jumps between myth and reality, time and place, and even goes back to rewrite some of her earlier observations of Penelope to change her interpretation. Sometimes Kyger describes Penelope as being all-powerful, the one who through her weaving controls the adventures of Odysseus; other times she is only seen passive, waiting and watching as Odysseus returns home to slaughter the suitors. This results in a work that transforms not only the style of the traditional epic poem but also the nature of the legend altogether. It works with some similar conventions—a journey to the underworld, the image of Penelope waiting—while abandoning others. This indirect treatment of the traditional epic serves to capture the lost story of Penelope, and in doing so gives both the fictional heroine as well as Kyger herself a voice in the narrative.

In order for Kyger to rewrite the epic, certain gendered conventions must be dealt with. First, there is no muse figure in Kyger’s poem. She identifies the problem of the muse in one of her journals: “if you happened to be a woman you had no access to the muse herself since you WERE female and couldn’t take a (same sex) female, or a male, as your muse, therefore you could never be a great poet” (qtd. in Russo 183). This echoes Rich’s criticism that “it seemed to be a given that men wrote poems and women frequently inhabited them” (Rich 39). In order to take on a genre of poetry as culturally significant as the epic, Kyger had to re-vision a narrative

in which the female poet writes other women, without guidance or inspiration from the past. In the beginning of the poem, when the muse should be most apparent, Kyger is left alone. She is even unable to access past literary guides: “I expect Virgil to guide across the ripple tops to guide the prow still further into the gloom/ Where are we caught? This mist obscures the landmarks” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 16). By alluding to *The Divine Comedy*, Kyger contrasts her situation with that of the male artist: while Virgil appeared to guide Dante, Kyger is left to wander through the obscure, gloomy underworld. As a female poet, she is not able to use the direction of the past great poets, and must rely on her own experiences in order to write. However, even the setting of the underworld prevents her from using her own observations and instincts to forge a new path.

She also subverts the mythic convention of using birds as omens. In the *Odyssey*, Homer uses birds as a sign from the gods, warning Telemachus of his father’s returning, and foreshadowing the destruction of the suitors. Kyger’s narrative also begins with a bird omen. The narrator opens the series of poems by announcing “I saw the/ dead bird on the sidewalk/ his neck uncovered/ and prehistoric” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 11). The image of the ancient dead bird on a sidewalk evokes the fact that the ancients used birds to tell the future, yet this particular message seems to be bleak, especially when compared to the soaring eagle who announced Odysseus’s return. The dead bird seems to suggest that a defeat has already occurred; she will not be able to tell her story as a female narrator if she attempts to use traditional methods. This also makes her narrative far more uncertain than *The Odyssey*. While Telemachus’s omen was clearly interpreted, Kyger offers no explanation for the image. Like the poem’s lack of a muse, the uncertain omen at the beginning of the poem emphasizes the new and possibly dangerous territory Kyger crosses into as she rewrites the epic.

The rest of the opening poem describes the maze in the Governor's Palace in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. Russo analyzes the maze as "a form of patriarchal knowledge pointed out by an uncle" that represents the traditional male poetic forms that Kyger will proceed to destabilize through the rest of the poem (Russo 182). The order and convention of the maze is emphasized not only in her description of the "long hallway tightly trimmed" but also in the shape of her poems (Kyger, *Tapestry* 12). The words are shaped in a straight, narrow line that seems to mimic the claustrophobic, highly manicured form of the maze. However, she destabilizes this order by the end of the poem with her last stanza, in which the narrator creates a "demented web" and uses language such as "tortures," "insane" and "clawing" (Kyger, *Tapestry* 13). The words in the stanza are scattered, giving the appearance of having been torn apart, which serves to reemphasize the disorder of the passage. This part of the poem mimics Penelope's destruction of her weaving at the end of each night to deceive her suitors. Not only does that connect Kyger to Penelope in a very significant way, but it also begins the ongoing metaphor of the poems as "threads" of a larger tapestry. Like Penelope, Kyger creates these threads, or stories, before destroying or deconstructing them—she does this frequently throughout *The Tapestry and the Web*, deconstructing and contradicting Homer's original narrative as well as the alternative one she develops.

The fact that she seems to weave the thread-like stanzas in order to tell her story connects her with Penelope, and also insinuates that like Penelope, Kyger herself may be deceitful as a narrator. She challenges the idea that Penelope waited patiently and chastely, by suggesting that Penelope slept with the suitors, and also had some hand in delaying Odysseus's return: "She did not run up and embrace him as I recall. / He came upon her at the house & killed the suitors./ I choose to think of her waiting for him/ concocting his adventures bringing / the misfortunes to



him/ -- she must have had her hands full” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 31). In Kyger’s version, Penelope takes on a radically different role—she contradicts the original legend by claiming that Penelope not only enjoyed her husband’s long absence, but took an active part in engineering it. However, Kyger reminds the readers of the uncertainty of any narrator by emphasizing “*I choose*”—stressing her power as the narrator to determine what the reader understands as true. When Odysseus returns, the characterization of Penelope becomes much more passive: “Penelope had at least one night with her husband/ And he’ll have to go on again to find another city... I think she is happy now./ her household is restored./ and she knows he will die an old and comfortable death./ up to your room now to wait a while he tells her/ and she does what he says” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 58). Penelope becomes quiet, obedient, without any hint of the devious woman who plotted her husband’s misfortunes. The return of her husband to re-establish patriarchal order in Ithaca caused this sudden change in Penelope’s demeanor. As an independent woman, she was able to create, scheme or determine her own life; when her husband returns, she is required to play a more subdued role.

Kyger intertwines Penelope’s story with her own experiences living with Gary Snyder in Kyoto. As noted in the discussion on Buddhism, Kyger often felt frustrated playing a secondary role to her husband’s career. In her poem “Possibilities IV,” Kyger connects her life and Penelope’s experience: “Well the men,/ they give a lot of insults to anyone that comes by,/ wine running,/ dancing with the maids, 112 people/ eating every day/ She comes and rages/ quit eating the coffee cake and cottage cheese/ put a lid on the peanut butter jar/ sandwiches made of cucumber, stop eating the *food!*... and there she withdrew/ and wept for Odysseus” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 56). She combines her domestic frustrations with Penelope’s by switching the location of the subject: she starts convincingly in Ithaca, by alluding to the maids and the 112 guests.

However, the cottage cheese and cucumber sandwiches belong to Kyger's postwar household in Japan. This confusion of time and place blurs the differences between the two women, and shows the connections between their situations.

Kyger also addresses the challenges of being a woman poet in the Beat Generation's "boy gang" within *The Tapestry and the Web*. In "The Long Poem" she compares the experiences of the male and the female artist. The woman poet, she describes herself as being trapped, tied to a chair. She challenges her captor: "every thread is my own" and notices "there is a skill in my unfolding that frightens her" (Kyger, *Tapestry* 22). She is necessarily defiant—in order for her to create as a female she must first overcome forces that would try to silence her before she has said all she has to say. She resists being silenced by protesting that "there is much to tell." At the same time, she maintains her silence by continuing the metaphor of working with a visual, rather than aural art. This is emphasized when compared to the male artist, who is able to sing to express his art. Not only does her captor want to silence her creative voice, but there is also evidence that Kyger's life is being threatened as well, as she defiantly states "I have not come here to die." This anticipates Cixous's assertion that the female writer's fatal flaw is that she "resists death" by daring to create poetry, to "bring out something new" (Cixous 417). For both Kyger and Cixous, writing and creating is a way of reclaiming life and agency through expressing inner thoughts, desires, fantasy and resistance. Kyger asserts this by claiming that not only will she insist on expressing herself, but she must do this in order to live.

The next stanza serves as a comparison between the experiences of the male and female artists. In contrast to the desperation of the early scene, the man produces art with confidence and grace. Kyger observes how "he moves at ease about the room" and wonders "is it caprice that makes him capture the beast and turn him aside head askew tail lashing/ A sureness dictates

the fall of each animal” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 23). The male artist does not have to justify his right to create, let alone to survive, as the woman did. Rather, everything he does exudes certainty, privilege. In the next stanza, she watches a man singing about a sea turtle struggling to lay eggs on the beach. The difficulty facing the sea turtle is distinctly gendered—“ponderously she drags her belly up,” “this birth is a chore” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 24). However, the male singer is distant from her struggle; impassively “he sings of her belly and the sigh of the ocean.” For him, the suffering mother turtle is simply part of the broader scene of the beach at night. The fact that he sings about a distinctly female experience, while the female artist remains silent, emphasizes the canonical tradition of men writing *about* women, rather than women defining their own experiences. Kyger’s fascination with watching male artists reflects Adrienne Rich’s observation of women and poetry: “[in women’s work] Man appears as, if not a dream, a fascination and a terror; and that the source of the fascination and the terror is, simply, Man’s power...” (Rich 36). The man’s freedom to create compared to the woman’s captivity emphasizes the social differences between men and women which allow men to produce art while women are prevented from doing the same. This is power not only over his work, but also over the women themselves—“a literary master and a master in other ways less easy to acknowledge” (Rich 39). Kyger presents herself in the poem as in awe of the “literary master” who is able to create so effortlessly yet also unwilling to submit to his authority. Just as she defiantly resists her old woman captor, she refuses to be silenced when she is in the presence of the male artist. Instead, she makes the artist and *his* subject as the subject of her own poem—it is her narrative voice which defines how we interpret them.

### **Using Humor as Subversion**

Humor and sarcasm have already been seen in a number of examples of Beat women's poetry mentioned in this paper; these devices were important ways for women to protest their situation while still maintaining a place of privilege as the exceptional female poet within the Beat boy gang. Humor, sarcasm and irony allowed women to address issues indirectly: a way to voice their discontent at a time when it was extremely rare for women to do so. As stated earlier, the men of the Beat Generation never tackled issues of gender in their rebellion. Women in the pre-war period did not have a language to voice their anger or frustration at being the Beat housewife the way women did during later decades, so using humor and sarcasm was a way to write within the Beat narrative while subverting it at the same time. Much of their poetry is darkly humorous; the humor is unexpected and is rooted in taboo or grotesque subjects. Elise Cowen, for instance, uses dark humor to explore issues of sexuality and madness.

Like some of their male counterparts, women poets of the Beat Generation used humor to criticize the academic poetic establishment. Beat poetics did not fit into the strictly defined rules common to many critically acclaimed poems in the postwar period. The major school of literary thought during the postwar period was the New Critics. This was a critical movement which sought to emphasize the "autonomy of the text" as the most important aspect of a work of literature (Matterson 170). New Critics promoted close reading and attention to language, while largely ignoring the historical or cultural context in which works were written, in an attempt to "salvage modern poetry and literature from the various ideological purposes for which it had previously [during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century] been appropriated" (Genter 30). The New Critics' intense focus on diction and structure alone alienated many of the Beats: "it was [Allen] Ginsberg's self-proclaimed rejection of New Criticism that prompted his return to free verse... [to reject] his earlier focus on quatrains for a more detailed examination of literary experience"

(Genter 34). Many of the other Beat writers, including Kyger, di Prima and Elise Cowen, also opted for a more spontaneous (seeming) style of composition in their work in a rejection of New Critical limitations.

Diane di Prima takes a jab at the academic and formal writing institutions in this poem:

alas

I believe

I might have become

a great writer

but

the chairs

in the library

were too hard            (di Prima, *Dinners* 119)

The poem begins formally and rather dramatically, with the archaic declaration of “alas” and very precise grammar. The tiny line “but” alerts the reader to a shift in the poem’s tone and meaning. It becomes wryly humorous: she seems to be blaming her inability to achieve her artistic aspirations on something trivial, yet what she’s really calling attention to is her refusal to work in a traditional literary setting. The hard chairs in the library signify her discomfort with the literary establishment—it is not a place where she feels that she can allow herself to write. She recognizes that the cost of being unable to write in the library is that she will never be a “great” writer; however the extremely formal tone of her complaint mocks the pretention of aspiring to be an academy-recognized writer.

This poem reflects the fact that Beat art was a protest of the academy poetry of the postwar period. Critically acclaimed poetry at this time was required to follow formal rules about meter, image and irony. Beat poetry did not follow any sort of rules—there was not even a specific style that would make one “beat,” as evidenced by the heterogeneous nature of the Beat canon. In most cases, Beat poets chose to emphasize the meaning of the experience of the poem over how it was expressed. The New Critics’ rigid attention to detail within the work led to very structured, formal poetry being praised. Much of the spontaneity of Beat poetry is a reaction to this conformity within the arts. When the Beats did pay distinct attention to form, it was to use it in creative, visually oriented ways. Gregory Corso’s “Bomb,” for instance, takes the physical shape of a mushroom cloud, and (as mentioned above), the shape of Kyger’s poetry reflects a feeling she hopes to emphasize.

Joanne Kyger uses also humor to mock the literary pretensions of the Beat Generation, emphasizing that even the Beats fell into the academic habit of defining and categorizing their own poetics. She writes: “Those things we see are images of the past/ From now, always, on the turning point, viewing back/ and that delicious interpretation/ is this world, HOW CLEVER OF US” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 49). She describes a way of seeing and understanding the world, one based in images and interpretation, then immediately undercuts this vision with a biting sarcasm self-praising remark. The way of seeing and writing the world is based on the poetic theory of her San Francisco circle: “Kyger enacts what Duncan describes as ‘the poetic imagination [that] faces the challenge of finding a structure that will be the complex story of all stories felt to be true, a myth in which something like the variety of man’s experience of what is real may be contained’” (Russo 186). She compares herself with the “fleet footed” Greek god Hermes, who is the messenger to the gods. She also imagines herself as “Jack Spicer in a

dream,” adopting the identity of a prominent male poet in the San Francisco scene. In this way, she mocks masculine Beat poetics by embodying male figures. She subverts this, however, by sarcastically re-affirming this poetic philosophy: “As clear as you can See/ it’s done, isn’t it, isn’t that a *fact*” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 49). The use of italics, like the use of capital letters earlier in the poem, emphasizes the mocking nature of the line. By bookending her poem with two caustic remarks, she undermines this poetic theory even as she explains it—emphasizing her insider status among Beat writers and her simultaneous exclusion as a woman.

Kyger also employs a sarcastic tone as she takes on the male poetic canon, as if she’s mocking not only the subject of her poem, but also the readers for believing what they were first told about literature. She re-imagines the story of Penelope: “Refresh my thoughts of Penelope again. Just HOW solitary was her wait?” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 31). By posing her doubts to readers in the form of a question, with the “HOW” emphasized in capital letters, Kyger challenges readers to re-examine their knowledge of the Penelope story for themselves. The sarcastic tone suggests that the original assumption—that her wait was solitary—is wrong. She increases the uncertainty: “Falling into her weaving,/ creating herself as a fold in her tapestry. / a flat dimension character of beauty/ keeping one task in mind and letting nothing *Human* touch her – which is pretend./ She knew what she was doing” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 31). This adds to the doubt she created in the opening stanza, and re-writes the story of Penelope so that she created her own deception for her husband and the suitors. This evokes her earlier suggestion that Penelope controlled her husband’s misfortunes through her weaving. She now uses her weaving to create an illusion of herself—a “flat dimension character of beauty”—to appear loyal and chaste. By maintaining the same, mocking tone from earlier in the stanza, Kyger avoids having to make any

definitive statements about Penelope; the sarcastic tone allows her to challenge her readers to imagine the alternatives for themselves.

The Beats also used humor and irony to criticize the medical and psychiatric establishment. During the post war era, mental health experts, scientists and professional psychologists had a great deal of authority in determining what behavior was normal and acceptable, and which should be considered a diagnosable disorder. While both women and men whose behavior placed them outside the social norm were subject to being diagnosed and even institutionalized, madness became gendered for a number of reasons. As mentioned earlier, even women in the counter-cultural community had a much narrower range of acceptable behavior before their difference was interpreted as a complex. Additionally, the new focus on science and psychiatry during the postwar period caused the number of women seeking psychiatric therapy and medication to increase substantially. By approaching this issue with humor, Beat women criticized deeply held cultural assumptions about women and pathology indirectly by placing the burden on the reader to draw their own conclusions through the act of getting the joke.

In the “Nightmares” chapter of *Dinners and Nightmares*, di Prima describes a dream in which white-coated doctors and attendants are in a park:

Keep moving said the cop. The park closes at nine keep moving dammit. God damn thing you think you own the park.

Not talking huh not going noplac? We'll see. Send you up for observation a week of shock will do you good I bet.

And he blew his whistle.

Whereupon white car pulled up,

White attendants

Who set about their job without emotion.



It wasn't the first time they'd seen a catatonic tree. (di Prima, *Dinners* 48)

Like many of di Prima's other humorous poems, this one begins seriously, only to set itself up for a punch line at the end. This poem suggests that the criteria for determining acceptable behavior—the difference between sanity and madness—are set along unnatural and impossible standards. By waiting until the very last word to reveal that the center of this scene is not a person but a tree, she allows the reader to become invested in the situation, before relieving the tension and revealing that the poem is simply a joke. As a result the poem forces you to re-evaluate certain assumptions about who determines what's insane. The officer had the tree institutionalized simply for existing in a park—arguably the only place you would expect to see a tree in the city—and the tree is diagnosed by the medical staff as being “catatonic.” It's not the tree that is behaving unnaturally, it's the officer and the attendants who are acting insane. Through this joke, di Prima actually criticizes medical institutions which attempt to monitor and control behavior that should be considered natural. Especially considering how many female Beats suffered nervous breakdowns, institutionalization and drug dependency, arguing that it's the system that is wrong, not the patients, is especially relevant.

### **Two Poems about Madness and Medicine: A Comparison**

Both Cowen and di Prima take on the medical establishment in two rather similar poems: both describe a nightmare encounter with a male doctor who at the end of the poem is unable to cure them. In di Prima's version, she goes to a clinic, where the doctor's behavior is bureaucratic and unresponsive: “I went to the clinic. I twisted my foot I said. Whats your name they said and age and how much do you make and whos your family dentist. I told them and

they told me to wait and I waited and they said come inside and I did” (di Prima, *Dinners* 49-50). Immediately, she is subject to irrelevant questions, which she answers without complaint. She also follows the orders of the medical staff just as quickly and without protest, as emphasized by the fact that her actions are all immediate reactions to the orders. In Cowen’s poem, the patient-narrator also lacks control over her actions—she writes that her parents “are taking me to a doctor/ as I am sick, neurotic” and they are “disgusted with me, tired...” (qtd. in Trigilio 128). Cowen’s poem reflects an even more reduced sense of agency than di Prima’s—although di Prima is only able to do what the medical staff tell her, Cowen’s trip to the doctor was a decision her parents made, because they were “disgusted” with her condition. However, di Prima still asserts her identity through her frequent use of sentences beginning with the subject “I”—this becomes a protest against the medical establishment’s attempt to take away her agency, even if it is ineffective. Cowen puts up no such syntactic struggle—though her poem is in the first person she relies on the passive voice to describe the actions that are being done to her.

In di Prima’s poem, the doctor blatantly ignores her medical concerns. She arrives in his office with a hurt foot, and he instead focuses on her eye: “Open your eye said the doctor you have something in it. I hurt my foot I said. Open your eye he said and I did and he took out the eyeball and washed it in a basin” (di Prima, *Dinners* 50). The doctor’s diagnosis focuses on the part of her body farthest away from her foot, and the treatment is grotesque and barbaric. He treats di Prima’s patient-narrator as if she is a machine, with interchangeable and removable parts. In the end, his treatment makes her worse. When he asks how she feels, she responds “I guess so... It’s all black I don’t know. I hurt my foot I said” (di Prima, *Dinners* 50). The doctor’s wrongful treatment of di Prima’s eye, rather than her foot, causes her to lose her vision—she can see, or understand, things much less clearly than when she came in. This

crippling makes her more dependent on the doctor's sight and judgment, since he has taken away her ability to see for herself. Despite the obvious case of malpractice, di Prima is unable to articulate her displeasure with the treatment—she can only guess that it worked, but since she has been made blind, she has her doubts. The fact that she is not able to defend herself, to speak out against the doctor's clearly wrong diagnosis, reflects her helplessness in dealing with medical authority.

In Cowen's poem, the doctor is presented as being "sick," like Cowen. They both have leg wounds; during the visit the doctor reveals a "drying gash" (Trigilio<sup>4</sup>). However, "it is clear to [Cowen] that her wound is 'sick' at the end of the poem, while her male doctor's wound by contrast is 'drying,' nearly healed" (Trigilio 129). In Tony Trigilio's analysis of the poem, "the male doctor exposes his wound—confesses it much as a psychiatric patient would—and this gesture allows a 'drying' that becomes the normative standard by which the female patient's sickness would be measured" (Trigilio 129). Although the doctor seems more sympathetic in this poem than in di Prima's, he is still unable to truly understand his female patient's concerns; he is distanced from her because of his authority as her male doctor. In this poem, his ability to heal from his wound only serves to emphasize how "sick" Cowen is, making her appear incurable in comparison.

Cowen leaves her doctor's visit with the diagnosis that she is very sick, possibly incurably so, as determined by her parents' disgust and her doctor's ability to heal from the same injury she still suffers from. In di Prima's poem, her visit is equally ineffective in treating her

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<sup>4</sup> Eighty-three of Cowen's poems remain after her parents destroyed the majority of her writings, however complete copies of these poems are often hard to come by. For this reason, I'm relying on Trigilio's analysis of this poem because I have been unable to find another copy anywhere else except in his critical essay.

problem. She insists: “I think I said theres something the matter with my foot. O he said. Perhaps you’re right. I’ll cut it off” (di Prima, *Dinners* 50). The lack of quotations makes it ambiguous as to whether di Prima repeats: “I think there’s something the matter...” or if she only thinks that’s what she said. However, in either case, asserting that “she thinks,” rather than knows, further emphasizes that she is forced to doubt her own knowledge of her body—even the readers are confused as to what she actually says and makes clear to the doctor, because of the doctor’s refusal to listen to his patient. The doctor decides for di Prima, without consulting her first, to treat her hurt foot by cutting it off—a decision that is just as drastic and violent as taking out her eyeballs and washing them. Again, her body is treated as a machine, with interchangeable and therefore insignificant parts; like a machine, di Prima has no say nor control over how the doctor plans to fix her.

These poems may be rooted in the experiences of the two women with the medical establishment. Cowen’s poem, which is not only darker and more graphic than di Prima’s, but also more personal, reflects her personal struggles “as a psychiatric patient whose autonomy gradually was turned over to her parents and doctors” (Trigilio 128). Di Prima did not have the same direct experience as a patient—this is reflected in the third person, observational narrative in the “Nightmare” about the catatonic tree. Even as a patient, she still insists on her own agency, despite the doctor’s attempts to take it away from her, persistently using first person, active voice, rather than the passive. Both poets challenge the authority of who gets to name a person “mad,” and this is done through a gendered perspective—as patients, they are both female, dealing with all male members of the medical establishment. However, di Prima’s poems are less explicitly gendered than Cowen’s. Di Prima’s role as a Beat insider may have influenced her to write poems that male or female members of the counter-culture would relate

to; Cowen, who did not share or attempt to publish her poems, may have been more aware of the influence her gender had on her mental instability, and would therefore write from a more gendered perspective.

### **Deadly Bodies: Re-writing the Female Body in Beat Poetry**

Interpreting the female body and sexuality was another way through which women Beat poets were able to create their own counter-cultural narrative in their poetry. Elise Cowen never attempted to share her poetry with anyone during her lifetime—this may explain why she was able to discuss the female body in far more graphic detail than did Diane di Prima or Joanne Kyger, whose legitimacy as artists often depended on the approval of the men in their circle. Cowen's work uses images of the body in order to explore her agency as a poet in a female body. The portrayal of the body, both her own and the bodies she desires, can be glorified or made grotesque. When she writes about the body as something divine, this is usually in the context of sexual desire. The images of the grotesque or dead body are often associated with her exploring questions of her own identity or agency as a poet. Writing about the body in this way could serve as the beginning of an attempt to reclaim female agency within poetry. Helene Cixous writes: "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (Cixous 424). In order to create literature that is *by* women, rather than about them, women must learn to inhabit their bodies and their sexuality and express these through their own language and images. Cowen does this by constructing images of her own body to explore gendered liberation and oppression. By using both her real body and by imagining a new one within her poems, she can describe

ways which having a female body oppresses her, and through articulating this, help to “wreck partitions” which contribute to her oppression.

In “I took the skin of corpses,” Cowen describes creating a body for display from the various parts of corpses. The iambic meter and (almost) completely regular rhyme give the poem the sound of a nursery rhyme; this seems to make the disturbing subject matter stand out even more. She describes in the first stanza: “I took the skin of corpses/ And dyed them blue for dreams/ Oh I can wear these everywhere/(I sat home in my jeans)” (Cowen, “I took,” 1-4). Tony Trugilio, in his essay on Cowen’s poetics, explains, “the poem is a seething allegory of a woman’s search for inspiration in a poetic tradition dominated by men” (Trugilio 134). In many ways, the “deadly body” Cowen creates mirrors her attempt to create a poetic voice for herself. She creates this body herself; however the parts are made up of other dead bodies. Because of this, none of her creations succeed as a body for herself. The skin which she dyes “blue for dreams” does not permit her to venture “everywhere” as she had hoped; instead, she remains at home. This is because the outer skin which she takes can only create a false body—she cannot liberate herself through this artificial body because it is not her own. It instead “has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions” (Cixous 419). The false body Cowen creates for herself stifles her true self, alienating her from herself. The new body, made up of “ailing or dead” parts, is unable to carry her out into the world, keeping her at home and silent.

Similarly, she “borrowed heads of corpses/ to do my reading by/ I saw my name on every page/ and every word a lie” (Cowen, “I took” 25-8). She attempts to use the eyes and thoughts that go along with the corpse heads in order to understand what she reads; however, she is able to tell that what is written about her is not true. The books and the corpse heads represent the

traditional (i.e. male dominated) canon, and the way to interpret it; she suggests that by viewing and reading only through the traditional perspective, she will not be able to find the truth about herself. However, the poem doesn't offer a way to re-write this text, except through shedding the body to "become a spirit" (Cowen, "I took" 33). Because female bodies have been historically subject to male control, in order to create her own narrative Cowen must paradoxically abandon the body she has created in order to live without constraint

The stanza in which Cowen took "the sex of corpses" stands out against the other stanzas of the poem: "From the sex of corpses/ I sewed a union suit" (Cowen, "I took" 17-18). Unlike the other stanzas, Cowen begins this line without a subject, forcing the reader to wait until the second line to find the subject and the action and disrupting the otherwise consistent pattern of the poem. She also disrupts the meter of the poem: "From the sex of corpses" does not follow the same iambic pattern as the previous stanzas, forcing the reader to slow down and pay attention to the alarming information in the new stanza. In this stanza, she creates a "cock" and "union-suit" for herself; the disruption in the reader's idea of the narrator's gender is as startling as the suddenly awkward rhythm of the stanza (Cowen, "I took" 20, 18). The unnaturalness of the new meter emphasizes the unnaturalness of Cowen claiming a powerful phallus: "Esther, Solomon, God himself/ were humbler than my cock" (Cowen, "I took" 20). By creating a corpse phallus for herself, Cowen makes a grotesque parody of the Freudian assumption invoked by Cixous that women must adopt a phallus, however false, in order to write for themselves: "that the act of writing is equivalent to masculine masturbation (and so the woman who writes cuts herself out a paper penis)" (Cixous 422). The cock and other forms of masculine posturing feel unnatural to Cowen, and become yet another burden on an already cumbersome body.

At the end of the poem, Cowen admits that her “deadly body” still separates her from life. She concludes the poem with: “When I become a spirit/ (I’ll have to wait for life)” (Cowen, “I took” 33-4). The body she creates keeps her from being a spirit, which would permit her to fully live. Her body seems to turn her into a corpse. This mirrors the “deadness” inherent in the female body as it is constructed by patriarchy, which, as Cixous argues, prevents women from being fully realized people. Despite attempting to take on male-ness, her body still prevents her from fully living, and even her mind is subjected to the disguises—“I saw my name on every page/ and every word a lie” (Cowen, “I took” 27-8). Cowen emphasizes that the body becomes “the nasty companion” because it is made up of borrowed or stolen parts from “corpses;” in order to free herself from the prison of the body, she must abandon the body. The body she creates, as well as the one she had before she assumed the “deadly body,” both inhibit her; the only way she can truly live is without the burden of any sort of body. She does not have the language to inscribe meaning, as Cixous argues women writers must, onto her female body—her best solution is to leave it altogether.

Cowen’s poems express physical and sexual desire in an explicit way—however, these tend to construct the body in a divine sense, rather than the morbid. She opens a poem with: “I wanted a cunt of golden pleasure/ purer than heroin/ to honor you in” (Cowen, “I wanted” 1-3). This beginning is somewhat ambiguous: it’s difficult to determine if the “cunt of golden pleasure” belongs to the object of desire, or if she’s referring to her own body. By the end of the poem, the meaning emerges that favors the latter interpretation. She tells her lover that she desires “to glory you in/ breast, hair, fingers/ whole city of body/ in your arms all night” (Cowen, “I wanted” 12-15). In this poem, through love and desire, her body becomes part of something holy, worshipful love. It seems to transcend the corporeal, offering her lover a “heart like a



meadow in yosemite/ to take your ease in” (Cowen, “I wanted” 4-5). Similarly, she calls attention to her body in the ways in which it has transformed itself in order to more fully express love/desire for her lover. The holy aspect of love and sexuality is also important to this (and other) poems. There is a lot of imagery of gold and sunlight—with their associations of goodness and purity, as well as the explicit promise to “glory” the desired.

Is it problematic that her body becomes whole, useful, even divine when its energies are directed towards another person? The body was deformed in “I took the skins” because Cowen was trying to create her own identity as a poet against the male canon, with morbid and ultimately futile results. Her body only becomes useful, even beautiful, when it’s purpose is for someone else’s pleasure. Gender becomes important when the “cunt of golden pleasure” and the phallus from “I took the skins” are compared—while the union suit and cock were part of a grotesque intrusion, the cunt exists as “purer than heroin”—both a location of intense pleasure as well as a site of worship “to honor you in.” Both bodies in “I wanted” seem to transcend themselves: the narrator’s also expands to become “a city of body,” transforming into something grander and more mysterious to be explored by her lover. Love or desire seems to be what transforms bodies from something grotesque and corporeal into the spiritual. Despite the healing, redeeming nature of her sexual interactions with the other body, Cowen’s poetics still do not challenge the idea that women’s bodies are given importance based on their connections to other bodies.

Cowen characterizes the female body through language and metaphors of death. In one poem, this comes across quite explicitly:

The Lady is a humble thing  
Made of death and water

The fashion is to dress it plain  
 And use the mind for border (Cowen, "The Lady")

Like "I took," this poem employs an iambic rhyme pattern, mimicking the sound of children's songs. This makes *The Lady* sound like a mythic, mysterious creature, parodying the way women are sometimes discussed within male-dominated discourse. *The Lady* is also only referred to as a "thing" or "it," emphasizing the dehumanization that comes with being mythologized. Cixous observes: "Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death..." (Cixous 424). In Cowen's representation, the Lady is certainly associated with death, as she is equal parts "death and water;" however, she is constructed as something that's strange and morbid, rather than frightening. This plays into the male construction of the feminine as dark and unknowable, but at the same time Cowen refuses to sexualize the lady or make her terrifying. The passive voice throughout limits the Lady's ability to act for herself: she is dressed plainly by someone else, according to someone else's fashion.

### **For Babio: Beat Women Writing Motherhood**

The Beat women poets sometimes took on the subject of motherhood in their early poetry, although at that point in their lives none of them were mothers. As sexually active women in an era before the use of birth control became common, motherhood and abortion loomed as seemingly inevitable consequences of their actions.<sup>5</sup> Looking at "beat" rebellion

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<sup>5</sup> The early poems discussed in this thesis do not touch on abortion, even though both Cowen and di Prima underwent the procedure. Di Prima's later writings explore the subject more in depth, suggesting that the topic

through the strictly masculine understanding, there is no real place for mothers or motherhood— if the Beats searched for complete freedom and celebrated themselves as individuals, both children and mothers would have been seen as part of the old stifling social order. Mothers were also complicated figures in the personal lives of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Kerouac's relationship with his mother was somewhat simpler than Ginsberg's: he relied on his mother to take care of him in times of personal difficulties; however her maternal care was linked with a somewhat stifling home environment, in which many of his beatnik friends were not welcome.

Naomi Ginsberg's insanity had a profound influence on her son's psyche; this appears most prominently in his poem "Kaddish," which mourns the death of his mother and considers the legacy she (and her madness) left for him. He reflects on his mother's influence on his poetics: "By my later burden--vow to illuminate mankind--this is release of particulars--(mad as you)--(sanity a trick of agreement)—/ But you stared out the window on the Broadway Church corner, and spied a mystical assassin from Newark" (Ginsberg, "Kaddish"). He claims to be as mad as his mother (Ginsberg did spend some time in a mental institution after a nervous breakdown), possibly understanding his own madness as an inheritance from Naomi. These lines are part of his memories—"remembrances of electrical shocks"—of his mother. As a poet he can identify with her madness, even use it to "illuminate mankind," but he can't romanticize the very disturbing effects that his mother's mental illness had on her life, such as her paranoid visions of "mythical assassins from Newark." Ginsberg was commonly attracted to "mad women," often those who reminded him of his mother—for him, Elise, who typed "Kaddish," fit that category. At any rate, Ginsberg's mother profoundly influenced his relationships with and

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may have been too difficult to deal during the late 1950s. It is unknown if any of Cowen's destroyed poetry dealt with the subject.

views of other women, possibly contributing to some of his own misogynist beliefs and statements. The experiences of Ginsberg with his mother, combined with the cultural climate of the 1950s, made motherhood a difficult area for Beat women to write about and reclaim as a countercultural subject.

On the other hand, mainstream culture in postwar America placed a high value on motherhood and the stable nuclear family. Birthrates in the 1950s were at an all time high: “By the end of the fifties, the United States birthrate was overtaking India's. . . . Statisticians were especially astounded at the fantastic increase in the number of babies among college women. Where once they had two children, now they had four, five, six. Women who had once wanted careers were now making careers out of having babies” (Friedan 16-17). As the decade progressed, women were increasingly expected to put all of the education and talents into procreation and the upbringing of any resulting children. Motherhood became inextricably connected with American postwar femininity, and as a result, part of the postwar consumerist and conformist culture that the Beat Generation rebelled against. As poets of the counterculture, women Beat poets had to incorporate their experiences as mothers with their rebellion against the mainstream. More importantly, they found ways to experience motherhood outside of the “happy housewife” paradigm—reasserting their ability to be maternal in a way that was empowering.

Di Prima, more so than Kyger or Cowen, asserted motherhood in her poetry, presumably because she had more experience with it than either of them. By the time she published her second book of poetry, di Prima had given birth to her first daughter. In “Songs for Babio, Unborn,” she addresses her own pregnant body. She struggles to understand her pregnancy in a series of questions, leading to her final statement: “Body/ secret in you/ sprang this cry of flesh”

(di Prima, *Dinners* 126). As a result of the pregnancy, she feels somewhat disconnected from her body—it can keep secrets from her. The pregnancy “sprang” inside her, emphasizing a sudden, organic growth. She describes her pregnancy as if she is mystified that such a thing could be possible; however, it’s significant that the focus of these poems stays with her own body. In doing so, she constructs her pregnancy as a very personal event—a matter that is between her and her body and no one else. She anticipates Cixous’s liberating claim: “Begetting a child does not mean that the woman or the man must fall ineluctably into patterns or must recharge the circuit of reproduction... There are thousands of ways of living one’s pregnancy; to have or not to have wit that still invisible other a relationship of another intensity” (Cixous 428). While this is a celebration of women’s bodies, it is also somewhat of a protest against mainstream constructions of motherhood, which would insist that women view their pregnant bodies as the domain of the medical establishment, rather than as a miracle of their own bodies. By arguing that she can be both Beat and mother, she rejects both mainstream limitations and Beat misogyny to create a narrative that celebrates the female body and its capabilities.

In the next two poems, she begins to address “babio, unborn,” telling the “cry of flesh” she refers to in the last stanza: “now tell the tale” (di Prima, *Dinners* 126). Then she addresses the unborn child directly:

Sweetheart  
 when you break thru  
 you’ll find  
 a poet here  
 not quite what one would choose.

I won’t promise  
 you’ll never go hungry

or that you won't be sad  
 on this gutted  
 breaking  
 globe  
 but I can show you  
 baby  
 enough to love  
 to break your heart  
 forever

(Di Prima, *Dinners* 127)

This poem acts as a Beat declaration of motherhood: di Prima admits to the child that a poet does not resemble the ideal mother, especially considering the cultural context of motherhood in the postwar period. She seems apologetic for bringing a new life into “this gutted breaking globe”—while the birth of a child is typically a time of optimism, di Prima instead focuses on the negative, tragic aspects of life. By the time the child is born, the world has already been gutted, used up, broken. Even her hopes for the child are tinged with tragedy: “I can show you baby enough to love to break your heart forever.” Even the lovely, beautiful aspects of life can cause sadness because they exist in the broken world. This reflects a countercultural perspective in that she addresses the child in an honest way, ignoring the consumerist or other conformist demands which society places on mothers. By addressing the child as more or less an equal, she sets the tone for her mother-child relationship. It will not be one in which di Prima caters to the child’s every demand, which Friedan suggests is the fate of most young mothers in the 1950s. Rather, she regards her child as an independent being, as emphasized by the fact that she offers to show the child “enough to love,” rather than asserting that she will.

Di Prima’s maternal characteristics expand beyond her actual children: she also addresses the subjects of some of her “More or Less Love Poems” in a distinctly maternal way. This also

serves as a picture of Beat domesticity—di Prima shows an alternative to the traditional idea of a housewife. The display of maternal affection may emphasize her caretaker role for her artist friends, since she was in charge of the beat pad, as well as for cooking, cleaning and other required domestic duties. In one prose passage, “Two Big Dinners,” di Prima describes hosting a Thanksgiving feast for her friends in the Bohemian community. With the help of a friend, she cooks the entire meal: “there was really a lot of stuff, oh much more than I’ve said... and the next morning early sara came over with many things among them fresh dill and we made three salads and I baked asparagus and made all the antipastos we used to have at home and finally it was three o’clock and people began to come” (di Prima *Dinners* 35). Hosting a very family-oriented event, such as a Thanksgiving dinner, suggests that di Prima’s friends form for her a family; by taking on the responsibility for cooking for everyone, she assumes a maternal role. As the feast continues into the night the scene is one of content and comfort: “I kept stopping everybody to tell them to eat more things and tom warner kept trying to pit in words about turkey, the country he meant, and nobody listened but he looked very happy. The baby took off her clothes and sang happy birthday and told us it was a party and we told her yes” (di Prima *Dinners* 36). She continues to try to feed her friends, evoking a stereotypical Italian mother. By including the description of the baby, di Prima emphasizes the content domestic chaos of the scene—the child is wound up by the excitement of the party, even if everyone is just eating and talking, and they let the child sing and play uninhibited. This is similar to her empathetic treatment of children in the poems about the bomb. She reinterprets the role of the mother to transcend the traditional role as an enforcer of rules and a symbol of stability to imagine a more loving, nurturing version of motherhood, rooted in counter-cultural, free-spirited sensibilities.

Joanne Kyger treats motherhood in a more distant, analytical way. Children appear in *The Tapestry and the Web* as hindrances to the female poet, rather than little miracles. When compared to di Prima's narratives of motherhood, Kyger seems to take the opposite idea—a skepticism of traditional family roles shared by many of the male Beats. While di Prima rejoices in motherhood while rejecting stifling mainstream constructs of an ideal mother, Kyger is uncomfortable in her imagined roles as a mother. At least in her early collection of poems, she sees children as hindering art and creativity, rather than being part of an artist's life.

In an opening poem she describes the female poet's descent to the underworld as being hindered by a child and husband; the male version of the tale allows the poet to travel alone. Before the journey, she must scold a child: "Youngster—don't babble/to me I/ am tired/ We were steering a course close to shore..." (Kyger, *Tapestry* 15-16). The child annoys her, and transforms the journey into a tiresome effort. As a result, her attempt to follow the muse falls apart: "the wind stops/ over us like sleep/ it is not pleasant/ the sail flaps/ -- a listless excursion/ we wait for movement" (Kyger, *Tapestry* 16). As a woman trying to access the world of the poets, and the poets' muse Virgil, the journey is particularly difficult for her—the dull, torpid nature of the scene suggests that inspiration for the female poet is not easily accessible, even if she makes the same journey the man does.

At the same time, she imagines herself, in the retelling of *The Odyssey*, as the mother of Achilles, although like many of her other poems in *The Tapestry and the Web*, she blurs the line between myth and reality. In "Burning the Baby to make him realer," Kyger describes "Dipping him at night in the kitchen the rest are asleep by one hand into the flames just out of a desire of niceness" (Kyger, *Tapestry* 41). This alludes to the Achilles myth, where he gained his invincibility by being dipped into the River Styx by his heel. She changes the myth to describe



dipping the child in fire in the kitchen—keeping some elements of fantasy while relocating the setting in a mundane scene. She also imagines that it is her, not the mother of the child, who is giving the baby his powers. In the final stanza of the poem, she switches settings entirely by describing a scene of a child on the porch, whom she describes as “not human” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 41). This could allude to the child’s god-like status as a result of the dipping (if this is the same child from the kitchen), but it also emphasizes Kyger’s discomfort with children. She describes the child as “at 2 ½ an unfaltering icy blue stare in his eyes he DEMANDS Both hands before him, uh-uh, want, want & his parents cower” (Kyger, *Tapestry* 41). The child seems especially “not human” as he stares coldly at his parents, demanding something from them. His greed and lack of emotion frighten his parents, who don’t understand what their child wants. Similar to Pan, the half-god son of Penelope, Kyger characterizes this non-mythical child as equally strange. Unlike di Prima, she does not choose to incorporate a radical revision of motherhood in her narrative. Her characterization of children emphasizes her skepticism, at least early in her poetry, of motherhood. Motherhood for her seems like an intimidating requirement for women, and she emphasizes her distance from this role through her narrative distance from the children in her poetry.

### **CONCLUSION: Giving up the Silence**

In her 1983 memoir *Minor Characters*, Joyce Johnson reflects on her experience as a young writer living among the Beats in bohemian New York. She remembers herself “with her seat at the table in the exact center of the universe, that midnight place where so much is converging, the only place in America that’s alive[.] As a female she’s not quite part of this

convergence. A fact she ignores sitting by in her excitement as the voices of the men, always the men, passionately rise and fall” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 261-2). This memory is a reminder that being simultaneously on the margins and in the center of the Beat Generation was not just something that the women poets wrote about—it was part of their lived experience. It was extremely radical for anyone, but especially for young women, to reject the mainstream and drop out in the 1950s, and women had the additional challenges of resisting the limitations that the postwar placed on women alone—the stigma of premarital sex, the intense pressure to marry and give up individual ambition, the restrictions on their ability to do anything independently. The promise of freedom through non-conformity which the Beat Generation offered was extremely appealing to women, even if the ethos of liberation did not always include them. Even among fellow beatniks, women faced with a version of femininity imposed on them—girls who say nothing and wear black.

For a Beat Generation woman to have her poetry taken seriously (even for her to take her own poetry seriously) there must be a combination of several factors at work—luck, talent, knowing the right people, and confidence in her own ability to write good poetry, to name a few. While Kyger and di Prima were able to forge identities as the exceptional girls in the boy gang of Beat poets, most women in the Beat community were not so lucky. Many women who were associated with the Beat literary scene would begin their writing careers decades after the Beat heyday had passed. The feminist movement which came later gave all women the tools necessary to write to assert themselves and their voices into the cultural and literary discourse. In re-visioning her own history, nearly thirty years since she was a young woman in the Lower East Side, Johnson writes of herself: “What I refuse to relinquish is her expectancy. It’s only her silence that I wish to finally give up—and Elise [Cowen]’s silence... and the poems Hettie

[Jones] kept mute in boxes for too many years...” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 262). Hettie Jones would begin publishing her poetry later; however Elise Cowen’s silence would not be broken until after her death. While it’s important not to idealize her as a tragic “type” of woman, or claim that she represents all silenced women on the margins, her life and poetry can serve as a *reflection* of the personal and artistic obstacles that Beat women faced. For her, and the unnamed, unrecognized women like her who were unable (or unwilling) to live a double life as both Beat housewife and rebel poet, the struggle to assert herself as both woman and artist was next to impossible.

The fact that some women were able to write and be read despite the often blatant sexism in the Beat community helped to set the stage for the coming fight for women’s rights. Beat poets such as di Prima and Kyger were ahead of their time: they articulated female experience and protested gender inequality through their poetry at a time when the majority of women were retreating into the home. Ironically, it was the free-thinking, free-loving ethos of the Beats that gave women the means to resist being forced into the category of both the suburban housewife and the cool, silent Beat chick. Their writings can be seen as a transition between the reactionary gender conformity of the postwar era and the radical feminist movements beginning in the mid to late 1960s, setting the stage for all women to move out of the margins. Their rebellion set the stage for more women to reject their culturally imposed silence and begin to write their own discourse for their lives, experiences and resistance.

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