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From Backburner to Forefront: Critical Recollection and Commitment to Literary Community in
Women Beat Memoirs

A Thesis
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BY

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English

“There were women, they were there, I knew them, their families put them in institutions, they were given electric shock. In the '50s if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female your families had you locked up. There were cases, I knew them, someday someone will write about them” (qtd. in Osterweil 33).

“If you want to understand Beat women, call us transitional—a bridge to the next generation, who in the 1960s, when a young woman’s right to leave home was no longer an issue, would question every assumption that limited women’s lives and begin the long, never-to-be-completed work of transforming relationships with men” (qtd. in Knight 1).

“They were feminists before the word was coined, and their work stands besides that of the men” (Knight 6).

“pat my bro/ pat my sister/ see we tender/ women/ live/ on” (Jones dedication page).

I became aware of a problem when I was introduced to the Beats. I thought, “Where are the women? There must be some.” There were, of course, but that notion required some digging, for these women are often only mentioned briefly when reading of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and William Burroughs. However, while frequently overlooked or forgotten, the women of the Beat generation have made a public name for themselves after the time of the movement. Embracing and gaining insight from their past experiences, writers Diane di Prima, Brenda Frazer (formerly known as Bonnie Bremser), Joyce Johnson, and Hettie Jones formed a personal artistic resurgence and Beat revival in the form of memoir. I have chosen to examine their four memoirs written after the rise of the Beats: di Prima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and Frazer’s *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*, (both published in 1969), Johnson’s *Minor Characters* (1983), and Jones’ *How I Became Hettie Jones* (1990). These works span decades and are, of course, unique to the author’s life, but ultimately tell similar tales. Compiled, these works form a textual community—exposing collective memories and establishing a publicly creative presence. These works share common themes and events but there is one over-arching message that shines: women Beats yearned for more self-expression during the artistic movement that shaped their histories and it is not until they were away from male influence that they could accomplish this; while they may have once been silent, they formed a significant literary community and wrote

themselves to the front of the memoir genre years later. For these women, the memoir was a form of release, and their works are textual forms of both creative expression and criticism.

Discussing their past in both the ‘Silent’ and Beat generations, these women Beats share their distinct yet overlapping experiences in their later-written memoirs. Part of an artistic community during the Beat generation, the above-mentioned women form their own community after the movement—reflecting on their past experiences and creating a Beat revival of sorts. Often in the background, these women write themselves among the men who became famous; feeling they must tell their personal stories and insert their voices into a space where they may have once been overlooked, underappreciated, or misunderstood, for it is only recently that scholars “are finally starting to integrate Beat culture into our accounts of American literature in the 1950s and 1960s,” and with this, “reconsideration of the Beats must also engage the work of women who wrote Beat and account for their critical neglect (by their male Beat peers, the press, and the academy)” (Hunt 251). The stories and relationships of Beat women are vital to understanding the movement and culture; knowing one another and mentioning many of the other women writers in their works, the stories of these women Beats are remarkably similar—all have like stories to tell and themes to share of their past and presence in a community of artists, as well as of who they came to be years later. Shaping and shaped by a community at a pivotal moment in history and life, these women unite (knowingly or unknowingly) years later to revive their past and share communal experiences; offering their own insights and showing readers that there are additional Beat experiences, more perspectives and texts worthy of appreciation.

Growing up in a time termed the ‘Silent Generation,’ these women were not to be silenced forever, making “an attempt to resist the pressures to commit to the fantasy of suburban

bliss and to anesthetize one's self to the nightmare of cold war stalemate... attempt[ing] to recover, demonstrate, and (thereby) validate other, more individual modes of consciousness" (Hunt 252). Breaking from mid-century societal norms, di Prima, Frazer, Johnson, and Jones chose to lead more 'alternative' lives, moving away from their parents and experiment for experience. But as 'rebellious' as these women may have been for their time, they were still placed in an inferior role, not given the space or influence to do much creative work, reminding readers that "even in the Beat world, for all its rejection of middle-class values and norms, for all its emphasis on the transcendent individual, the roles for women were ones that supported the writing of men and cast women as peripheral figures" (Hunt 253). While these Beat women left home and led more spontaneous and adventurous lives than most women of their time, they were still on the margins, living and attempting to work in a community that privileged the masculine, especially in regards to public displays of creativity, for this (at least later) Beat women are critical. Johnson recalls a 'dream letter' by John Clellon Holmes (documented by Allen Ginsberg in 1954):

“‘The social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang.’ [...] Holmes wrote in his preface to a new edition of *Go*: ‘Did we really resemble these feverish young men, these centerless young women, awkwardly reaching out for love, for hope, for comprehension of their lives and times?’” (qtd. in Johnson 79).

Holmes, who also recorded Kerouac's definition of 'Beat' in a *New York Times Magazine* article, suggests that the male artists were the only true creative and adventurous souls, the women around them lacking cores and the facility to take risks. But as their memoirs show, these women seemed just as 'feverish' and risk-taking as the men in terms of both creativity and life choices, and while it may have taken the women longer to create and publish, they document their past and illustrate the energy they exerted to set in motion the survival of male artists and overall Beat

community. The experiences women Beats gained and the scenes they observed left a mark on who they would later become and what they would later create: “the quintessential ‘rasa’ or taste of that historical period is often captured by the diaristic accounts which substantially strengthen and give a historical viability and narrative... the women were often present as the most observant and sober witnesses” (Knight xi). Frazer, di Prima, Johnson, and Jones may have once been silent observers, but their visions offer a glimpse into a cultural and literary history. Ultimately, these women were revivers of the Beat generation and curators of the community, not only for themselves but for readers—they use their memoirs to both chronicle and criticize their community and experiences.

Because these texts are creative performances and are fundamental to understand a time and their authors, as well as vital to understanding the relationship of Beat women to the memoir genre, it is essential to recognize the importance of the text’s creation, author, and overlapping themes and scenes. It seems this essay can be broken down into several shared themes, documented experiences, and critical points made by Frazer, di Prima, Johnson, and Jones: employment, sex, and creative activity are topics that bear mentioning and illustrate past stories of female Beat experience; these sections follow.

Employment

Women Beats performed not only for their own survival, but to aid in the survival of the community (mostly the men in their lives who did not often work outside of writing)—Frazer performed sex for money and di Prima modeled nude for the same. Becoming the breadwinners involved in numerous forms of employment, these women often put their creative work and self-expression on the backburner. While Jack Kerouac, LeRoi Jones, and Ray Bremser (the

significant others of Johnson, Jones, and Frazer, respectively) were writing and publicly reading (and as Ray was running from the law), their female counterparts were hard at non-creative work to foot bills, supporting male writers, households, and community.

These women appreciate the fact that they were not the stereotypical 1950's housewives, but are critical of the fact that they did not have as much time to write or equal opportunity to publish. Di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, a 'pornographic memoir,' comments on the notion of unequal treatment in terms of publication, for she admits that her memoir is not entirely accurate due to her editor's and publisher's wishes for 'MORE SEX,' as well as di Prima's need to support her San Francisco household. Di Prima's 1969 memoir was one of the first women Beat memoirs to be published; fictionalized and geared towards women readers, it captured di Prima's possible experiences, but the air of her male editor lingers. It was not until 1987, after Frazer and Johnson's memoirs had been published, that di Prima added an afterword in which she illustrates her reasons for writing *Memoirs of a Beatnik*; reflecting on her choice to publish the 'memoir,' she suggests that at the time of its publication, she was focused more on survival than creativity, "writing—well, writing for our rent and dinner [...] Write I did, else how would we all have the seaweed and brown rice and miso soup I deemed necessary for our survival? It was a schizophrenic life" (di Prima 190-91). Kerouac and Ginsberg had found literary success and were able to write for pleasure, but di Prima wrote to survive and to carry her family, and while she was not necessarily resentful of the creative freedom and accomplishments of the male Beats, she was aware that her employment as a writer was much different than the men; her publishers had an agenda for her 'memoir,' and that notion, years later at least, she criticized. By adding an afterword explaining her writing process and intentions, di Prima uses her 'memoir' to

both tell stories of what could have happened during the Beat movement, but also to comment on what should have—more women writing and publishing on their own terms.

Di Prima's afterword also speaks to her part in a Beat revival, for she added those four-and-a-half pages around the time when interest in Beat culture was resurfacing and more scholarly work on the Beats was being produced and noticed. It seems di Prima wanted it to be known that not all of her past penned experiences were truthful; writing this section to express her criticism of society and of what she had to do to survive. Furthermore, according to the time of her afterword, it seems di Prima wished to make it known that male Beats did not accurately portray the women of their time and community; also declaring that she had not completely honest in this regard.

For Frazer, employment and prostitution was not in terms of selling her words and sex scenes, but in selling her body. Attempting to support herself, fugitive husband, and infant daughter, Frazer and family traveled to Mexico. While Ray is busy writing poetry in one of the many habitats they establish, Frazer goes to the streets to provide for her family. While Ray's artistic nature and commitment to poetry has an air of Beat romanticism upon first glimpse, the reality of Frazer's documented experiences is extremely bleak. Frazer's telling of her procuring and providing methods illustrate the criticism of her circumstances—her damaging marriage and the ways in which she was physically, sexually, and emotionally diminished both in matrimony and source of employment. Throughout her memoir, Frazer spews stream-of-consciousness recollections as if when she is writing she is transported back to Mexico, again selling her body. From Frazer's illustrations, readers can gather that Frazer was determined, walking the streets day in and out in search for clients, and while Frazer may not have been artistically creating in Mexico, she was creative in the ways in which she collected money and in forming 'business'

relationships. However, Frazer's heavy fear and desperation never departs from the scenes of her as prostitute; her past sadness and panic is entangled in her writing: "Reading it, I can pretend to feel myself in her ratty costume walking the streets to the disdain of many, not being street wise, getting ripped off, getting scared, getting treated like a whore. And I can pretend to feel her love of husband and baby in its crushing weight, taking away all logic and pushing her through sticky drunk nights, just one more lay and then I can go home" (Hannah Withrow 5). In *Troia*, Frazer mentions that she does not regret her experiences, but as she addresses her work to Ray, she is critical of his lack of respect for her mind, body, and being—Ray believing that it was Frazer's duty to conceal him from law enforcement, allow him time to write, and sell her body for their food and drugs.

The memoiristic work of Johnson and Jones came later, but their criticism towards 1950s paying work for women is evident. While Johnson and Jones were not forced to perform sex in reality or in writing to pay the bills, they illustrate the far-from-glamorous and underappreciated nature of their non-creative work. They do not see their time as wasted and cherish their experiences, yet they do illustrate that they hoped the literary scene would have had more to offer women of their time.

Beginning her memoir with images of her childhood and her mother's wish that Joyce become a famous composer, Johnson (maiden name Glassman) illustrates how unhappy she would be if she were to grow up and live like her mother, constantly vacuuming the living room rug and never playing the piano she saved for. Eventually moving out, Johnson experiences 'the world' a few blocks away from her parents' apartment, working as a secretary for some time to fund her life and aid others in her circle. Knowing she is falling into a pattern of silence, Johnson yearns to write and does earn a writing contract and editing job, yet remains on the sidelines in

comparison to her artistic male friends and eventual boyfriend, Kerouac. Johnson's work as an editor, however, is significant to furthering the Beat movement, for she promotes the work of her artist friends to her superior editors/publishers. While Johnson is contracted to write her own novel, she spends most of her time working at her editing job and caring for Kerouac—Johnson's relationship with Kerouac allowed her to escape from her working world of editing and publishing, but it often delivered other stressors—making sure Kerouac made appointments and keeping him sane and safe, overall, Johnson put her work on the backburner to support Kerouac's writing career.

Johnson admits that while women were usually unable to go 'on the road,' Beat women instead led unconventional lives to work to transform society: "Most of [the Beat women] never got the chance literally to go on the road. Our road instead became the strange lives we were leading. We had actually *chosen* those lives for good reasons" (qtd. in Johnson xix). Beat women chose to take a different route and often became stuck working to provide for themselves and their male counterparts; however, while Johnson may look back and wish she had created more/wished for more opportunities for women, she argues that her experiences among Beat men eventually led to both an active role in a community, later literary success, and dedication to keeping Beat ideas and aesthetics alive. Johnson criticizes society as well as the lack of work given to women in the writing/publishing industry, but used her career, community, and literary knowledge to transform a movement and capture its essence.

Like Johnson, Jones also edited, among other things, her and LeRoi Jones' (then-husband) literary magazine, *Yugen*. Jones describes the heavy lifting work she (and other women Beats) did to further the Beat movement and tells of her long hours spent editing *Yugen*. Although Jones appreciated that she had a hand in selecting and arranging the works published in

Yugen (mostly male work), she is critical of the men who received the credit for the journal's creation, for it was she who spent the time maintaining the magazine. Jones writes of the first issue: "*Yugen I* was neat, twenty-four pages, serious looking, its cover print an ochre on off-white grainy paper, the white spaces making the face of a man you don't see at first because he's in reverse. His own eyes aren't focused either, he seems to be looking wildly at the ideogram running across the cover in front of him, the Japanese character for *Yugen*, which I drew, and which means 'elegance, beauty, grace, transcendence of these things, and also nothing at all'" (Jones 54). Jones' cover art and title choices closely resemble her life in connection to the magazine: The drawing of the man speaks to the mostly-male work and credit given for the magazine, however, the image also has the 'you don't see at first' notion, which suggests that something else is going on—in this case, Hettie Jones, a woman, planning and curating each edition. The definition of the title, *Yugen*, illustrates Hettie's relationship to the magazine, for she meticulously produces each edition and then receives little credit—beautifully surpassing expectations to no acknowledgement—it is only the published male poets/artists that gain recognition. Jones's husband did some work both in and on *Yugen*, and Hettie tells of the time he 'surprised' her: "He gave me a new name that year—H. Cohen-Jones—and surprised me with it on the last *Yugen* masthead. I liked it—it was funny to have the least aristocratic hyphenated name in America, although the up-front initial, H, somehow left out the woman whose mouth I was trying to open" (Jones 168). This notion nods to Hettie's past identity as 'Cohen,' however, it leaves her with only the names of the men who would leave her; 'Hettie,' the name and the person, is looked over, her voice and power somehow shortened with this surprise renaming.

While they may have been lacking in recognition and time for creative self-expression during the rise of male Beats, women Beats were integral to their cultural movement, for their

work and dedication to art and change gave the Beats public presence and aided in the survival of their greater artistic community (predominately male) as they offered their support, homes, food, and money (often wiring money to their male partners who were away somewhere, writing). For the men, as Johnson notes, “the great accomplishment was to avoid actual employment for as long as possible and by whatever means. But it was all right for women to go out and earn wages, since they had no important creative endeavors to be distracted from. The women didn’t mind, or, if they did, they never said—not until years later (Johnson 207). It was years later that these women spoke up and revealed that they *did* mind and what they sacrificed along the way. However, as both business and Beat women, it seems they perhaps gained more life experience in the realization that they were part of both a working and literary community, sharing the experience of caring for not only themselves but their respective families.

Sex

In the foreword by Anne Waldman to Brenda Knight’s anthology, *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution*, Waldman writes of the sexual relationships of Beat women: “Being dominated by relationships with men—letting our own talents lag, following their lead—which could result in drug dependencies, painful abortions, alienation from family and friends” (Knight x). This passage includes the experiences of the women discussed and suggests that they were not alone in their pain, especially in regards to their sexual relationships with men. Among these women, criticism of sex is present yet somewhat complicated, for the issues taken often move past the actual act of sex and into the areas of writing sex, abortion, bearing children, and the overall treatment of women. In Ann Douglas’s introduction to Johnson’s memoir, Douglas describes the experience of many 1950s women:

“In the late 1950s, young women—not very many at first—once again left home rather violently. They came from nice families, and their parents could never understand why the daughters they had raised so carefully suddenly chose precarious lives. A girl was expected to stay under her parents’ roof until she married, even if she worked for a year or so as a secretary, got a little taste of the world that way, but not too much. Experience, adventure—these were not for young women. Everyone knew they would involve exposure to sex. Sex was for men. For women, it was as dangerous as Russian roulette; an unwanted pregnancy was life-threatening in more ways than one. As for art—decorative young women had their place as muses and appreciators”
(Johnson xxxii).

Sex was in fact dangerous for these women, for it not only affected their health, but could compromise their independence, and with that notion of independence, sex was liberating—sex was a double-edged sword. In the case of writing sex, this notion is especially true for di Prima, for her pornographic memoir grants herself and other female characters sexual freedom free from judgment; however, the act of writing sex for a male editor and to cater to a particular audience revokes some of di Prima’s creative freedom. In addition, unauthentically writing sex alters di Prima’s actual experience, for she admits that when the manuscript came back marked-up by her male editor, she would try out unusual sexual positions with her housemates: “Sometimes I’d wander the house looking for folks to check things out with: ‘Lie down,’ I’d say, ‘I want to see if this is possible.’ And they would, clothed, and we would find out, in a friendly disinterested way, if a particular contortion was viable, and stand up again, completely not turned on, and go about our business” (di Prima 193). Conjuring stories for her readers, di Prima’s readers are those who may have gained the most sense of sexual liberation from *Memoirs of a Beatnik*.

In terms of writing about women and sex, Johnson decides early on: “I would make it my business to write about young women quite different from the ones portrayed weekly in the pages of the *New Yorker*. I would write about furnished rooms and sex. Sex had to be approached critically, I thought. I would not succumb to the ladylike stratagem of shimmering my way toward discreet fadeouts. I’d decided this even before meeting Jack or reading *Howl*”

(Johnson 148). Johnson, more so it seems than di Prima (at least under different circumstances), wished to write authentically about female sexual experiences in her envisioned novels, succeeding in doing so throughout her memoir as well, for she writes openly about her sexual experiences (the good and bad), as well as her abortion. The story of her abortion is raw and the reader experiences Johnson's desperation, fear, and loneliness throughout the scene. From her realization: "In June I didn't get my period. First it was a little late, and then a lot, but I still thought it would come anyway, and I waited, thinking I felt it sometimes. But finally it didn't come. A tangible, unbelievable fact, like sealed doom. I was going to have a baby. But it was impossible for me to have a baby" (Johnson 106), to the procurement process: "I'd managed to borrow the five hundred dollars from a friend in her late twenties, who'd borrowed it from a wealthy married man who was her lover" (Johnson 109), Johnson's sense of freedom is dangled in front of the reader and women's reproductive reality in the 1950s becomes all too real, for as Johnson writes, "Life was considered sacred. But independence was punishable by death" (Johnson 107). For Johnson, sex is important in terms of freedom of self in general and in writing, for she yearns for the female Beat experience to be captured honestly, because the male Beats did not understand female obstacles and adventures and had not done these experiences justice in textual terms. Johnson respects Kerouac's writing style but illustrates that he did not understand the female Beat journey: "I'd listen to [Jack] with delight and pain, seeing all the pictures he painted so well for me, wanting to go with him. Could he ever include a woman in his journeys? I didn't altogether see why not. Whenever I tried to raise the question, he'd stop me by saying that what I really wanted were babies" (Johnson 136). Here, Johnson is impressed by Kerouac's imagery and not necessarily asking Kerouac to accurately write women's sexual experiences, but her criticism of his writing of women leads her to categorize Johnson and not

take her professional and female opinion seriously. In addition, Kerouac's comment(s) reminds Johnson of her previous abortion and the fear/emotion of the procedure she worried she may not survive. Overall, Johnson is critical of the inability of her male friends to write women and sex in a non-diminishing manner, as well as understanding of the notion that with sex came liberation, but critical of the time where sex brought with it the danger of women losing independence and/or life—in a way, just like the male Beats, Johnson and the others wanted to be able to take their female and sexual independence for granted.

The issue of sex is even more complicated for Frazer, for she puts herself in physical and emotional danger when she turns to prostitution to care for her family. Fearful of Ray's temper and passion and afraid she will never see her baby again, Frazer uses her body to generate financial security; these actions also lead her to find security with the men for whom she performs—refuge from Ray's unpredictable and often violent moods. While Frazer sees her meetings with 'clients' as an escape, she cannot escape the containment of prostitution; it offers another form of mistreatment and sense of entrapment. Feeling controlled by Ray and trapped in a damaging 'career,' Frazer's anxiety is evident throughout her memoir. While Ray is now free of (or running from) incarceration during their time in Mexico, Frazer is the one imprisoned. Frazer's desperation and seemingly brainwashed (at one time) mind lead her to both believe and criticize Ray's words and actions:

“Ray threatens to leave me, and I threaten to leave him if the violence continues. He maintains it is good for a chick to get pounded on once in a while for it increases the circulation and makes her pretty. I am brought back to our meeting in Washington, D.C.; we fucked a lot the first time, all night and all day. Ray also says that fucking is good for chicks: the more they fuck the better they look and are, and later when he went to jail I figured I should uphold his views and fucked everyone in sight, from the first night to the last” (Frazer).

Throughout her memoir, Frazer illustrates her knowledge of her unhealthy and destructive marriage, yet her feelings of entrapment reach beyond the page; the reader feels stuck with her in mind and setting, trapped with Frazer in harmful sex acts, wishing they would end and Frazer could collect her money and go home, eventually gathering enough money to make it back to a familiar and safe place. Frazer eventually returns home, meeting up with Ray for some time, and Jones comments on seeing Frazer after she has returned from Mexico and is noticeably affected by her experiences: “in this story of a mother’s life on the road the romance goes and the baby is left at the border. Bonnie herself made it back. That arc of her milk stayed on my mind” (Jones 111). However, after knowing Frazer is free, her regurgitation of information and events also allows the reader to feel somewhat cleansed alongside her, pain and fear have been released; she has criticized her personal decisions as well as the treatment of women, and while she may have lost her daughter and some self-confidence along her Mexico way, Frazer’s memoir demonstrates her commitment to rebuilding her life and condemnation of the way she was treated.

Creative Activity & Memoir Writing

The women discussed illustrate that they are somewhat regretful, and whether it was a wish to have written or painted more, their stories are similar; women Beats look back to their younger selves and wished they had more time, energy, and bravery to create. The male Beats had created a space for themselves and their ‘boy gang’ to write and perform, not allowing easy access for the women. During a movement that suggests an air of freedom, gender was a barrier and Beat women were often fearful to enter a world that the men deemed sacred to themselves, and while scholars are still making strides to make women Beats part of the American literary canon, male Beats are the most referenced in terms of poetry and the novel. However, it is

memoir where Beat women found a specialty, for their distinct approaches to capturing emotions and retelling scenes establish their presence in their own literary community in terms of the memoir genre as well as the community of their allied voices; both detached from and connected to the male Beat community, these women work to set themselves apart but also be remembered and included in a specific time and place. While they include themselves in a particular history, these women are not afraid to criticize their treatment within their cultural atmosphere. With limited creative access, Beat women curated cultural artifacts and later stepped into a genre that welcomed their stories and pain. Their creative energies may not have reached a peak at the height of the Beat movement, but the later memoirs of women Beats attest to their aspirations and wishes to write critical and liberatory accounts.

It is important to note, however, that these memoirs are not only sources of information to illustrate overlapping events and to secure a place/give voices to women of the Beat movement, but the memoirs of women Beats are vital texts in themselves. Frazer, di Prima, Johnson, and Jones look to the past to discover their present identities, for as Nancy Miller suggests, the “writing autobiographical subject—female or male—always requires a partner in crime. Put another way, it takes two to make an autobiography, to perform an autobiographical act” (Miller 422-23). While Miller suggests that the autobiographical subject’s partner in crime is the reader, it seems that in addition to the reader as the author’s partner in crime there is a partner in both crime and time for the memoir writer, for memoirs require two parts of one’s self—the past self and the writing present self who has gained insight from life experiences. With this notion of two selves, the essence and importance of memoir is evident—pasts and presents are connected yet distinct, and in addition to the author’s past and present selves, the reader becomes involved; creating a relationship with both past and present elements of the author. In this sense,

memoir is significant for women Beats not only to write more freely and unrestrained and provide rare glimpses into the lives of Beat women, but to offer criticism and set themselves both apart from and connected to past Beat community, as well as engage readers with a “heightened process of identification” with female Beat authors (Miller 423). Being some of the first authors to make memoirs popular, their

“attempts to make the written page a performative space for writer and reader (or at least to recast the page as the residue of the writer’s performative process), to explore, as does Hettie Jones, speaking as well as writing, to play with the gap between the way language functions for the ear and for the eye, may be another reason why women who wrote Beat at times chose to work outside the category of novel, with its weight of print-based conventions, and instead engaged their lives and readers through the less-determined genres of the memoir and personal narrative” (Hunt 258).

The voices and experiences of women Beats perform dialogues between both past and present authorial selves, readers, and other women Beats who personally relate to and are often mentioned throughout these stories. It appears the memoir genre felt more genuine to women Beats, for the novel “was simply too constraining, too indirect, too impersonal” (Hunt 257). While still practicing Beat aesthetics and offering previously unpublished poetry and vibrant scenes, women Beats demonstrate a liberatory energy when writing their pasts; their personal connection to the time and movement allows them to write both nostalgically and critically, sharing their uninhibited visions without a need for traditional and/or novelistic literary conventions. Scenes describing family (both blood and literary), sex, employment and hardship, silence, fear, and inspiration (all under the umbrella of community) overlap to tell of a connected past and establish a future.

Frazer’s notion of future is the hope for a more pain-free existence. She uses her creative energy to release her inner toxins, and seemingly even more so than the other women discussed, Frazer writes to navigate and move past her pain. Releasing her ache to the page and writing by

and for herself, Frazer illuminates her pain while addressing her memoir to Ray, showing him the silence and desperation she felt. However, while Frazer's work may have begun by 'talking' to Ray, the writing was done by her and to serve her—a method of relieving personal hurt and sorrow; Frazer makes her private voice public, but does so on her own terms and to transform herself. Written as if she is vomiting images and information, Frazer is cleansing herself, looking for the end/time when the wounds heal:

“In looking back, what's important is not the technique or lack of it, but those few minutes when you overcome frustration, bridge the gap, and hold something incredibly beautiful to you: the point where you don't see yourself anymore but you are there and OBOY, that's the way you really are” (Introduction to Bremser [Frazer] ii).

It seems the silence and fear of writing was not as much of an issue for Frazer, for it was more of a necessity for her to not only show Ray the pain he had caused, but to show him and readers that she was now free; writing for Frazer was a liberatory exercise that required individualized literary conventions. If she had “tried to fictionalize, to novelize, her experiences in Mexico she would have had to use her understanding of the needs and expectations of the impersonal reader to shape the book, but instead her decision to write as if talking to someone who shared these experiences allowed her to probe her associations with the material, to bring these reflections and lyric flights to the fore, and to push the linear narrative of the events into the background” (Hunt 258). Frazer suggests that by writing she is curing a disease, a contamination: “Damn the pain; it must be written. Damn reality that all the present infections have to be drained from a stopped hole. Damn the metaphors and the scariness; it is the fever taking over” (Frazer 43). With this, she uses that fever or infection as inspiration, a muse that eventually works to cure itself. In Knight's anthology, Frazer tells of her writing experience(s):

“I defined myself when I sat down to write. It was a rebellion against my most immediate authority figure, my husband, who was once again in jail. Writing was a therapy I could afford. It was exciting then and still is to give myself that freedom. Alone I evolved my personal story.

There is no mentor or male muse to be a live-in example for me. I have more faith in my creativity now. Creativity is in the middle, at the turning point of gender, either, neither, nor”
(qtd. in Knight 271).

Here, after completing her memoir and healing, Frazer realizes her courage and that creative energy and artistic talent does not rely on gender—writing (especially memoir writing) is a freeing, pleasurable, all-inclusive practice. Overall, Frazer’s creative activity/memoir writing is a method to criticize her past, to learn from it, and to end the hurt caused.

Johnson’s memoir was also about writing through/about what she criticized/deemed unfair, but it was also a commitment to writing women from women’s perspective, and this is evident throughout her prose. For even though she had few women writers of influence and no women writing *Beat* to look to (for most were writing in secret), Johnson decided she would write truthfully of women’s perspective as a young woman amidst the ‘Silent Generation,’ before the ‘Beat Generation’ was ever known; her vivid retelling of scenes accompanies her wish to change the ways in which women were written and viewed. Johnson did remain silent for a time, wishing she could find the time to create; she was not alone in this. Working on a novel in the midst of Kerouac’s rise to fame and taking care of him when celebrity status became too much for him to handle, Johnson admits that she enjoyed spending time with Kerouac rather than work on her novel. Johnson’s devotion to not only keeping Kerouac’s sanity but also his writing stole from her own time to create the female-centered texts she dreamed of writing. To Johnson, Kerouac’s work and success may have been inspiring, yet she resented his (and other male authors’) portrayal of the feminine. Writing again of John Clellon Holmes’ appreciation for male Beats/male characters, Johnson notes that he “scrupulously matches each of the male characters in his roman à clef to their originals, the ‘girls’ are variously ‘amalgams of several people’,

‘accurate to the young women of the time’, ‘a type rather than an individual.’ He can’t quite remember them—they were more anonymous passengers on the big Greyhound bus of experience. Lacking centers, how could they burn with the fever that infected his young men? What they did, I guess, was fill up the seats” (Johnson 79). Holmes and others eliminated female individuality and created a sort of schizophrenic blend of women in their art and in their ideas of what Beat women were observing and experiencing; the men highly underestimated what these women could and would later do—Beat women did have a fever and felt a similar need to break through it, also wishing to add to and invigorate what had been written about them.

Johnson’s status as a working writer was known and she mentions that it was always on her mind—unwritten pages calling out to her, urging her to find her voice. Before the movement, Johnson knew she held a “bottled eagerness,” and feeling she needed to exert creative energy she asked if she could “be somehow more a part of the Beat Generation than of the Silent one [she’d] been born into chronologically?” (Johnson 71). While Johnson and the other ladies mentioned their longing to create more, these women had little to no artistic females to stimulate and satisfy their creative urges; “no one had taught us to be women artists or writers” (Johnson xxxii), this notion clearly hindering their creative motivation and courage for women Beats stood for new ideas and aesthetics—they were unsure and seemingly afraid to portray that in writing.

However, Johnson eventually found her voice, and although she was creatively silent at times, her experiences and involvement in and survival of the Beat scene allowed inspiration for a number of works and later, an award-winning memoir. Johnson mentions several times that she does not regret her choices, “especially not her ‘seat at the table in the exact center of the universe,’ as she puts it, ‘the only place in America that’s alive’. She does not even regret, she says, the fact that women had no voice at that table then as long as she speaks of it now: ‘I’m a

forty-seven- year-old woman with a permanent sense of impermanence. If time were like a passage of music, you could keep going back to it till you got it right” (qtd. in Miller 433).

While once silent, she finds her voice and appreciates it, understanding that she and her writing can always change, always evolve—while not always pleasant, her past experiences have offered her a lifetime of knowledge and inspiration.

Jones’ memoir is dedicated to her daughters and looks to the future of women, which foreshadows her stories and life. But like Johnson’s memoir, Jones begins her story by looking to the past, upon her childhood, and how she became upset and shocked when her parents found her lying in the grass, looking up at the sky, weaving clouds, as if she was weaving her future. During this imaginative scene, Jones seems to realize her sense of difference within her family, and it seems that at this moment, “Hettie’s sensibility was fully developed [...] and she knew she would have to leave to become herself” (Knight 183). It is this notion that Jones realizes again, years later, when she leaves her husband (LeRoi Jones, later to become Amiri Baraka) and finds time to write—she had to leave the life she once knew to find her identity and recognize her talent, for she writes, “Without a him in the house, there was more space/time for her, and I tried to redefine the way a woman might use it” (Jones 233-4). When she uses the third person to describe her past self in the above passage, it seems she is doing so to speak/write for all of the Beat women who were at one time silenced or fearful of writing, including herself. Removing herself from environments that hinder her creativity, Jones looks toward her future and the future of women writers, for she knows she and friends were secretly creating and/or on creative hiatus: “Joyce never mentioned she’d stopped writing... I kept my own ‘occasional poems’ to myself, looking *at*, but not beyond Aishah’s windows. In retrospect there’s some terrible shame—how *could we?*” (Jones 180). Jones looks back ashamed at herself and her female comrades for not

embracing and/or putting more energy into their writing—in this regard, she is critical of her past self and the past selves of her Beat women friends.

Of all the women discussed, Jones seems to feel most guilty about her past silence than the others; she later realizes her talent and is saddened and critical by her destruction of past material: “Beside my desk at *Partisan* I kept a big green metal waste can, where most of my lunchtime attempts to write got filed. I was too ashamed to show them. I didn’t like my tone of voice, the twist of my tongue. At the open readings, where anyone could stand up, I remained in the cheering audience. Roi was so much better; everyone else was so much better. Only one poem I wrote survives, a sort-of-but-not-too haiku” (Jones 48). Even years later, Jones seems insecure of her poetry, but she pushes through and shows readers the woman she became and what she thinks her courage can mean for other female authors—she has the confidence to work towards the future, but at one time, she did not feel comfortable sharing her personal creative endeavors.

Jones and her female comrades faced societal, relational, and artistic challenges, and just as Frazer wrote that creative activity is genderless, these Beat women once felt that their gender undermined their authority, but all, at some point, realized that they had to remove themselves from men to creatively produce, and when they were alone and found their voice, all were adamant that they wanted to make a change for themselves, changing the way women wrote and were written about: “Whereas I, like few other women at that time, would first lose my past to share his, and then, with that eventually lost too, would become the person who speaks to you now. Which covered some ground...” (Jones 65). It was necessary for Jones and the others to be away from men to find their inner-writers and realize creative equality; Jones allowing the reader

to envision her in a room, alone, writing, which is something she could not see for herself years earlier.

Choosing to pen their life experiences, Frazer, di Prima, Johnson, and Jones perform their texts and illustrate the freeing nature of memoir writing and how they all performed literary release; creating a space to share experiences and perform their personal Beat styles. A theme of performance is evident in all four memoirs discussed—there is performance on paper and in creating as past and present selves, as well as each author’s performance of gender. Playing a large part in inspiring the men who became famous and being inspired themselves, women Beats identified and were familiar with many of the experiences the boys discussed. Perhaps it is identification that stands out in these memoirs, especially as a female reader, for maybe these women writers wanted not only to share their voices and view of a past community, but it is possible they wanted to offer readers the chance to identify with their feminine journey—offering readers their criticism, writing style, and a new and/or renewed sense of the Beats, for “however solitary, memoir reading, like memoir writing, participates in an important form of collective memorialization, providing building blocks to a more fully shared national narrative” (Miller 424). With each text examined, readers learn of the author’s journey—the memories of women Beats build upon histories and change what many readers may have known/thought about the Beat era; also reminding readers “that literary production is never neat, even if we make histories of it that are” (Hunt 254). Each text is a vital text in itself, shaping consciousness and representing both individual and communal experiences and perspectives; influencing past and forming present literary communities.

These women write glimpses into other women’s lives in their own memoirs and illustrate their connection to a female community both in the past and in their approach to writing

memoirs. “While Johnson laments the silence imposed on Beat women, never for a moment does she suggest that any other cultural site could have offered her as much stimulation, or that silence precluded a different form of participation” (Johnson xv). She participates during the rise of the Beat movement and years later, continuing to shape a time in history—with her memoir and the stories by Jones, di Prima, and Frazer, readers learn of their participation in the lives of one another, as well their contribution to furthering a movement. While they may have been literarily silent at one time, their creative nature, inspiration, and exhilarating life experiences demand telling. Aside from the admission that they would have liked to have created more, there seem to be no regrets in terms of being associated with furthering the Beat movement. This was a time in their history that shaped them and that shaped society’s consciousness.

It is not that women could not identify with the works of Kerouac or Ginsberg, they were physically and mentally capable of performing as male Beats did, but most often women were not given the opportunities to perform their writing (both privately and publicly); usually unable to go ‘on the road,’ Beat women instead led unconventional lives to work to transform society: “Most of [the Beat women] never got the chance literally to go on the road. Our road instead became the strange lives we were leading. We had actually *chosen* those lives” (qtd. in Johnson xiii). “*On the Road* electrified young women as well as men,” and while they may not have been on the road with the boys, Beat women understood the unconventional and rebellious ‘road’ experiences before Kerouac’s famous novel was published; women Beats were gaining their own life experiences that would later propel them into the literary world (Johnson xiv). These women did not need *On the Road* or male writings to electrify them, for they were already productive and creative in their own right, willing to fight for the lives they wished to lead and the art they wanted to print and publicize. Johnson was writing a book under contract during the time of

Kerouac's sudden fame, and while she did find it difficult to write when Jack was around, she was performing creatively and making a name for herself. She mentions many times that she knew she should be home writing after work; Johnson (as well as the other women discussed), at times, privileged experience over creative work, which eventually led to both an active role in a community as well as later literary success. Seen as rebellious and defiant, many women Beats were rejected by their families, but created their own families elsewhere (both figuratively and literally); becoming part of a community that welcomed new ideas. However, any new ideas were often 'performed' by men, for the women Beats did not feel confident in their work at the time, did not have the time to create, or the men thought their female friends should be listeners and observers. However, "it is important to remember that several of the Beat women writers, most notably Johnson and the poet Diane di Prima were working in 'Beat' directions before any of the major Beat works were published" (Johnson xvi). These women understood the liberating and performative nature of writing and were equally capable to do creative work, but not always comfortable or given the opportunity to display their labors—performance many times associated with access and opportunity.

What is interesting is that all of these women saved their work, holding their art to be at least worthy of saving they knew one day the time would come when this work was 'good enough' or that there would be others to join in their once silent, now creating community. While their initial silence kept these Beat women from vigorous creative expression, it later aroused their desire to illustrate their views of Beat scenes and write untold histories. These women are now influences and inspirers—releasing their pain and bottled energies illustrates the healing power of writing and their regard for creative expression and history; they have moved from often creatively underappreciated to forerunners and award-winners of the memoir genre. They

have established a place for themselves both among and separate from the men with whom they were associated. These women remember but move on and grow, holding on to part of their past selves and the experiences that shaped their histories, yet they discard the silence and fear of those young women, writing from their pasts and for their futures. Just as women Beats shared their past experiences, I write of my own experiences with the memoirs of these women and of how I came to discover the stories I knew must be there: women's stories and perspectives. Shaping consciousness and making change, the women Beats give themselves and their stories to the literary community. Once silent but always Beat, their stories are now heard and appreciated. Taking initiative to include themselves in Beat history, it is also "time for cultural historians, critical theorists, feminist literary critics, other poets and writers to take heed of this rich compendium of lore, literary history, and serious creative endeavor. And to acknowledge, as well, the suffering, difficulty, and dignity of these lives" (Knight xii). There were voices calling out to complete the Beat story and consciousness, these women have broken their silence and lent their voices to both past and present communities—forever shaping and offering a rethinking of the Beat movement.

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