Why Does Nobody Hear About the Women of the Beat Generation?

Fernanda Bisi

FACULDADE DE LETRAS DA UNIVERSIDADE DO PORTO

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Abstract

When we think of the Beat Generation most of the names that come to mind are from male writers in the movement. However, women Beat writers were as productive as their male counterparts but are not so often heard of, published, or accounted for their contributions to the literary scene of the times. This essay aims at analyzing the contribution of women to the Beat Generation and evaluate possible reasons for their absence in the literary canon.

Keywords: Borders; Belonging; Marginalization; Feminist studies; Conformism

Resumo

Quando pensamos na Geração Beat a maior parte dos nomes que nos vêm em mente são dos escritores homens do movimento. Porém, as mulheres escritoras Beat foram tão producentes quanto seus pares homens, mas não tão famosas, publicadas ou reconhecidas pelas suas contribuições para o movimento literário da época. Esse artigo tem como objetivo analisar a contribuição das mulheres para a Geração Beat e avaliar possíveis razões para sua ausência no cânone literário.

Palavras-chave: Fronteiras; Pertencimento; Marginalização; Estudos feministas; Conformismo

When I first started my research, it was not easy to find reliable bibliography about the topic "Women of the Beat Generation", or at least it was not easy to find answers that I believed satisfied my main research question: Why does nobody hear about the women of the Beat Generation?

Having said so, most of the references I found were fairly recent, but also vital for an intended expansion of the Beat studies and scholarship. My main sources were *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (2002), edited by Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, which is a collection of essays, *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (1996), by Brenda Knight, and *A Different Beat: Writings by Women of the Beat Generation* (1997), edited by Richard Peabody, which are anthologies, mostly commenting on each authors' lives and influences and compiling some of their work together with the names of other women that either influenced or were linked with the movement of the Beat (Appendix I). The canon of women Beat writers is yet to be established, "with debate about the constitution of the group manifesting itself in editorial choices conveyed through the publishing industry" (Johnson and Grace 11). Although the Knight and Peabody works bring several names, they also raise "unanswered questions of standards of Beat inclusion and exclusion" (*ibid*), which is still transitory and subjective in the case of women writers, as both volumes included names that do not overlap.

Most of the answers I found to my questioning revolved around reasons for which their Beat male peers were first condemned (and later praised): the rejection of conventional narrative, the rejection of consumer culture, the nonconformism, the exploitation of self-expression, the existential questioning and questing, and the sexual liberation. But the fact that they were women writing added a different layer, that is, being a woman writing in such style and about such topics was the utmost offense for that historical period, as they had to juggle with the roles assigned to women at the time (being a housewife and a mother), and the freedom of (sexual) expression, drug use and experimentation. Thus, my purpose is to analyze the contribution of women to the Beat Generation and evaluate possible reasons for their removal of the literary canon.

Women in the fifties were supposed to conform, to agree with being a housewife and mother. For the women who were involved with the movement, being Beat was a more attractive alternative, as many of them developed "a natural predilection for art and poetry" having received liberal arts educations (Knight 3). Living creatively and leaving behind the safety of a conformative prospect of existence, the women of the Beat generation were as "fearless, angry, high risk, too smart, restless, highly irregular" (*ibid*) as their male counterparts. They were "muses who birth the poetry so raw and new and full of power that it changed the world

writers whose words have spells whose story is behind whose vision blinds artists for whom curing the disease of art kills (*ibid* 4).

Nevertheless, "Beat" is usually equated with their most famous male figures – Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs – and what they represent: "iconoclastic, freewheeling, masculinity community and dissent from both literary convention and 'lifestyle'" (Johnson and Grace 1). This "dissent from literary convention and lifestyle" (*ibid*) came from a generation of postwar America in the 1950s and 1960s centered around the bohemian artist communities of New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, as mentioned by Hardt (10):

> The propinquity of the war years, as well as the escalating cold war had a tremendous impact on the self-conception of not only Beat-poets but many other artists like Bebop- and Jazz-musicians, painters and modern dancers. Tendencies of spontaneous, improvised artistry can be discovered in their work throughout the second half of the 1950s and early 1960s. Therefore, it stands to reason that the extremes of the postwar years fueled a mentality of individual exploration in terms of escape from traditional standards and behavioral norms.

As Johnson and Grace explain (4), the concept of a "generation" or "confraternity" of Beats, a group of individuals with common beliefs and interests, seems more and more reasonable (*ibid*). However, this camaraderie did not include women, who were mostly seen as characters in a supporting role only. They were the girlfriends, wives, lovers, muses, breadwinners and supporters, but hardly ever the artistic peers or equals.

For instance, Ginsberg saw the Beat literary movement as a gathering of "friends who had worked together on poetry, prose, and cultural conscience from the mid-forties until the term became popular nationally in the late fifties" (Waldman xiv); he also assumed that there were just one or two women writers who deserved merit, as he counted (and also many other sources counted, such as *The Poetry Foundation* site) Diane Di Prima and Joanne Kyger amongst the working friends: "where there was a strong writer who could hold her own, like Diane Di Prima, we would certainly work with her and recognize her" (Peabody 1).

For Kerouac, who coined terms such as "cool" and "hot" Beats, and claimed that "the 'new *more*' (emphasis in the original) was personified only by a singular few", women were also to be kept on the sidetracks only:

> Two distinct styles of hipster is: the "cool" . . . your bearded laconic sage . . . before a hardly touched beer in a beatnik dive, whose speech is low and unfriendly, whose girls say nothing and wear black (my emphasis): the "hot" . . . the crazy talkative shining eyed (often innocent and open hearted) nut who runs from bar to bar, pad to pad looking for everybody, shouting, restless, lushy, trying to "make it" with the subterranean beatniks who ignore him. (*apud* Johnson and Grace 6)

Therefore, "girls who say nothing and wear black" (*ibid*) is the archetype of hipster women, kept as passive accessories in auxiliary functions, as the "cool" Beat. The role of the "hot" Beat belonged to the male figures, and it seemed it did not matter if these women had something to say and were not willing to be unseen or unheard. Although Lenore Kandel and Anne Waldman affirmed that they had never experienced condescension, were "better friends with men" and felt that "they took [their] poetry seriously" (Knight 280), I do not believe they represented the majority of women Beat.

These women were always around: living together with other writers (both as lovers or just as roommates), in gatherings, poetry readings, and involved in the publication of magazines such as *City Magazine* (in which Anne Waldman published her work upon arriving in New York), *Angel Hair Magazine*, *The World*, and *Yugen* (founded by the former LeRoi Jones and wife Hettie Jones, in which many poets and writers of the new literary scene published). Anne Waldman was friends with Allen Ginsberg, whose farm in Cherry Valley was also her home in the seventies, and was invited along with Ginsberg to found the *Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics* at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado; she also befriended Joanne Kyger, Lew Welch, Brenda Frazer, and others, and was involved with the New York School of Poets and met Frank O'Hara before he died (*ibid* 288-9). Despite the aforementioned feeling of receiving no condescension from her male peers, Waldman comments:

> I pushed myself hard and fought for having a life and career as a writer in a field that was blatantly (at first) dominated by men. You make sacrifices. Relationships suffer because men were or are not used to strong women with purpose and discipline. There's a subtle psychological discrimination that goes on. It is an added pressure for women because they are often not taken seriously and have to push against a certain bias. (*ibid* 289)

The production of the women in the Beat Movement is, in my opinion, much more substantial than the men's. For instance, a lot was heard about Neal Cassidy

and Peter Orlovski in comparison to Elise Cowen (even regarding their relationship with Allen Ginsberg) and these men are considered main characters of the Beat Generation. Although it was partly destroyed, Elise Cowen's written production is more relevant and voluminous than her male counterparts'.

According to Peabody (2), not all critics would agree on the choices of names to include in an anthology or compilation of the women Beat writers, and "arguments could also be made for the inclusion of poets and writers" as varied as Denise Levertov (who navigated in between San Francisco and New York, and is considered as a representative of the Black Mountain school of poets much more than a Beat representative), Diane Wakoski, Barbara Guest, and other names. For the purposes of this essay, I decided to adopt Johnson and Grace's organization of the Women Beat writers and comment briefly on one work from each "generation".

The Women Beat Writers can be organized into two generations that are concurrent with the first and second well-known male Beat writers' generations and "extend beyond them to a third generation" (Johnson and Grace 12).

The first generation is contemporaneous with the first male Beat writers and like them born in the 1910s and 1920s and some are not necessarily associated with the birth of the Beat movement *per se*. Such women writers are Madeline Gleason, Helen Adam, Sheri Martinelli, ruth weiss, Denise Levertov, Jane Bowles and Carol Berge. Levertov, for instance, is considered by many to belong to the Black Mountain school of poets as aforementioned, although she herself considered a "school" to be "any group of poets who talk and write letters to each other" (Knight 208).

Writing at the same time as the most famous triumvirate of Beat male writers, Kerouac-Ginsberg-Burroughs, this first generation of women Beat writers approached work "free of academic or traditional literary models, or innovate new ones for their post-bomb, cold-war era experience" (Johnson and Grace 12). As the male writers, they could be found in connection with "diverse literary enclaves", such as The Maidens in San Francisco, and helped clarify "the way that Beat emerged contemporaneously with several other avant-garde literary communities" (*ibid*).

Within this first generation I decided to comment on one of the works of Sheri Martinelli, who was not necessarily considered Beat by some critics, but was always around the Beat, also navigating through their activities much like Denise Levertov and known as their "mother hen". As other women Beat writers, she also published Beat works as well as her own writings on her magazine *Anagogic & Paideumic Review,* which was sold at Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore (Moore). Her 1959 text *Duties of a Lady Female*, which she wrote for Ezra Pound and was published in her

magazine, is both fun and poignant. In it, Martinelli mocks feminine manuals of behavior and "gives tips on how to please a man and defend him from other women" (*ibid*). She plays with the "rules", while also introducing some more feminist tropes, such as sexuality and abortion, and registering the need to avoid specific forms of oppression related to "race, age, sex, class or religions" (Peabody 154-8). As she (ironically) describes models of the conduct that was expected from a woman in the late 50s, Martinelli also provides "tips" to encourage women to pursue freer sexual expression: the so-called Lady Female would care for and love her man "as if his ancestors were watching" but she also should not "scorn any way to make love. This is not the century for prejudice at any degree of life"; a woman should disdain "a renegade female that puts her vanity before the honor of the race of females" (*ibid*). Part of the text goes as follows:

> Feed him. Dont use rich meats or gravies. They clog his bowels. A man with a clog bowl will take to drink. . . .
> Dont cry for yourself except by yourself. It acts on his nerves like a rockdrill. . . .
> Dont scorn any way to make love. This is not the century for prejudice at any degree of life. Love him as if his ancestors were watching. . . .
> Practice honor. Fraternize with other females. Build a code of behavior. . . .
> If another female even EYE BALLS your male do this:
> Raise your voice. Warn her LOUD, CLEAR, FIRM, PLAIN, SPECIFIC. . . .
> When you first meet a renegade female that puts her vanity before the honor of the race of females tell her she has such a tiny waistline she should wear a tiny or a very tiny corset like the French women do. . . .
> Have or adopt children. . . .
> Teach them:
> To laugh, sing, dance or exclaim in public without shame.
> To SEE beyond local things like race, age, sex, class or religions. . . . (*ibid*)

The second generation comprises women writers born in the 1930s and who shared the community and cultural environment with an already established male Beat Generation. Second-generation women Beat writers include Joanna McClure, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Lenore Kandel, Elise Cowen, Joanne Kyger, Diane Di Prima, Hettie Jones, Joyce Johnson, Brenda Frazer, Brigid Murnaghan, Margaret Randall, Rochelle Owens, Diane Wakowski and Barbara Moraff. There is no consistent approach to gender among the themes of the second generation of Beat women

writers, but some in the group recognized the importance of asserting their gender in the alternative environment where they dwelled (Johnson and Grace 13).

For the second generation I wanted to comment on Elise Cowen, for all that she represents for this essay in which the silencing of a woman-author is central. Not only was she silenced by her family (they burnt her manuscripts for their sexual themes and allusions to bissexualism and drug use), but she was also silenced by those within the Beat movement and by the critical reception of her work: most of the scholarship regarding her oeuvre which focus on "Cowen's relationship to Ginsberg creates the conditions for Ginsberg to eclipse her" (Trigilio 137). In a cry for help, her alleged last poem ever claims that she had enough: "No love / No compassion / No intelligence / No beauty / Twenty-seven years is enough" (Knight 165). In this goodbye-like letter, her allusions to the first names of people in her life and the known context in which it was written, make us understand who she is addressing (Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Joyce Johnson among other friends from the movement and relatives):

> Mother – too late – years of meanness – I'm sorry
> Daddy – What happened?
> Allen – I'm sorry
> Peter – Holy Rose Youth
> Betty – Such womanly bravery
> Keith – Thank you
> Joyce – So girl beautiful
> Howard – Baby take care
> Leo – Open the windows and Shalom
> Carol – Let it happen
> Let me out please–
> –Please let me in (*ibid*)

Moreover, she also employs an economy of words in which to send her message across that would be part of a Beat aesthetics. It's haunting what she can accomplish with just a few lines, and in her message to Leo Skir, an old-time friend who saved more than eighty poems from her family's grasp: "Leo – Open the windows and Shalom", brings both her idea of suicide and a reference to religion (a trope so present in her oeuvre).

The third generation brings women writers born in the 1940s, such as Janine Pommy Vega and Anne Waldman, who were the vanguard of the sixties women's

movements and profited from the "empowerment of the sixties counterculture, and second-wave feminist demands for women's civil and economic rights and sexual self-determination" (Johnson and Grace 14). Moreover, their writings were influenced by the surge of the Vietnam War, the continuity of the sexual revolution and the drug counterculture (*ibid*).

Janine Pommy Vega will be my choice for comments on the third generation of Beat women writers. Not only because she might be less acknowledged than Anne Waldman, but also due to the fact that most of her work is out of print, like most of other Beat women's texts. Brenda Knight comments that Vega uses "her work to reflect on the past and look toward the future" (223). Her poem *The Drum Song* (Appendix II) brings the aforementioned feminist and sexual revolution tropes, as well as the anxieties regarding the wars; it follows no rhyme scheme and is written mainly in free verse as most of the Beats did.

Johnson and Grace define Beat as a "spontaneous composition, direct expression of mind, no censorious revision, jazz-based improvisation; or factualism, cut-up, surrealism; or first-thought-best-thought, cataloguing piled-up images, following breath line, prophetic utterance" (Johnson and Grace 2). Both men and women writers of the period were influenced by this "new ease of flow", and "the openness of a jazz improvisation was echoed in the open verse uttered within a breath" (Rogalle 8).

In regard to literary and aesthetic influence, the three generations of Beat women writers brought a variousness to the already hybrid literary heritage of the whole Beat generation, if not even more varied. British and American male modernists (Wolfe, Williams, Joyce, Faulkner) and male romantics (Shelley, Keats, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman) seem to have influenced the male Beat writers.

However, not only male, but also female predecessors are very influential for women Beat writers, specially from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some examples cited are the Brontës, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Gertrude Stein, Anais Nin, and Emily Dickinson. They also claimed having been influenced both by their male and female Beat peers and other artists, such as the film director François Truffaut (in the case of ruth weiss):

> The juxtaposition of the disparate and eclectic influences cited by women Beat writers with the male modernists and romantics cited by the male Beats provocatively complicates conceptions of a Beat aesthetic, which is evidently not monolithic and consistent, but multiple and divergent and more experimental than

> has been thought. . . . Beat is an avant-garde whose sources are as diffuse, unpredictable, and innovative as its practitioners. (Johnson and Grace 15)

Another difference between men and women Beat writers is their approach to literary production, most notably in relation to the revision of their work. Most women Beat writers were careful enough to revise their text, while male Beat writers considered revision an act "against the purity of the unmodified literary utterance" and "spontaneity" (*ibid* 16).

For women writers of the Beat Generation, writing poetry, novels, biographies or memoirs demanded a degree of courage, sacrifice, nonconformity and separation from the mainstream values, beliefs and practices of their eras that differentiated them from their male peers as they faced a double exclusion: they were the wrong gender in an already marginalized group whose members defied conventions.

Hence, their work both expands their male peers' by showing an even more oppressed and hidden side of the Beat Generation and broadens an already eclectic literature by adding issues of motherhood, abortion, sexual exploitation, etc. As Peabody mentions (3), although not all of them were invisible or silent (ruth weiss was frequently on stage in the same clubs as the men), many were silenced either by their families (in the case of Elise Cowen, who had her works destroyed by her family to "preserve her reputation"), or by their partners, or by their own choice. The following succeeded in an account of the Naropa Institute tribute to Ginsberg in July 1994, when a woman from the audience inquired about the absence of female names in the program:

> "Why are there so few women on this panel? Why are there so few women in this whole week's program? Why were there so few women among the Beat writers?" And [Gregory] Corso, suddenly utterly serious, leans forward and says: "There were women, they were there, I knew them, their families put them in institutions. In the '50s if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female your families had you locked up." (Knight 141)

Another shocking story is Joan Burroughs' manslaughter. On September 6, 1951, Joan Burroughs was killed by her own husband, William Burroughs, when he decided it was time for a William Tell act during a party. Joan put a water glass on her head and turned her face. Bill, who was said to be a crack shot, took aim from about six feet away. She died instantly (Knight 53). William Burroughs' was out of trouble with the help of a good lawyer and had always said that her death motivated

him to write (*ibid* 53). However, in *Minor Characters*, Joyce Johnson mocks his declaration by asking: "ever hear the one about the man who played William Tell and missed?" (5), being completely aware of the downplay of Burroughs' crime.

Hence, it is easy to agree with the assertion that "the exclusion of the female Beat writers diminishes understanding of the Beat literacy and cultural movement, creates insufficient representations of the field of Beat literature, and distorts views of the era during and after the Second World War when Beat emerged" (Johnson and Grace 2).

So, why does nobody hear about the women writers of the Beat Generation? In a nutshell, misogyny would be the first bet. It does not seem appropriate to comment on the sexual orientation of the male writers as a reason for "dismissing" the women's work, as I believe the reasons are more nuanced than that and a lot might fall on speculation. Anne Waldman gives her testimony:

> The '50s were a conservative time and it was difficult for artistic "bohemian" women to live outside the norm. Often they were incarcerated by their families, or were driven to suicide. Many talented women perished. But male writers of this literary generation were not entirely to blame, it was the ignorance of a whole culture. (Knight 289)

To a certain extent, they were in the borders in nearly all aspects of their lives, balancing the expectations towards their sexuality, housework, financial work and poetry. They supported their male peers at the same time in which they received, in their majority, limited encouragement to develop their own works. Works that many times were destroyed or criticized as not being Beat enough or "on a par with their male counterparts" (Peabody 3). In such a hybrid movement, the definition of what would be Beat or not was also quite unclear and (the borders) were blurred, so many women were left out of the canon.

Although they faced institutionalization, prejudice, misogynistic partners and peers, they were brave enough to challenge the behavior of the times and bring concerns of women's lives and existence to their writings – which shocked audiences enough to encourage those offended to try and silence them. Writing from the borders, the ostracized women writers of the Beat Generation refused to remain silenced.

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Appendix I: Women of the Beat Generation (Johnson and Grace 12-4; Knight vii-viii; Peabody 2)

Writers:
Anne Waldman
Diane Di Prima
Mary Fabilli
Elise Cowen
Joyce Johnson
Hettie Jones
Joanne Kyger
Denise Levertov
Joanna McClure
Janine Pommy Vega
ruth weiss
Mary Norbert Körte
Brenda Frazer
Lenore Kandel
Jan Kerouac
Bridget Murnaghan
Barbara Moraff
Sheri Martinelli
Margaret Randall
Bobbie Louise Hawkins
Diane Wakowski
Rochelle Owens

Precursors:
Helen Adam
Jane Bowles
Madeline Gleason
Josephine Miles
Carol Berge

"Muses":
Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs
Carolyn Cassady
Edie Parker Kerouac
Joan Haverty Kerouac
Eileen Kaufman

Artists:
Jay DeFeo
Joan Brown

“Lesser-known writers, artists, coffeehouse scenesters” (Peabody 2)

Grace Paley
Daisy Aldan
Jean Garrigue
Patsy Southgate
Gloria Oden
Carolyn Sotoloff
Kaye McDonough
Hazel Ford
Lenore Jaffa
Elia Kokkinen
Marion Zazeela
Marianne Raphael
Ruth Fainlight
Rosemary Santini
Mimi Margeaux
Penny Carol
Marcia Lord
Ann Giudici
Mary E. Mayo
Betty E. Taub
Ruth Krauss
Elizabeth Sutherland
Mary Caroline Richards
Anne Wilson
DeeDee Doyle (Sharon Morill)
Jan Balas
Jeanne Phillips
Edith Kutash
Fran Sheridan
Sheila Platt
Sally Stern
Madeline Davis
Anne Frost
Anabel Kirby
Alice Pankovits
Francine Marshall
Gloria Tropp
Susan Sherman
Joan Block
L. S. M. Kelly
Susan Gorbea
Marietta Greer

Appendix II

The Drum Song

Red and white candy striped
Exit sign:
enter a hole in the wall
to a hidden world of juju beads
and maps the size of Atlantis
and little boys stalking the deer
of imagination

Red and white
Peruvian flag, the Polish flag,
and other breastplates
and gee-gaws of domination
since there ever was war
since there was the idea
of conquering your neighbor

Red and white
the woman in her childbearing
years, and then herself, soft haired
watching the fire, talking to her
the grandchildren who want her stories
red and white, the passionate
female, the passionate male

Orgasm and abstinence
hosannas coming up from the belly
to the top of the head
red/white
the blood and bone, the skeleton
in its scarlet flag

the two-step zigzag dance
across the tightrope, the red and white
agenda, wavering like a flock
of geese, like a ribbon
across the sky.

February 1994, New York City. (Knight, 237-8)