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### Women Writers in the Beat Generation /Alix Kates Shulman

I know that I shall be the sea  
And the mother  
And never me.  
Wait  
I am here  
Under the sea  
Recognize me

—Sally Stern, Wait I’ve Been This Way Before, in *The Beat Scene*

When I was doing research for my 1978 novel *Burning Questions*, about the rise of the Women’s Liberation Movement, I was shocked to discover that the young radical feminists of the seventies regarded the Beat period with a certain idealized nostalgia. What was shocking was their assumption that those Beatnik women in black leotards and thong sandals who were associated with the Beat writers in the flourishing bohemia of lower Manhattan in the Fifties were somehow their predecessors in the struggle for women’s liberation. That image certainly didn’t accord with my experience. It’s true that the Beat movement was liberatory—but not really for women. As one of the many young women who had fled to Greenwich Village in 1953 at the age of twenty seeking adventure, significance, and escape from a set of materialistic, conformist values, I knew first-hand that the popular view was mistaken. In fact, however stimulating and exciting it was to be in the midst of the new jazz, art, and poetry, it was every bit as oppressive to women and as dominated by the feminine mystique and outright misogyny as square culture—and in some ways worse, since you weren’t allowed to complain.

So when I tried to recreate that important moment of our cultural history in my novel, to prepare myself I read as widely as I could in the literature of the women Beats, hoping to test my own experience against theirs. And what I quickly discovered was that with one important exception, the poet Diane di Prima, there were no Beat women writers to speak of.

The few women whose work does occasionally appear in the early anthologies of Beat writing (and I’m talking here about 2 out of 25, 4 out of 44, that order of magnitude) or whose names figure in histories of the period, were imported from other sensibilities, eras, and schools (Denise Levertov, Barbara Guest, Jean Garigue). Or they stopped writing and quickly passed into obscurity, like Sally Stern, whose poem from *The Beat Scene* I used as my epigraph, because it protests the very invisibility I’m talking about.

I did, however, in my search for Beat women writers find several memoirs of the period, written by women situated, because of their close association with Beat men, at the very center of the Beat movement; and although it took decades for them to write and publish their memoirs, they do help throw light on the vexing question of why there are so few Beat women writers, when previous flowerings of bohemia in lower Manhattan, from the turn of the century on through the Twenties, had featured so many notable women artists and rebels, like Isadora Duncan, Emma Goldman, Crystal Eastman, Susan Glaspell, Dorothy Day, Edna St. Vincent Millay. Why, as Hettie Jones, ex-wife of LeRoi Jones (who later, as a black militant, renamed himself Amiri Baraka), repeatedly asks throughout her book, did the wives of writers and artists of the new consciousness so readily subvert their own ambitions and desires to those of their men? The writers whose memoirs form the basis of my discussion are, in order of publication: first Diane di Prima, our exception to the rule, the only one of them who is an authentic Beat poet in her own right, whose long out-of-print underground classic, the 1969 *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, was finally reissued in 1988; next, Bonnie Bremser, wife of Beat poet Ray Bremser (*Troia*, or *For Love of Ray*, 1969); Carolyn Cassady, wife of Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty) (*Heart Beat*, 1976, and *Off the Road*, 1990); Joyce Johnson, lover of Jack Kerouac (*Minor Characters*, 1983); and more recently, Hettie Jones (*How I Became Hettie Jones*, 1990). I’ll speak a bit about each of them later, but first I want to discuss the

background situation these women shared among the Beats.

These memoirists were college educated. they had enough rebelliousness and personal ambition to draw them to the Village—to put them at the right time in the right place to develop their talents—yet for the most part they seemed at the time hardly better able to escape or defy the feminine mystique they had presumably fled than the rest of the country. Why?

My answer has to do with the absence of any hint of feminism even in bohemia, and worse, the unselfconscious incorporation of misogyny in the Beat ideology itself. Following decades of organized and militant feminism, bohemians of the Twenties, men and women alike, revolting against the notion that woman's place is in the home, consciously supported sexual equality and women's emancipation as explicit goals, even if they had a hard time living out those ideals. But by the time the Beats were ascendant, the postwar renewal of mandatory domesticity, sexual repression, and gender rigidity, in opposition to which the Beats defined their values, had so routed feminism from the national ideology that it lapsed even in bohemia. Despite its liberatory philosophy and elevation of sex, both homosexual and heterosexual, to what John Tytell called "the one and only important thing in life," the Beat ideology claimed liberation for men, not women.

Why feminism disappeared is outside the scope of my talk; Instead, I want to explore consequences of its disappearance. (I don't want to assign blame, either; as Diane di Prima said in a recent interview, "the men in the scene had no way to realize how sexist they were because that was the time.")

**Against gender rigidity**, the Beats, a primarily male society, posed homosexuality, entailing what Ginsberg has called "the breakthrough of the feminine within us, bringing out the tender, tearful, sensitive aspect of men," but not a loosening of gender roles for women or a redefinition of masculine and feminine. (At the end of the parties in Kerouac's novels, for example, a woman often comes in to do the cleaning up.) **Against sexual repression**, the Beats, like earlier bohemians, posed sexual freedom, but—also, like their predecessors—it was not the freedom generally desired by women, for often the elevation of sex meant love-em-and-leave-em when it came to women. (As Kerouac once said, "I wasn't trying to create any new kind of consciousness or anything like that....We were just a bunch of guys who were trying to get laid.") **Against materialism**, the Beats posed mysticism—plus a rejection of consumerism and a denigration of regular nine-to-five jobs (for men, though not for the women, who frequently worked as clericals to support the men); for men a regular job was a "slave," "embarrassing and aberrant" to have. For women, says Hettie Jones, a job sometimes had a different meaning—**independence**. **Against domesticity**, the Beats posed an ideal of constant motion, pursued without the regular company of women. Joyce Johnson laments that if she hinted at accompanying Kerouac on the road, he would "stop me by saying that what I really wanted were babies. That was what all women wanted and what I wanted too, even though I said I didn't"<sup>142</sup>).

The Housewife was demonized by the Beats, no less than in the popular culture of the square world of the period, as, typically, a devouring subverter of the freedom of men and the life-force of artists. Home and family appeared no less confining to the bohemian predecessors of the Beats, but there was an important difference: instead of seeing the bourgeois family as a prison for both men and women alike, Beats tended to identify women with the family and see them not as prisoners but as prison guards. Consequently, Beat men of the Fifties urged emancipation *from* women rather than *for* them, perceiving them as the embodiment of family and the guardians of sex, domesticators out to trap them into commitments, or sexual adversaries whose powers must be overcome. Beat men, married or not, took to the road to escape the women and find the girls. Jack Duluoz, narrator of Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*, says: "Her cunt is sweet, you get to it via white lace panties, and she be fine. This is almost all I can say about almost all girls."

The comic strip images of Dagwood and Blondie, or Maggie and Jiggs, with the husband meekly tiptoeing into the house at night carrying his shoes, afraid of discovery by the all-powerful wife, usually waiting to clobber him, were taken over whole by the Beats. A woman concerned about her image did all she could to avoid being anything like Blondie. In her memoir, Hettie Jones recounts that after she had her first child, Roi went out drinking every night, leaving her at home taking care of the baby. One evening as he was leaving with his friend the poet Frank O'Hara she reports: "I threw my arms around [Roi] and out of my mouth sprang 'Don't be late.' Beside me Frank stiffened. But I already knew what I'd done. 'How's that for a line,' I said. Frank looked amazed. 'I thought you were serious,' he said."<sup>98</sup> What a bind to be in—expected to take on all the traditional wifely responsibilities, confined to that role, but at the

same time despised for acting like a wife.

One of the best examples I know of this tension is the 1959 Beat film, "Pull My Daisy," directed by Robert Frank, with screenplay and narration by Jack Kerouac, starring Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and others. The film shows a typical goofy day in the life of a group of Beat buddies in the Lower East Side loft of one of them, named Milo, and the plot, such as it is, reproduces the standard Blondie-Dagwood, Maggie-Jiggs scenario. The free-spirited Beats are all bursting with poetry, while Milo's wife (played by actress Delphine Seyrig, later superb in "Last Year at Marienbad"), who has to see to the practical details of taking care of the kids, taking them to school, serving the food, entertaining, keeping some order in the house, is pictured as the eternal spoil sport, though she's a painter herself. The climax of the film occurs when Milo successfully sneaks down the stairs away from her to join his buddies in freedom. The mood is certainly playful and light-hearted enough, but the victim-blaming subtext is grim.

Where did that attitude leave the women? Young Fifties women fleeing to bohemia to live as rebels and hoping as much as the men to escape sexual repression and stultifying convention, found themselves unsuspectingly rushing into the arms of their enemies. At the very cultural moment when women most urgently needed the power and perspective of feminism, bohemia itself, once a refuge, turned out to be a blockhouse of misogyny. Bohemia's vaunted sexual freedom could be had only on the men's terms. Trapped in a cruel self-fulfilling prophecy, women soon discovered that the more elusive and restless the men, the more abject they themselves must behave, capitulating to the men's worst view of them in their attempt to prove themselves worthy.

Paul Goodman, the late poet, novelist, and anarchist intellectual, asks in *Growing Up Absurd*, that cult book of the early sixties, "What is in it for the women who accompany the Beats?" since "Beat culture... is essentially for men?"<sup><185></sup> He proposes that women may be maternal, may be Muse or Model to the Beat artist, or, finally, may be themselves Beats, disaffected from status standards. "Perhaps they have left an unlucky marriage, have had an illegitimate child, have fallen in love with a Negro and found little support or charity 'in' society. They might then choose a life among those more tolerant, and find meaning in it by posing for them or typing their manuscripts."<sup><186-7></sup> This without a trace of irony.

Faced with the inescapable dilemma of yearning for acceptance in a woman-hating culture, what was a woman to do? Short of remaining unattached—difficult in a world where women were validated only by men—any course a Beat woman chose must include some basic self-contempt. Trapped inside the body of the enemy, sooner or later she would discover that no matter what she said or did, to the men whose values she espoused she represented what she had thought to rebel against. If they stood up to the men they were Bitches, if they lay down for them they were Patsies, either way subverting their own desires. Winning was losing: di Prima writes in her first book of poems ("More or Less Love Poems"): "I have the upper hand/ but if I keep it/ I'll lose the circulation in one arm."

Beat men, even the married ones, turned for emotional intensity not to women, whom they seldom considered colleagues or equals, but to other men. If a woman tried to escape suspicion by making ever fewer demands, the more tenuous would be her connection to her lover. Di Prima writes, when her lover has to split to New Orleans, "Our code, our eternal, tiresome rule of Cool, would have made it impossible for me to say 'I'm going with you' without blowing our entire scene, retrospectively even, blowing what had gone before, so that if I had indeed gone with Rudy all the magic would have gone out of our coming together."<sup><125></sup> Although Beat was a cult of spontaneity and heart, of feeling over intellect, feelings of attachment between the sexes were fatally uncool.

This then is the predicament. Each of the memoirs I've been looking at portrays a very different accommodation to the problem of being Beat and female. Though each fails in its way, all are revealing, each epitomizing one of the few roles available to women among the Beats: Diane di Prima (DD) is the Artist, the exception, one-of-the-boys; Joyce Johnson (JJ) is the Groupie; the other three are all Wives (and of all Beat women, Beat wives seem the most hopelessly compromised): one the Mother Carolyn Cassady (CC), one the Whore Bonnie Bremser (BB), one the helpmate Hettie Jones (HJ). I want to tell you a little about each of them briefly.

Carolyn Cassady is Mrs. Beat and mother to the three children of Mr. Beat—Neal Cassady, legendary coast-to-coast driver, model for Kerouac's, Ginsberg's and Ken Kesey's heroes. Her short memoir, *Heart Beat: My Life with Jack and Neal*, covers the year 1952-53, when Kerouac moved into the attic of the Cassadys' California house and they lived in a ménage a trois, and was made into a Hollywood movie in 1980. In 1991, a very expanded memoir came out (*Off the Road*).

Her way to deal with the Beat/woman dilemma is simply to accept without complaint her inferior

status as all-suffering wife. She is the caretaker, outsider, Mother. When friends bring peyote to the house, she declines to partake in order to “be able to function normally-- if anyone required help,”<sup><29></sup> and admits that “the bohemian scene now was less compatible to me than when I’d been younger.” Although she tries to present herself as the center of a glamorous ménage à trois, throughout her book she continually reveals how alienated and excluded from Beat life she is made to feel.

When Jack and Neal go out to party or “shut themselves up in the attic”<sup><9></sup>, she feels like a “neglected household drudge.” But once Jack starts sleeping with her at Neal’s suggestion,

I began a season of singing days and nights. I was a part of all they did now and I felt like the star of the show. I felt I was a real contributor for once. My housework and baby care had a purpose; it was needed and appreciated. I was functioning as a female, and my men were men....

They were such different types: how lucky could a girl get? Each was being himself, and I served whichever was in residence according to their individual requirements. <sup><3-4></sup>

While I performed my household duties the men would read each other excerpts from their writing in progress or bring out Spengler, Proust or Shakespeare to read aloud, accompanied by energetic discussions and appraisals.... I was happy just listening to them and filling their coffee cups. Yet I never felt left out. They’d address remarks to me and include me in the group with smiles, pats and requests for opinions or to moderate an argument<sup><26></sup>.

And though her self-esteem temporarily rises under the attention provided by the new arrangement, her basic sense of exclusion persists throughout the book. For example, when Ginsberg addresses a letter directly to her she is amazed and “overjoyed to be thus recognized as an official member of the clan.”<sup><41></sup> She is “staggered” when Jack invites her to visit him in Mexico. When she accepts the invitation and Neal gets sulky she remarks, “I could hardly credit my senses. Because of me? Neal was feeling rejected by me? And he cared?”<sup><77></sup> In the end, she decides not to join Jack in Mexico. “It didn’t fit my idea of motherhood, and it was a pretty serious affront to my marriage vows”<sup><77-79></sup>, so when Jack inevitably backs out she can act relieved. “Poor, dear Jack,” she muses in her fantasies, “I had already pretty well decided that married life with Jack on a daily basis would never work.”<sup><87></sup>

Years later when Jack is gone, the kids are somewhat older, and Neal is in jail, she has to choose between the roles of Wife and Mother. At last she rises above the passivity, not for herself but for the children, as she puts the role of Mother first by refusing to forfeit the house to pay Neal’s bail. “It was a rending decision,” she writes elsewhere, one that enrages Neal, but “with three small children, I didn’t think I had the right.” Going to work to support the family she considers her “final admission that I must abandon my dreams for ever being truly his ‘wife’”—in her mind the ultimate sacrifice.

Bonnie Bremser’s memoir, *Troia (For Love of Ray)*, for all its Beat syntax, language, and rhythms, and its depiction of a life of sex, drugs, and constant motion, tells a story of another kind of wifely self-sacrifice. (Though BB is a flamboyant, rebellious, impulsive kid—no household drudge like CC—her husband, older and tougher, can handle her. No wonder that unlike CC she is Wife first, Mother second.)

When the book opens, Bonnie, Ray, and their baby, Rachel, are in Mexico on the run. Six months after they married he was jailed and she pregnant; now he is a fugitive from parole from a New Jersey prison. Ray, who embodies the extreme macho idealized criminal side of Beat mythology, nags Bonnie to shut Rachel up or else he goes off by himself. The family stays on the move, hiding out in cheap hotels or with friends, getting constantly stoned, until one day, dead broke, Ray forces Bonnie to turn tricks. From then on, every afternoon she tries to resist, every night Ray forces her out again, sometimes hustling customers for her. With few exceptions she hates the work and the Mexican Johns, but she reluctantly goes along since, as she writes, “it was nothing but me and the general public between us and starvation and the jailhouse.”<sup><34></sup> She rationalizes that she used to sleep around anyway, so why not do it “for love of Ray”<sup><54></sup> who she thinks is “surely poetry’s representative in the flesh.”<sup><107></sup>

Eventually Ray is picked up and deported to a Texas jail. Loyal wife Bonnie leaves the baby with a friend, hustles her way across the border, then hustles to get Ray sprung. Once out, he arranges to give the baby up in order to facilitate their getaway back to Mexico. Bonnie is badly shaken by this event, but since she can’t be successful both as a mother and a breadwinning wife (i.e., prostitute), she accepts the inevitable, hoping Rachel may also benefit. Even supercool Ray admits in an unguarded moment, “I feel sick about the whole thing, baby, yeah, me, too, Ray”—but he steadies her hand so she can sign the papers. <sup><115></sup>

As soon as they run out of their getaway money, Ray sends Bonnie back out on the street, while he writes. If she tries to defy him he beats her up. “He maintains it is good for a chick to get pounded on once and [sic] awhile for it increases the circulation and makes her pretty.”<sup><134></sup>

She complains that “Ray was out of the hotel a lot, writing poems, he says, and often didn’t come back all night” while she lies in bed apathetic and disgusted “at the apparently permanent occupation of fucking a bunch of guys I didn’t like ... to get money for us to continue this way. It has no rewards for me, I am alone, lonely, bugged, feeling more and more unloved, as if each trick I turn is a negative score on the happiness list.”<sup><145></sup> Even though this is her book, not his, like a good wife she catches herself up, stops complaining, and tells us, “Oh shit, let me try to dig up a little joy here to interject—and in real life there was once and often joy here and there, simple stolen joy, get high on pot, and go out and eat in a restaurant, ... look at the movie magazines and dig the chicks.”<sup><146></sup> Here you can hear the imitation of Beat writing, but the mood is entirely different, the joy is fake. Their fights escalate, but since she is the breadwinner, she muses, in another reversal, “Ray knows he is trapped with me.”

Despite anguish over losing her child, and depression over her own lot, the book’s major point is that love justifies all. “Here is the way I really am,” writes Bonnie in the foreword: “My heart belonged to Ray since the day I met him in Washington, that is the basis of my life.”<sup><7></sup> She also chooses this love refrain to end her book (though Ray’s own book of poems, *Blowing Mouth*, published half a dozen years later, is dedicated to a different young woman: “For Judith Johnson/ Forever...”).

Hettie Jones, nee Cohen, the third Beat wife to write a memoir, is at the beginning ostensibly as ambitious as her husband, Roi. They meet working similar jobs on a record magazine; soon Hettie moves to *Partisan Review* as circulation manager (where, incidentally, she gets Roi published); together the Joneses put out their own journal *Yugen*, “a new consciousness in arts and letters.” But once they are married and have a child, everything changes rapidly. She realizes that “there were different transformations awaiting us, He would remain, like any man of any race, exactly as he was, augmented,” whereas she would “lose my past to share his”<sup><65></sup>—particularly since her family renounced her for marrying a black man. She feels herself increasingly relegated to the sidelines reserved for wives, mothers, and women artists. He goes out every night, taking up with a string of women, while she is a “thrumming blinking bleating switchboard.”<sup><146></sup> Yet she is forbidden by the prevailing rules of cool to make any domestic or sexual demands on him: when she objects to his womanizing he temporarily moves out, even though she’s pregnant again, and when she retaliates with her own affairs, he rages. Ashamed of “burying [her] talent in a napkin,”<sup><130></sup> and subordinating her own ambitions to her husband’s—even though she continues to write in secret, design and sew her own clothes, dance, and act in the avant-garde theater (in a play Roi never bothers to attend)—she mourns over “poor discarded Hettie Cohen. With all her grand ambition, all she’d ever ‘become’ was Hettie Jones.”<sup><115></sup> That Roi is also disappointed in her is especially galling.

With the swell of the civil rights movement and the new militancy of the Sixties, Hettie recognizes that Roi “couldn’t stay king of the Hill by standing still.”<sup><214></sup> After seven years of marriage and two children, his successful plays about race move him to the center of the Black Power movement, and he feels he must leave her. The scene is searing. She writes: “I could feel it coming, like an awful tide. I said ‘Why?’ and then there it was: ‘Because you’re white.’”<sup><218></sup>

Comparing her father and her husband, she observes: “Both these men...first loved me for myself, and then discarded me when that self no longer fit their daughter/wife image.”<sup><216></sup>

Written since the women’s movement, Jones’s moving memoir ponders the predicament of bohemian wives of the Fifties, in the reflected light of two decades of feminist analysis, and details the circumstances and feelings that made it virtually impossible for her to find the confidence and the time to pursue her own ambitions amidst the proliferating responsibilities of breadwinner, publisher, mother of two, homemaker, seamstress, hostess, secretary to her husband, wife. But instead of forgiving herself, she writes, “In retrospect there’s some terrible shame—how could we?”<sup><180></sup>—assuming total responsibility, as if women’s liberation could have been accomplished, absent a movement, by will alone. It’s not surprising when she has before her the example of the exceptional Diane di Prima, who during the period when Hettie was married to Roi also bore Roi a child and collaborated with him on a magazine, but seemed to have no trouble writing and publishing her poems. Hettie writes: “Diane was everything I wasn’t. To begin she was single.”<sup><98></sup>

Joyce Johnson also writes from much later, the 1980s, safely outside the Beat subculture, with her lover Kerouac long dead and herself an accomplished novelist, successful editor, mother. However, her memoir *Minor Characters*, though evocative and beautifully written, lacks Jones’s feminist consciousness.

During her intermittent youthful affair with the elusive Kerouac, who would crash with her whenever he was in New York, she was working on a novel of her own, with Henry James, not Kerouac, her literary model; yet, she admits, "I always wanted to be with [Jack] more than I wanted to be at the typewriter"<sup><56></sup>. Her stance is that of a detached, cautious, ironic observer. "How Beat could I actually be, holding down a steady office job and writing a novel about an ivy league college girl on the verge of parting with her virginity?"<sup><216-7></sup>

Still, so seductive did she find the Beats and their pursuit of "intensity for its own sake" that she was tempted to become some artist's "old lady"—"straighten him out a little, clean up the studio, contribute to the rent, have a baby or two, become one of those weary, quiet, self-sacrificing, widely respected women brought by their men to the Cedar on occasional Saturday nights in their limp thrift-shop dresses made interesting with beads. Even a very young woman can achieve old-ladyhood, become the mainstay of someone else's self-destructive genius"<sup><180></sup>. What saves her is not a sense of self-preservation but being in love with Jack, who has already had enough old ladies, thank you. Had Kerouac wanted her she would have leaped, even at 22; both CC and JJ describe him as one of the sweetest of men. It took her years of separations, uncertainty, jealousy and rejections by him before reaching the point where "what you've been bearing all along suddenly becomes unbearable,"<sup><267></sup> and she abandons all hope of winning him.

Of the five memoirists, Johnson is the least engulfed in Beat values, the most detached, never so deeply involved that she couldn't pull out without forfeit. Yet, puzzlingly, she seems to view this more as her loss than her gain. The dominant tone of her elegant memoir is of wistful regret that she was never really accepted by the Beats and never managed to penetrate "as completely as I longed to" <sup><267></sup> that inner world from which women were excluded.

Diane di Prima's exuberant bisexual romp *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, I've saved for the end, since it is the only celebration of Beat culture written by a woman, and di Prima is the only woman writer I know of to escape the double standard and genuinely embrace Beat values, and to be accepted by the Beats, as if she were one of the boys.

A founder and editor of several Beat Journals, organizer of some of the original poetry readings, an accomplished and prolific poet whose relative obscurity compared to the men with whom she is usually associated is something of a scandal today, DD confronts the dangers of female subservience with bravado, accepting the burden of proof that she is no mere woman. Not that the protagonist of her memoir escapes the Beat woman's dilemma, but her solution to it is to stay cool, itself a Beat response. "Your air was casual, and your face betrayed no emotion at all... Even in bed...the game is Cool."<sup><18></sup> She will be as cool as any man, beat them at their own game, never become emotionally vulnerable.

*Memoirs of a Beatnik*, though not strictly a memoir, commissioned as it was by Olympia Press as pornography and first published as such in 1969, has been praised as a true evocation of the period. Since making your living through pornography and having lots of goopy sex are both part of the "easy, unselfconscious Bohemian"<sup><164></sup> life DD is trying to portray in this ficto-biographical novel cum memoir (with, I suspect, imaginary cocks but real names), it is not inappropriate that the slender volume has crammed detailed descriptions of 25 different couplings plus three orgies in among the "tiny perfect memories" that soon begin to take over the writing.<sup><137></sup> (The sex is pre-AIDS, the consciousness pre-feminist, the life pre-hippy, the style an always energetic but sometimes uncertain combination of spoof, satire, and nostalgia.) After six chapters of sex description, that for all DD's poetic ingenuity does eventually begin to pall, the writer steps up to recreate her memories and impressions of a moment in Manhattan when she was seventeen, "the dance was the Fish and the game was Cool."<sup><18></sup> It was a time when

there was only a small handful of us—perhaps forty or fifty in the city—who knew what we knew; who raced about in Levis and work shirts, smoked dope, dug the new jazz, and spoke a bastardization of the black argot... Our chief concern was to keep our integrity (much time and energy went into defining the concept of the 'sellout') and to keep our cool: a hard, clean edge and definition in the midst of the terrifying indifference and sentimentality around us—'media mush.' We looked to each other for comfort, for praise, for love, and shut out the rest of the world. <sup><163></sup>

DD knows the danger of attachment as well as any Beat male: "it is usually a good thing to be the woman of many men at once, or to be one of the many women on one man's scene, or to be one of the

many women in a household with many men, and the scene between all of you shifting and ambiguous. What is not good, what is claustrophobic and deadening after a while, is the one-one relationship. ...Live with one man and you begin to have a claim on him. Live with five, and you have the same claim, but it is spread out, ambiguous, undefined." <<sup>103-104</sup>> This sounds like a familiar Beat position, but with a difference: she's worried about making claims (as women do) rather than about feeling claimed (as men do). And instead of rejecting such claims, as Beat men might, she wants to diffuse them.

The climax of the book occurs when a friend brings her Ginsberg's *Howl*. Reading It, she realizes something new was about to happen. "The phrase 'breaking ground' kept coming into my head. I knew that this Allen Ginsberg, whoever he was, had been breaking ground for all of us, though I had no idea yet what that meant, how far it would take us.... I sensed that Allen was only, could only be, the vanguard of a much larger thing. All the people, who, like me, had hidden and sulked, writing down what they knew for a small handful of friends, waiting with only a slight bitterness for the thing to end, for man's era to draw to a close in a blaze of radiation—all these would now step forward and say their pieces....I was high and delighted....A new era had begun." <<sup>164-5</sup>>

She celebrates the new era with a final, hilarious orgy the night Ginsberg, Kerouac and Peter Orlovsky visit her and her roommates. But for all the fun, when at the end of the book she decides to have a baby, she's savvy enough to know that for her yet another new era has begun. It's hard to be cool with a baby.

Most of her poetry is written post-baby and tells a somewhat different story from that of the memoir. Though there is not a word of complaint about woman's predicament in the book, which is, after all, the fantasy of a persona, written presumably for a male audience, her poetry from that period complains of the need to hide feelings and of sexism. Here is one example, from a poem called "The Quarrel":

You know I thought I've got work to do too sometimes. In fact I probably have just as fucking much work to do as you do...// I am sick I said to the woodpile of doing dishes. I am just as lazy as you. Maybe lazier....// Just because I happen to be a chick I thought.// ...I got up and went into the kitchen to do the dishes...I'll never say anything because it's so fucking uncool to talk about it...// Hey hon Mark yelled at me from the living room. It says here Picasso produces fourteen hours a day//

Not that the Beat bards don't deserve everyone's gratitude for making public readings popular, reviving poetry as performance with "their boy songs," as Grace Paley has called them, for loosening up the heterosexual stranglehold, and enriching literature with many treasures. But on the Woman Question, they were no better than those who embraced the established values the Beats rebelled against and were considerably worse than many of their bohemian forebears. Allen Ginsberg asks In a recent interview, "Were we responsible for the lack of outstanding genius in the women we knew? ...I don't think so." But I don't think it's just a matter of "genius." I'm not trying to lay heavy blame on the men, but you can't blame the victims either for their diminished capacity. The Beat ideology made it almost impossible for the women to develop their talents because despite their desires and sometimes brave attempts to live as rebels (like HJ's), they always (except, of course, for DD), felt themselves to be failures, and their men demanded that they come first. In fact, to some degree they seem to have led lives in some ways not all that different from their non-Beat counterparts: CC resembles a conventional suburban housewife; BB, a run of the mill street hustler with her pimp; HJ, an abandoned helpmate; JJ, a lovesick girl. The major difference is that for a time each believed her ordinary life so redeemed by her attachment to a glamorous, exceptional man that it could no longer be said to be ordinary. But given that the men in their potentially liberating quest allowed no equal place for women among them, the redemption fails to convince. The saddest part is that it even fails to convince the women themselves.

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