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Offbeat and Beyond the Road: Beat Women and the Freedom to Write

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ABSTRACT

The Beats ignited a major cultural, artistic, and literary revolution in 1950s America that became a prominent staple in 20th-century literature. The works of its founders—Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs—led many to believe that the movement solely celebrated literature defined by globe-trotting and travel across the nation. Due to gender norms and cultural circumstances that restricted women's freedom to travel in the 1950s, the literature of the women of the Beat Generation did not emulate or reflect the notions of Kerouac's popular and widespread 1957 novel, *On the Road.* Thus, these women writers are chronically underrepresented in the understanding of the movement.

Through close textual analysis of the literature written by various Beat women, this thesis intends to offer a more complete understanding of the literary contributions of the Beat Generation by drawing attention to the notion that the women writers wrote under different circumstances and with varying degrees and forms of freedom. The works of Joyce Johnson, Joanne Kyger, Diane di Prima, and Hettie Jones reveal how each writer created and documented their explorations of freedom and how it manifested in the literature that they produced. In doing so, Beat aesthetics and themes are reconceptualized and work towards a more inclusive understanding of the generation while uncovering the neglected works of its women.

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Chapter 1

The Inception of the Beat Generation: Founded on Freedom

In the 1950s, three men defined an entire generation of writers, poets, and artists in one singular word—beat. The lives of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs aligned in 1948 in New York City at the campus of Columbia University. These men soon became the forefathers of the well-known "hippie" and post-war, revolutionary culture that emerged by the 1960s as they engaged in the underground, anti-conformist movement that surfaced through a union of literature, art, and music. Kerouac's coined term, "beat," holds multiple connotations. Apart from expressing resignation, defeat, and pure exhaustion, it also evokes sanctity, deriving from the term 'beatific.' Not only did beat identify the downtrodden individuals cast aside by society, but Kerouac honors the divinity of these artists as well. He recognized their creative pursuits through the illumination of their struggles that highlighted their unconventional ways of life that propelled the nation into a new form of artistic expression.

Kerouac states, "'You know, this is a really beat generation,'" in which 1950s American author and poet John Clellon Holmes elaborates by expressing that "More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and ultimately, of soul: a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself" (Holmes). Both Kerouac and Holmes offer descriptions of the generation that addresses the "beat down" disposition of much of post-war America and capture the counterculture movement that appeared in response. Through spontaneity and experimentation with innovation, the Beats represented those who

resisted society's attempts at reducing their individuality. They instead found themselves engaging in writing that celebrated a reimagined originality. Creation became an outlet for the Beats, providing a release from the rigid and often suffocating social expectations which defined 1950s America as materialistic, uniform, and consumerist. At the time, the literary movement occupied the coasts, mainly concentrated in New York City but eventually expanding in collaboration with writers of the San Francisco Renaissance. The constellation of writers and artists, such as Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan, Michael McClure, Kenneth Rexroth, and Jack Spicer ushered avant-garde poetry into the Bay Area, establishing a strong community in San Francisco that would later unite with creatives along the east coast.

The Beats, so dubbed by Kerouac, were writers and poets who focused on the experiences of personal liberation within their writing. Through this emphasis, a genre of poetry and prose emerged that surpassed all adherence to conventions and assumed a greater emphasis on—not only an exploration of the external—but also of the self. The Beats ignited a transformation in the literary scene in America through their free-spirited, spontaneous, and outright rejection of guidelines within their written work and creations. Many sought to expand their consciousness through experimentation with Eastern religions, spirituality, illicit substances, and relationships with the natural world. The poetry, prose, and literature that the Beats produced emerged after World War II and was placed against the backdrop of Cold War politics and tensions. The contrast in Beat values and practices compared to mainstream American culture evoked an alluring alternative to life within the United States, captivating those on a quest against conformity.

Despite Kerouac's description of "beaten down" artistic minds, the Beats undeniably possessed the necessary energy, passion, and pursuit to revolutionize America and send the

nation racing towards a path of expanded possibility. Without the Beats, America may have risked the continuation of the entrenched desire to be uniform, which dims creativity and is numbing to a nation of original beings. The rebellious, yet purposeful spirit of the Beat Generation encouraged people to think in unrestricted ways, inviting new forms of poetry, music, literature, and art that embody this release from the bitter bindings of tradition.

On the Road with Jack Kerouac

Situated at the epicenter of the Beat Generation was a novel that remains a staple in Beat literature and is valued as an inspiration for other texts of its kind. Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road* is a torrent of life and conscious reflection as he paints scenes of screaming through cities in stolen cars, hitchhiking across the American continent, and escaping the static and stable lifestyle that had washed over the nation by the 1950s. As he traveled the country, experiencing the events of his novel, Kerouac is one of the first to engage in the liberation of the road, which would incite many to take the same route. Kerouac reputedly wrote the first full draft of *On the Road* on a singular scroll that stretched 120 feet long, the unfurling teletype paper synonymous with the endless roads traversed by Kerouac's protagonists, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. The two were co-conspirators cruising through North America against the backdrop of conformist and conservative 1950s America. With its publication in 1957, *On the Road* served as a manifesto for restless American youth and unlocked an alternative way of living that was characterized by travel, minimalism, experimentations with sex and drugs, and a spirituality borrowed from and contributing to Buddhist practices. The seduction of the road became a trope for the emergence of 1950s counterculture, which became heightened over the decade.

For Kerouac and his protagonists, the road presented the opportunity to experience the entirety of America and was a manifestation of Kerouac's own travels across the North American continent with friend and prominent figure of the Beat Generation, Neal Cassady. Kerouac's Sal Paradise embodies the writer's pursuits: "I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me" (Kerouac 11). For Kerouac, his ability to go on the road and freely travel across America with minimal possessions, an abandonment of itineraries, and a heavy reliance on the generous spirits of others to carry him along the way provided considerable opportunities. Kerouac remarks, "He and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there. Off we roared south" (Kerouac 138). Whether it be through sex, drugs, literary pursuits, or fast-paced movements across the country, Kerouac's road created a space for the tales that would later come to fruition as *On the Road.*

Kerouac's novel and decision to engage in cross-country travel are both suggestive of the idea that freedom was an enticing promise of the road. The freedom to physically travel translates into the freedom of greater opportunity, the freedom to relinquish all adherence to social conventions and restrictions, and the freedom to actively construct. The liberty that Kerouac experiences is not contingent on arriving at one destination. Instead, the accessibility of the road for Sal and Dean becomes a consistent presence in their lives, which they return to and reintroduce themselves to when desired. For Kerouac, traveling on the road drove his narrative and served as a source of inspiration, not only fueling his creative and literary pursuits but also opening up opportunities for personal freedoms that rebelled against the advised narrative that men were told they must accept. Rather than obtaining a university education, serving the

country, or finding consistent work, Kerouac embarks on a journey across the country defined by self-discovery, personal navigation, and reckless abandonment of a world that had attempted to place an archetype over his infinite existence.

For Kerouac, the physical distance was no longer an obstacle to accessing the nation. He met several individuals during his time on the road, both intellectuals and ordinary citizens who comprised the United States. The ability to explore both personally and physically gave Kerouac exposure to other writers, people, cultural revolutions, literary movements, and hubs of intellectual growth. In a way, the road offered Kerouac and several of his male Beat counterparts the ability to flee from responsibilities that they took no interest in upholding, such as the more idle tasks of caring for the home, maintaining a steady job, or financially supporting a family. In fact, many worked for the Merchant Marine—a sea-going version of the road. The road released them from social expectations and values that restricted their creativity and mobility. In *On the Road*, Kerouac rejoices in his ability to reinvent and create himself and his narrative by writing that they would be "driving across the world and into the places where [they] would finally learn [themselves]" (Kerouac 280). The road became an emblem of an escape from society and an entryway to the literary movement that was unfolding.

While the road became a glorified expedition for many of the writers of the Beat Generation, it exempted a demographic of writers and poets who would become neglected due to their inability to travel as freely as Kerouac. Today, much of the canon is reduced to the works of its three founders—Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs—due to the unwarranted exclusion of a cohort of writers who were silenced by gender discrimination. These brilliant minds belonged to the women writers of the Beat Generation, many of whom are still unheard of and few who have been awarded the recognition that they deserve. However, Beat women writers were present and

participated in the literary movement, despite not inhabiting the road to the extent that male Beat writers did. The road offered obvious freedom for men, yet gendered politics frequently tied women to different spaces that were overlooked when considering the literary accomplishments of the generation. It is worthy of noting and exploring these inconsistencies in order to uncover advancements in literature produced by Beat women, who have been unfairly unrepresented and repeatedly written off as absent. Like the beat of a heart, women writers and poets consistently pounded within the chest of the literary movement and were entirely necessary for its function and survival. Their rhythmic presence—unfortunately understood as undertones of the generation—pumped blood through the movement's veins to preserve its life. Though not often seen nor heard, women Beat writers diligently worked in the shadows of their male counterparts. Their beat sustained their presence by any means necessary to ensure that they were never completely silenced or forgotten.

Chapter 2

Beat Women and the Freedom of Choice

In 1983, Beat writer Joyce Johnson published a memoir entitled *Minor Characters*, revealing her perspective as a woman writer during the 1950s and 1960s while in a romantic relationship with Jack Kerouac during his publication of *On the Road*. The title serves as no exaggeration when considering the role of women writers during this era. Johnson believed that she and other women served as “minor characters” in the narrative that Kerouac and other male writers constructed. Many of the Beat women’s achievements were unheard of and disregarded, taking a, yes, backseat to the men’s pursuits. Instead, the women writers and poets who played pivotal roles in the progression of the literary movement were overlooked. At its core, the Beat Generation was thought to have been ruled by men. However, this notion has been falsely constructed and misunderstood due to consistent neglect to understand the ways that Beat women wrote and how they forged the necessary freedom to create themselves.

While Joyce Johnson had longed to accompany Kerouac on the road, she was never included. Therefore, her narrative unfolded differently, aligning with many Beat women writers. They discovered the freedom and risks that existed in writing from an internal locus rather than from the unattainable external location of the road. Due to the social constraints of the 1950s, women were expected to remain internally within the structures built for them: the house, the school, and the office. The road, which became a defining and crucial journey for many of the male Beats, was nonexistent within many of the women’s work. Therefore, much of the women’s literature never received proper attention.

Women writers and poets such as Joyce Johnson, Joanne Kyger, Diane di Prima, and Hettie Jones took tremendous strides in inserting themselves within the Beat narrative—many making the active decision to abandon the safety of conventional lifestyles to gain entry into the literary scene. These women rebelled against their erasure by writing, weaving, and reinventing themselves and giving "Beat literature a transformative character, rending speech from their socially mandated silence, presence from their invisibility of gender, and literary works from their subordinate status as literature's objects" (Johnson and Grace 7). They established much of their freedom by actively resisting and transgressing rigid lifestyles. By challenging society's efforts to dismiss their creative pursuits, these women summoned courage, sacrifice, and defiance in order to actively *choose* their lives (Johnson and Grace 17). Johnson, Kyger, di Prima, and Jones were some of the most prominent voices who initiated female involvement in what has been considered a homosocial realm due to its formation of close relationships amongst male writers, poets, and artists. By infiltrating the cracks of the gender-exclusive generation, these women cultivated their talents within the narrowed spaces of their existence through admirable dedication to their work. Simply understanding the accomplishments and contributions of the Beat Generation from a male perspective, and from Kerouac's *On the Road*, fails to engage with the works of the women, as the "road narrative" omits their presence. Entering the realms of Beat women allows for alternative ways of writing to become recognizable. Beat women writers garnered freedom from the peculiarities of their lives, and the evidence resides in the unexplored crevices of their literary works.

Instead of Sal Paradise's route, these women focus internally on themselves and alter their submissive roles in the structures that corralled their creative agency, which in many ways is a more remarkable feat. Joyce Johnson's use of themes such as "dropping out," sexual

experimentation, and insertion into spaces that were previously uninhabited by women "challenges the central Beat discourse of male freedom" (Johnson and Grace 19). Johnson independently navigates her life and the life of her protagonist as both women revolt against the expectations that were forced on young women. Joanne Kyger had the opportunity to travel; however, much of the freedom she experienced did not derive from her voyage to the Asian continent but emerged by reworking and retelling past narratives. Di Prima consciously and radically utilized language that prevented her from being trapped by categorization, while Jones immersed herself in personal transformation. These women's contributions to Beat literature began with "a recognition of their oppression, the extent of their personal responsibility for it, and the opportunity for liberation presented by the unconventionality of bohemian enclaves like Beat" (Johnson and Grace 9). To gain a comprehensive understanding of the literary contributions made within the Beat Generation, there needs to be a reevaluation of the literary movement through a gendered lens that seeks to uncover a more authentic portrayal of its women writers. Merely acknowledging their existence is not enough. Their works offer a reconceptualized notion of freedom that needs not be unearthed by traversing the continent but rather by navigating the self.

According to Beat scholars Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, "The fact that so many women Beat writers did shed their silence and secrecy and emerge as public artists is a significant achievement—ultimately, perhaps more daring and consequential than making the mythic Beat road trip" (Johnson and Grace 17). Understanding the literary contributions and achievements of women Beats begins with the recognition of this feat. In the preface to the 1999 edition of *Minor Characters,* Joyce Johnson states, "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" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 15). Johnson, Kyger, di Prima, and Jones each chose to resist society's attempts to dictate their lives. The active decision for a woman to *choose* how she spends her days, what she pursues, and the places she inhabits served as a triumph for Beat women writers. These women personified the spirit of the Beat Generation and embodied the essence of the literary movement, which hinged on rejecting conformity, liberating oneself, and risking discomfort for the rewards of writing. Textual analysis of the works of Joyce Johnson, Joanne Kyger, Diane di Prima, and Hettie Jones reveals the alternative freedoms pursued by Beat women writers, which surpass Kerouac's road narrative. Through analysis of the women's works, the canon expands, reinstating Beat women within history. By focusing on their accomplishments, not only does this attention redefine the Beat community, its aesthetics, and tropes, but it also provides a more accurate representation of the literary world during this period in time. Reclaiming their participation and understanding their written works ensures that their accomplishments are not forgotten, permanently placing them in time and space as influential members of the generation. In her 1929 essay, "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf cautions male intellectuals of her time, "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt, that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (Woolf 135). While Woolf called out and took to task the global lockdown on learning and writing, it was roughly two decades later that Beat women writers embodied her argument, their minds serving as keys to unlocking the fundamental "freedom of the mind."

Chapter 3

Joyce Johnson and the Occupancy of Space

Unlike Kerouac and his male counterparts, women Beat writers were largely excluded from the opportunities that the road presented and, instead, were expected to reside within the confines of socially appropriate spaces. The walled bedrooms of parents' homes, the concrete masonry of office buildings, the countertops of kitchens, the desk chairs of classrooms all served as spaces where women were supposed to dwell. Their worlds were carefully constructed based on their obedience, domesticity, and adherence to expectations. Their occupancy of space was dependent on their gender, and they were given limited opportunities to venture beyond these internal structures and institutions. Conversely, in *On the Road,* Dean Moriarty recognizes that the road unlocks greater accessibility to the world. He exudes, "Yes! You and I, Sal, we'd dig the whole world with a car like this because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world. Ain't nowhere else it can go—right?" (Kerouac 230). For the male Beat, the act of leaving and traveling across America proved to be a simple feat, one that allowed the opportunity to expand his influence and gain a first-person perspective of the external world. For Beat women, this endeavor was less accessible. Johnson even questions the exclusivity of Kerouac's travels; "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. That was what all women wanted and what I wanted too, even though I said I didn't" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 136). Preconceived notions set forth by 1950s America that sought to diminish a woman's role to that of a wife, mother, and caregiver fueled their limited range of motion. Johnson also addresses the temporal limitations of the locations that were accessible to women, explaining how "There were no women in this nighttime world…It was strange to think that

because of my sex I'd probably never see any of this again, and would probably never have seen it at all if it hadn't been for Jack" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 139). Women were not only limited to *where* they could go but also were advised to be cautious of *when* they were traveling—their limited range of movement constricting their independence.

Born in 1935 in Queens, New York and raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Joyce Johnson's life eventually converged with Kerouac and fellow members of the Beat Generation. They walked the same damaged sidewalks, their worn soles treading on tufts of grass that persevered in between cracks, lush life at odds with the jungle of concrete. They rode the same ebb and flow of subway riders, uptown, downtown, and between. They escaped to the same Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village where avant-garde artists and writers assembled, anchored by the iconic Washington Arch. Despite their parallel lives, Johnson faced challenges that Kerouac did not. Yet, Johnson actively and creatively refused the spatial restrictions and inequalities that sought to contain her. She often rebelled against her controlling parents and roamed the city despite their dissent and deliberately failed to complete her degree at Barnard College, falling short by only one class. In the same way that Kerouac explores the freedom of the road by removing himself from the highly structured functions of society, Johnson's rejection of gendered social roles provides evidence of her own withdrawal. Rather than joining the road, Johnson's work "transgresses the road tale's traditions by making a woman the protagonist of its quest narrative," and abolishes its key aspects: "vehicle, travel, [and] escape" (Johnson and Grace 88). Instead, Johnson and her protagonist engage in "interiorized flights, journeys to existential and sexual revelation, not destinations on the road away from home" (Johnson and Grace 88). With the unlikelihood of physically traveling across America, Johnson instead reveals that liberation can be obtained through a woman's internal movements

as she navigates the world around her, learning how it expands and shrinks based on the institutions she chooses or refuses to occupy. In this regard, the movement of rejection and creation becomes something like a dance rather than a simple action, discrete in time.

In both *Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir* (1983) and her debut novel, *Come and Join the Dance* (1962), Joyce Johnson finds freedom through an exploration of a woman's ability to actively refuse and choose to occupy space. Johnson's writing reflects how women assume the spaces that were most central to their lives: the home, the academic institution, and the office. Johnson also explores a woman's independent insertion into less conventional spaces, such as one's own apartment, New York City cafeterias, and poetry readings, which all served as entryways into the newly budding Beat community. For Johnson, removal from the spaces that women were expected to occupy and insertion into the spaces that were often discouraged enabled her to experience freedom. Johnson's written works suggest that a woman's freedom hinges on her decision to enter spaces that encourage independence, liberation, nonconformity, and creativity. Having been excluded from the road narrative herself, Johnson focuses on the freedom that she and her protagonist, Susan Levitt, acquire through the desire to have a dwelling of her own, to refuse the streamlined nature of academic institutions, and to resist the destined path towards office life and the demise of a woman's creative agency.

An Exit From the Home and Emergence into Independent Living

Johnson's first novel, *Come and Join the Dance,* reveals freedom in the very act of removing oneself from a restrictive setting. After returning to her parents' house, Susan was obligated to disconnect from the expansive world around her—specifically New York City—

which served as a bustling hub of opportunity. Johnson writes “New York was to become hers when she started college. She would know more of it than its department stores and the Radio City Music Hall; she would no longer have to catch the five-o’clock Long Island train and be back in her parents’ dining room in time for dinner” (Johnson, *Come and Join the Dance* 12). Susan's capacity to navigate the city ends on the five-o’clock Long Island train, which delivers her to the steps of her parents’ house. When she enters, the city is no longer “hers.”

In learning to inhabit and explore “her” city, Johnson deeply admired Barnard friend and fellow Beat writer Elise Cowen who fled from the comfort and security of a wealthy family to acquire her own apartment. For Johnson, Elise’s room offered a new meaning for her, she even “envied the courage it represented. Nineteen-year-old girls did not leave home except for dormitories or marriage. If you wished to live free, you could not also expect to live well” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 63). Elise’s escape from luxurious living reveals a “flight from convention” in which Elise learned to “survive her own defiance” (Johnson and Grace 75, 76). Though not glamorous, the decision for a woman to live independently from both her parents and a male figure freed her from the expectations that these individuals often held concerning marriage, work, and academic success. For a woman writer, living independently played an important role in enabling the flow of creative thinking and provided her with a space to write, unbothered by the presence of extraneous individuals who detract her ability to focus on her work. A woman having “a room of her own” is something that was not only desired and achieved by women Beat writers but has been a constant thought entertained throughout history. In fact, one of Virginia Woolf’s well-known essays thrives on this idea. Woolf argues that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 7). For Beat women, money often stood in the way of their independent living arrangements. Elise Cowen’s

apartment was described as “sordidness and disgust” and a place “where janitors refused to give you clean sheets and Puerto Rican hookers screamed in courtyards” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 63). However, when a woman like Elise Cowen actively chose to seek out her own apartment, no matter how subpar the conditions may be, her world expanded to fill the newly acquired room. Her four walls sanctioned space to have full control over her mind and body and what she desires to do with them both. Woolf’s essay advocates for the female writer and her ability to claim her position in the historically long line of male writers. Woolf argues that a woman’s opportunity to write is dependent on social and material conditions, which have been entirely unattainable and have restricted her access to the literary world. For a woman to find success in her writing, she must have a *space* that she can escape to—one that allows her to grow and cultivate her own identity. In a world where, “intellectual freedom depends upon material things” and “poetry depends upon intellectual freedom,” having a room of one’s own grants a woman the freedom to explore her own abilities, entering a space that is reserved solely for her own movements (Woolf 193). Johnson remarks on how “Elise slipped into amorphousness as if dream life was absorbing everyday reality,” which contrasts sharply with Johnson’s experience in which she “studied hard and anxiously” and “lived at home and never stayed out all night.” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 63, 64). By having an apartment of her own, Elise unlocks her ability to gain greater control over the events of her life, choosing to let it absorb her while abiding by minimal rules. Whereas, Johnson’s adherence to her parents' household expectations dictated how she occupied their space in accordance with how they wished for her to live. With a room of their own, women Beat writers no longer need the road as a means of absolute freedom to navigate the world around them. Instead, living independently provided them with a space to take control over their actions, both physically and through their intellectual capacity to create.

Dropping Out

The theme of removing oneself from a restrictive setting is consistent in Johnson's work and is deeply explored in her novel *Come and Join the Dance*. Johnson reveals how dropping out of academic institutions translates into a refusal to conform to the expectations and collective nature that it breeds. Seven days before her graduation from Barnard College, Johnson's protagonist, Susan Levitt, finds herself questioning the trajectory of her life, asking "What if you lived your entire life without urgency?" (Johnson, *Come and Join the Dance* 166). As she watches the girls in her class blindly follow the instructions of academic institutions, she comes to the last question on her English literature examination relating to Melville. She stops to recognize the sixty-three girls that surround her in the gymnasium, bent over their exams, minds narrowly focused on the final question—ideas nearly uniform in their pursuits of the correct answer. Instead, Susan's thoughts divide from the pack, stating "Melville was unimportant and all the other questions were unimportant and had nothing to do with what really was going to happen" (Johnson, *Come and Join the Dance* 4). And so, with half an hour to finish, Susan's realization invites her to leave the academic institution with her exam incomplete. Unhurriedly, "she found herself getting up from her chair and walking to the proctor's desk, placing her paper on it—unfinished" and "the doors of the gymnasium swung behind her" (Johnson, *Come and Join the Dance* 4). The act of removing herself and resisting the conformity that academics instill signifies Susan's new sense of agency to alter the course of her academic career. She recognizes that the exam serves as more of a measurement of a woman's capacity to follow instruction than

of individual knowledge. For Susan, “something had made her want the feeling of living a little close to the edge; perhaps she had chosen to feel frightened rather than feel nothing at all” (Johnson, *Come and Join the Dance* 13). Susan’s radical decision to drop out indicates that she has chosen “the urgency, search, and trepidation that signifies being a subject,” one who took the risk to reject “conformity’s numb safeness” (Johnson and Grace 81). In leaving, Susan sheds the shackles that hold her in place and on track to becoming a woman who shares the same fate as the other sixty-three women in the gymnasium. As she walks out, she closes the door on the institution’s hold over how she chooses to spend her life, both in physical presence and intellectual thinking and reasoning.

Nine to Five: Out of the Office

In the act of dropping out, Susan demonstrates a moment of radical refusal and removes herself from a space that sought to diminish her individualism and narrow her thoughts on a singular path towards academic success. Through her own experiences, Johnson discusses her active choice to disengage with her job as a secretary in the same way that Susan does when she walks away from the institution. For Johnson, being a secretary served as a temporary position that depended on Johnson’s adherence to individuals of higher status, who were often male publishers and well-known in the literary scene. Johnson comments on how “office life and real life had to be kept separate. On weekday mornings, you locked the door on your unacceptable self; you let it out again after five” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 148). For Johnson, the office served as a space where she was expected to “play a part” that did not align with her future goals and hindered her ability to progress in writing. However, for Johnson, the “unacceptable self” is

what fueled her work. To lock it away for most of the day prevented Johnson from living the rebellious lifestyle that she strived to capture in her novels. Johnson fantasizes by writing "someday the publishers that would not have me as a secretary would have me as a writer. As a writer, I would live life to the hilt as my unacceptable self" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 148). For many women, the role of secretary served as an inevitable career path. However, for Johnson, she "would not succumb to the ladylike stratagem of shimmering [her] way toward discreet fadeouts" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 148). Through her recognition of this predestined occupation that revolves around the world of another, Johnson's awareness sets her apart. Throughout her experience as a secretary, Johnson simultaneously wrote the pages of her first novel, deliberately refusing to allow the occupation to diminish her creative capacity. She satirizes 1950s culture in America which pressured women to assume a subordinate career: "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 later" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 207). A woman's ability to engage in creative endeavors was nearly nonexistent. Therefore, it was believed that her pursuits must surely lie within the office from nine to five, typing away her creative capacity to think independently. Johnson's self-removal and disengagement from the office first come from a desire to prioritize her writing. After feeling "dead" and "dispirited" one day following her return from the office, causing her inability to work on her novel, Johnson resigns (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 206). In her sudden drop out from the office, Johnson declines the monetary safety that her secretarial job offers. She instead chooses to pursue her literary career as a novelist, which removes the safety net beneath her tightrope act towards publishing. Johnson's decision to no longer occupy the office is marked by her strong desire to enter the literary scene with the publication of her first novel, *Come and*

Join the Dance. She refrains from succumbing to the false belief that women are unable to produce creative projects that are worthy of time and dedication. Johnson exits the office and sets foot in the literary scene by way of the Beat community. High on her "moral victory," she "at last…joined the ranks of the scufflers" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 206).

Entry Into the Literary Scene

Understanding that her role as secretary hindered her ability to focus on her novel, Johnson's departure from the office expanded her freedom by granting her opportunities to occupy spaces that she had not previously been allowed to access. These spaces were entryways into the Beat community and into areas that encouraged the creativity of women. However, without her desire to seek out these spaces, Johnson may have run the risk of missing them altogether. Two main places in which she inserted herself were the New York City cafeterias, often positioned in "the sweet slums of Bohemia and beatnikdom" and various poetry readings held throughout the city (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 208-209). In both her personal life and within her novel, Johnson explores the role of cafeterias as entrances into the literary community in New York City and into a world that no woman was expected to witness—especially at night. In her memoir, Johnson discusses the ability of a woman to literally and metaphorically assume her own seat at the table. Not only is she referencing the chairs of the cafeterias and her desire to sit and "stay up forever and see the dawn and have 6 A.M. coffee…with lean, sharp-faced boys in corduroy jackets and walk back through all the streets of the city," but she also indicates that these dining areas allowed a woman to claim her position as the main character within her

narrative (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 192-193). It all begins precisely with a woman's daring decision to claim a spot at the table.

The Waldorf Cafeteria off Eighth Street is described as a "dreary looking place…a uniform gray-brown," dingey, and substandard joint "despite its ironic name" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 38). This is where Johnson acquired a habit of hanging around and where she first met Beat ringleader Jack Kerouac. The rundown, beat, hipster New York City cafeterias exuded creative beings whether it be "artists, poets, communists and anarchists, guitar-pickers, jailbirds, [or] scavengers" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 39). Johnson's decision to inhabit these cafeterias allowed her to break into an external world that was not highly accessible to women. In fact, in an English assignment, she had once described the habitués of the Waldorf in which her professor responded that she should only write about the things in which she knew (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 42). A woman was not expected to be visible in a crowd of men and amongst the plumes of their cigarette smoke which rose to the ceiling after speaking their thoughts without hesitation. However, by claiming her position among the bitter black coffees in the early hours of the morning and the discarded beer bottles at night, Johnson's occupancy of the cafeterias placed her "in the exact center of the universe…where so much is converging, the only place in America that's alive" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 261-262). As she sits on the periphery of this convergence, perching on the fringes of these crowded tables, Johnson successfully sought out a seat. Johnson's willingness to sit amongst the crowded, male-dominated nightlife provides her with the opportunity to be present, to be thrust into the center of the city lights, witnessing America when it is most alive. Johnson claims that "merely being here...is enough" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 261-262). For she has carved and clawed society's

expectations to receive a spot at both the Waldorf and within a community that aligns with her creative pursuits and where her "unacceptable self" can finally be set free.

Similarly, while several Beat writers occupied the New York City cafeterias, Johnson's circle of companions expanded in proportion to the amount of time that she spent within these spaces. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, and Hettie Jones were all individuals she had met at cafeterias and later at poetry readings, which Kerouac had introduced Johnson to. Johnson discusses meeting Beat poet Hettie Jones at a poetry reading in which she recalls Jones never standing up to read her own work, making no mention of her poetry, and believing her work wasn't "good enough" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 212-213). Johnson and Jones were two of the few women who attended the poetry readings—accompanied by their male partners at the time (Kerouac and Baraka), who most likely served as their gateways into these scenes. However, while their active participation was significantly less compared to the men, simply being present within these functions granted women more entry into the literary scene than their previous roles as secretaries. Johnson discusses how "only the publication of [her] novel would transform [her] existence into what [she] wanted it to be (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 118). As Johnson navigates these unfamiliar spaces that were atypical for a woman to occupy, she finds herself getting closer to her goal—to publish her first novel.

The freedom that Johnson acquires throughout her life, which she then explores in her novel, *Come and Join the Dance,* is understood through the navigation of a woman's internal life. The external, being "the road," proved to be inaccessible for a woman in 1950s America. Therefore, how a woman chooses or refuses to inhabit the socially constructed, highly gendered institutions that already exist around her serves as her own road to traverse. In and out of spaces that attempted to restrict her freedom, Johnson's decision to drop out of academic institutions,

her parents' home, and offices allowed her to assume an active role in the creation of her life. By penetrating the locations that women were discouraged from occupying, such as independent living, cafeterias, and the literary scene, Johnson assumes the necessary agency to construct her own "road" based on her own desires.

Johnson concludes *Come and Join the Dance* with Susan's departure. "And then she went" are Johnson's last words, indicating that Susan's final decision of the novel is to remove herself from the apartment of her then-lover, Peter, and embark on her own journey to Paris (Johnson, *Come and Join the Dance* 178). By ending the novel with Susan's withdrawal from the expectation that she remains with Peter, Susan plays an active role in grasping the freedom that comes with dropping out and moving on. Johnson and Grace suggest that "with this narrative, shaking off her silence, the Beat female subject emerges, contending and refiguring what it means to be Beat" (Johnson and Grace 92). By the end of the novel, it is clear that Johnson has reached liberation through the fictional character of Susan. Beat no longer exclusively represents the navigation of the road but rather through the ways that women maneuver out of areas that sought to restrict them and into spaces that allow them to write. Indicative of the title, Susan leaves to join her own dance. After all, to *come* and *join* a dance, one must abandon their initial position and enter something of the unfamiliar.

Chapter 4

Joanne Kyger: Remembering, Reworking, and Retelling History

Joanne Kyger was one of the few Beat women to ever set foot on the road. Unlike Johnson's plea for Kerouac to take her along in his travels, Kyger had the opportunity to reach beyond the internal spaces that women occupied and enter the external world. However, Kyger was neither hopping on boxcars and riding them to the West Coast nor inhabiting cheap San Francisco motels nor spending all night under the stars and recklessly driving stolen cars. Instead, Kyger's road took a different route. She served as an accomplice to her then-boyfriend and Beat poet, Gary Snyder. Before embarking on this opportunity, Kyger studied at the University of California, Santa Barbara, until she moved to San Francisco in 1957, just before finishing her degree. Kyger was influenced by the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance and even studied Zen Buddhism. In the early 1960s, Kyger and Snyder shipped off to Japan so that Snyder could continue his own studies of Zen. Japan was a popular destination for male Beat writers, and the pair were often accompanied by Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky. Throughout her time living in Japan and traveling to India, Kyger kept a journal documenting the events from 1960 to 1964. She then went on to publish her first poetry collection, *The Tapestry and the Web,* in 1965, which she had been working on while abroad.

Instead of finding freedom on the road, Kyger's travels were fixated to adhere to the studies of Snyder. She writes that "He [Snyder] is gone most of the day" (Kyger, *The Japan and India Journals* 67). Kyger often resided in the household, unsatisfied with the small room she

was given to explore, create, and write. Like Joyce Johnson, the domestic space of the household haunted Kyger, threatening to restrict her creative abilities. Because of these restrictions, Kyger's freedom forms through her focus on documenting her own story. She reworks and retells the male-centric narrative, which was repeated for many women throughout history. In both her published journal and her first poetry collection, Kyger finds herself transfixed with actively refusing to be forgotten. Her journal serves as a way to document her travels while revealing her fascination with remembrance. Kyger's *The Japan and India Journals* allows her story to be accurately documented. Additionally, one year later, with the publication of *The Tapestry and the Web,* Kyger rewrites history to return agency to female protagonists and reveals her hope to set women free of their previous challenges to self-construct within literature. Resembling her desire to play an active role in the construction of her story, Kyger reworks history to dismantle the male-centric lens that has been placed on the past. Through her poetry collection, she deconstructs the patriarchal powers that diminish women and rewrites the story of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey.* Kyger explores freedom that surpasses what can be acquired on the road by reaching backward into historical narratives. She remembers, reworks, and retells the stories of women and returns authority to their rightful owners—setting them free.

Kyger's Fixation with Remembrance

First published in 1981, *The Japan and India Journals* offers access into Kyger's mind while she traveled for five years in the 1960s. Her journal entries are sporadic, unedited shards of thought, documenting her explorations while recording moments of self-discovery and periodic personal struggles. Kyger's journal reveals raw details that form mosaics of her narrative:

scattered fragments of poetry, lists of day-to-day routine, internal turmoil, marital challenges, raw and warranted dissatisfaction, and snippets of cultural experiences. Through the publication of her journal, Kyger "gives access to past times and lines that would have been gone forever" in a way that "gives history back to you," says Anne Waldman, a 1960s experimental poet who is ascribed to the Beat community (Waldman in Kyger, *The Japan and India Journals* xi). By keeping a journal, Kyger enables herself to be accurately portrayed in history and ensures that her narrative is remembered. According to Waldman, *The Japan and India Journals* "forms both a public and private identity…Taking the measure of her male poet-companions, she is most definitively in a different "space"" (Waldman in Kyger, *The Japan and India Journals* ix). Kyger blurs the boundary between the gendered internal and external realms by occupying both. By traveling the Asian continent, she is inserted into a world mostly inhabited by male Beat writers, such as Snyder, Ginsberg, and other practicing Buddhists and poets. As if weaving a tapestry, Kyger constructs her narrative teetering between domestic spaces and the road—offering a patchwork of unique insight into both. Kyger's work reflects her entry into this "different space," which allows her to reinvent the narratives of women by transcribing her thoughts and memories in an uncensored, unfiltered way.

Throughout her work, Kyger actively works against erasure. The details that she decides to include in *The Japan and India Journals* are consistent, implying her fascination with remembrance, which she states was driven by "a real *fear* of being submerged not heard" (Kyger, *The Japan and India Journals* 11). Kyger's concern with being forgotten is evident and becomes a prominent theme in her first poetry collection. Her thoughts on impermanence emerge in the journal when she writes, "The fact things change has always been a source of worry and depression to me. The fact of its *inevitability* was now pressed upon me. How foolish to fight it.

One must learn to live with it and plan a life according to impermanence if we are to accept reality and not continue to fabricate our world" (Kyger, *The Japan and India Journals* 84). The poet's anxieties surrounding impermanence emphasize the importance of etching herself and other women into history. Journaling becomes a source of freedom that secures Kyger's story. Her desire to remember resides in her fascination with memory, recognizing that it is deeply important—as all things are eventually reduced to memories. Kyger reflects by writing,

> How very difficult to cut past and future time away from what is happening. Reminiscence and anticipation are so important - define the moment ahead and behind. Memory defines us now. Cut off time from what we are doing now and it renders the act meaningless. However, also fresh. How does one cut away time. I don't know as I would want an act to be presented new, I cling to memory. MIRROR: when some thing is removed there is no trace left. "When the wild goose flys it leaves no trace When the moon sets in the sky, there is no reflection in the water. (Kyger, *The Japan and India Journals* 69)

Through identifying that all things at one point cease to exist, Kyger's consistency in journaling resists the impermanence of her world. This defiance leads her to focus her first poetry collection on rewriting Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey* to correct Penelope's history and ensure her independence. Kyger recognizes that writing resists erasure. Her preoccupation with remembrance leads her to construct works that represent the complex lives of women, which align and interlace to form a story, person, and narrative.

Reworking: Kyger as the Artisan

While living in Japan in the early 1960s, Kyger found herself working on her first collection of poems entitled *The Tapestry and the Web.* Kyger's time in Japan assisted in shaping her works and providing direct influence to the concepts that were given life through her published poems. Kyger's experience on the road was indicative of an "immersion in and

subsequent absence from a persuasively male context" (Russo 180-181). As the poet navigated the external world, she continued to be excluded by the men in ways that were similar to Penelope's isolation in the *Odyssey*. Kyger's resemblance to Penelope is nearly identical. She turns to myth through a recognition of women being constricted in their physical movements, which is present in historical texts like the *Odyssey*. Epic myths often lack a female writer to tell her story and free her from narratives that were constructed to place women in subordinate positions. As a poet, Kyger assumes the role of the artisan, crafting an original text that derives from Homer's *Odyssey*, but places Penelope in a position of power. English scholar Linda Russo argues that Kyger "saw it as her task to be "the instigator" and "propagator" of her own definition of female" (Russo 188). Kyger repeatedly returns to Penelope in her poetry, refining and rewriting her character to construct an identity that is multifaceted and indeterminate (Manwell 62). In doing so, Kyger slips in and out of Penelope's tale, reconfiguring her story to weave a woman who has been given various opportunities to insert herself into the epic myth as an active individual—capable of making her own decisions. Kyger's weaving forms a tapestry that not only explores Penelope's agency but also allows Kyger to reflect on her own. *The Tapestry and the Web* becomes a space where Kyger "re-reads classical mythology as a female-centered nontraditional narrative" and reinvents the genre to place women in a position of autonomy, seeking freedom for herself and for women who have been purposefully written out of history (Manwell 54).

Kyger's Penelope in *The Tapestry and the Web*

Like her own role as a poet, Kyger recasts Penelope to be a "weaver" or "artisan" and delivers Penelope to a position of power as someone who has a direct influence over what occurs during Odysseus's absence. Kyger writes of Penelope "Falling into her weaving / creating herself as a fold in her tapestry," believing that "she knew what she was doing" (Kyger, *The Tapestry and the Web* 31). Penelope's weaving represents a woman's ability to fabricate the events of her life by "falling into" her own creation. The creator becomes intertwined with her work, placing herself within the tapestry and promising her eternal presence. This allows the woman, the writer, or the weaver to be agential in her story and alter the course of action as someone who lies inside and outside the boundary that separates the narrative and reality.

In her poem, "The Maze," Kyger reinvents gender roles and blurs the boundaries of the stereotypical behavior of the sexes by contradicting the characters' reactions to their absences from one another. Kyger writes, "Held captive in a cave / Ulysses / sobbed for his wife / who was singing high / melodies / from the center of a cobweb shawl / of their design" (Kyger, *The Tapestry and the Web* 12). In the *Odyssey,* Penelope weeps for her husband. However, in her poems, Kyger reverses the roles and places Penelope in an authoritative position while Odysseus yearns and longs for her company. In "12.29 & 30 (Pan as the son of Penelope)," Kyger continues to place power in the hands of Penelope. Instead of passively waiting for her husband to return, Kyger constructs Penelope to assume an active part in fabricating Odysseus's adventures and obstacles while he is away from Ithaca. Upon Odysseus's return, Kyger writes that "Something about the landing of the husband's boat upon the shore. / She did not run up and embrace him as I recall. / He came upon her at the house & killed the suitors. / I choose to think of her waiting for him / concocting his adventures bringing the misfortunes to him / --she must

have had her hands full" (Kyger, *The Tapestry and the Web* 31). Kyger's perception of Penelope's character suggests that Odysseus *was not* welcomed by his wife upon his return. Instead, this creative decision reveals Penelope's preoccupation with her own desires and creations, disclosing her independence and freedom from a singular identity as "wife." Also, Kyger actively *chooses* to think of Penelope as someone who can dictate Odysseus's travels. As Penelope is weaving, she is altering the course of action. Despite residing at home, her ability to create surpasses the walls that she is kept in and affects the external world that she is unable to experience or navigate. Kyger's reimagination of Penelope as an essentially creative being inserts the Queen of Ithaca into the narrative, rather than allowing her to reside on the edges as a passive wife waiting for her husband's return.

In addition to restoring creative agency and independence to Penelope, Kyger also suggests that her days spent waiting for Odysseus to return are not so steeped in innocence. In "12.29 & 30 (Pan as the son of Penelope)," Kyger proposes the idea of Penelope being an adulteress, by stating, "Somewhere you can find reference to the fact that PAN was the son of PENELOPE / Either as the result of a *god* / or as a result of ALL of the suitors / who hung around while Odysseus was abroad" (Kyger, *The Tapestry and the Web* 29). In the *Odyssey,* Penelope is most known for her fidelity to her husband despite the temptation of many suitors. By considering the idea that Penelope was not entirely loyal to Odysseus and instead chose to pursue other relationships, "Kyger attributes to Penelope sexual autonomy, or at the very least infidelity" and offers a critical take on Penelope's passivity as Odysseus's wife (Manwell 62). Proposing the idea that Penelope engages in relationships with other suitors transforms Penelope into an authoritative individual whose life is less centered around adhering to Odysseus. Kyger flirts with the notion of a woman having control over her sexuality. The rewriting and reworking

of Penelope's narrative in *The Tapestry and the Web* enables Penelope to be a multi-faceted character who reflects an identity of "the mother of Pan, an unwilling accomplice in her own captivity and a dreamer who shapes the reception of her own identity" (Manwell 63). Kyger overlays multiple characteristics of Penelope to weave the warp and woof of a woman who has the power to alter the epic narrative and is in control of her own story. Instead of succumbing to the stagnant, domesticated life that is packaged and promised by the household, Kyger's Penelope "never refuses or accepts / stands against a pillar of the house, / watching and planning" in a way that defiantly works against the male-centric myth and places women in a position of being the active decision-makers and creators of their lives (Kyger, *The Tapestry and the Web* 56).

Retelling The Story of Women

In the *Tapestry and the Web,* reimagining a woman's navigation of internal and external spaces is placed at the forefront, which aligns with Joyce Johnson's exploration of space in both her life and in literature. Kyger's poetry collection identifies the internal and external as highly gendered areas, understanding that interior space was designated for women and exterior space was reserved for men. Penelope and Kyger find themselves occupying both the internal and external and discover the freedom of living in the "in-between." Penelope in the original Homeric text awaits, waits for, and waits on Odysseus—loyal and kempt. Kyger's *The Japan and India Journals* reveals that she, too, was unsatisfied with the amount of time she spent at home waiting for Snyder to return. However, Kyger recreates Penelope's narrative to challenge the gendered inside/outside dichotomy of space. Not only does Kyger free Penelope but she also

releases herself through Penelope's ability to scale the boundary between the two spaces. Kyger's Penelope has direct influence over Odysseus's travels, which is made possible through weaving her tapestry. Without leaving the household, her abilities transgress physical boundaries and allow her to be an artisan of the narrative. Penelope also assumes greater control over her sexuality and makes independent decisions concerning her suitors while Odysseus is absent. Kyger even proposes that she is a lavish and divine adulteress: "Either as the result of a *god* / or as a result of ALL of the suitors / who hung around while Odysseus was abroad" (Kyger, *The Tapestry and the Web* 29). Kyger validates Penelope's freedom, which Homer had refrained from entertaining in his *Odyssey.*

The Tapestry and the Web not only rewrites Penelope as a woman with more agency but also serves as a way for Kyger to occupy external space as well. Throughout the collection, she uses "poems as a structure in which to observe her situation as an American poet/wife abroad at a distance that provided some perspective on the difficulties and dissatisfactions associated with her roles" (Russo 188). Kyger utilized her poetry as a space to disassociate from her life and transgress the boundary that divided her from the fictional and mythic realms of her poems. In doing so, Kyger and Penelope begin to align, both women benefiting from one another. Kyger's writing resembles Penelope's craft, which is weaving complex tapestries. As she rewrites Penelope, she intertwines her own narrative with the character. Penelope enables Kyger to weave a more complex and conflicted character than what traditionally exists in mythic texts. Kyger's "retelling" produces a new set of truths and potentials for all women, inside and outside of the literary world (Manwell 62). She *re-conceives* Homer's text, placing women within epic accounts while refiguring the boundaries that prevented women from flourishing into their own self-actualizing beings. The Penelope within *The Tapestry and the Web* refuses to remain passive

in her confinement to the internal. Kyger instead *fabric*ates Penelope to take control of her home, her life, and her story—breaking gendered boundaries and unraveling space in history. As Kyger writes towards the end of the collection, 'memory has no direction,' and through her poetic reworkings, the threads of Penelope's narrative interlace to form a "new, complex and rich web" that sets Kyger free to weave in and out of history, refusing to be forgotten (Manwell 76).

Chapter 5

Diane di Prima and Living Between the Binaries

The internal, the external, and the boundary that separates the two played a central role in the lives of women Beat writers. When traversing these divided worlds by way of trains, cars, and long hitchhiked walks across the country proved unwelcoming to the women, they inhabited the schism by navigating its turbulence within their lives and within their literary works. For Joyce Johnson, the boundary challenged her to enter external locations and abandon the internal spaces women were expected to occupy. Joanne Kyger's entry into the external world was ignited by her travels to Japan yet manifested in her ability to rework mythical texts—setting female characters free of restrictive narratives. From the internal to the external, these women crossed over into realms that were difficult to occupy because of their gender. And so, they began to blur the boundary of the binary.

Diane di Prima, however, did not adhere to the binaries. Instead, her work and life reflected a radical refusal to inhabit either. Di Prima rightfully deserves the title of *rebel* as she "was immersed in the three major American cultural revolutions of the century: modernism, through her association with Pound, the Beat movement of the fifties and early sixties, and then the explosion of LSD and protests of the sixties and seventies, when romanticism hit the streets" (Libby 45). Living and writing through each of these revolutions manifests in di Prima's poetry in radical ways. Anthony Libby argues that "di Prima was not one to fit general patterns. She went her own sometimes contradictory way" (Libby 46). These contradictions served as a technique that enabled di Prima to stand out, setting herself free from binding labels.

The poet found freedom in the space between the constant dualities that are present in life. Neither here nor there, nor this nor that, di Prima's poetry reflects an understanding that

when one does not forcefully place themself within the rigidity of categorical measures, one has room to be both, neither, or something in between. The inability to classify herself, her poetry, her beliefs, and her thoughts as singular entities opens up the opportunity to experience the multiplicity of life. While other Beat women identified the divide between the internal and external worlds and crossed the boundary to inhabit one or the other, di Prima instead rebelled against these divides. Published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* (1971) and *Loba* (1973) explore and enact her refusal to fit into categories. Through her works, di Prima does not necessarily navigate the internal and external world in the same ways that Johnson and Kyger do. Instead, she ceases to engage with the gendered divide that persists in society and refuses to adhere to it. Her poetry suggests that occupying the area that exists in the "in-between" allows for greater freedom and movement to fluidly self-construct and embody personas that exist outside of stringent categories.

Di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* is riddled with contradictions, employed as a technique to actively refuse being tied to a singular entity. She proposes that all things in life extend beyond categories that restrict and reduce them. Through this collection of poems, it is clear that di Prima has a desire to occupy the margins. Rather than simply crossing over a boundary, a la Johnson and Kyger, di Prima refuses to entertain the boundary. Rather, she becomes "The writer who deliberately positions herself as an outsider, preferring marginalization" (Libby 49). The peripheral position that she takes allows her to occupy uninhabited territory, animating di Prima's ability to devise poetry that rebels against ease and simplicity, serving as a reflection of how she lived. Similarly, di Prima's *Loba* hinges on the emergence of a character who is in between human and animal. The "loba" is constructed as the archetype of the wolf goddess whose presence serves to complicate identity by "contaminating" it with its alleged animal other:

the wolf. Stradling and inhabiting the division of 'animal' and 'human,' di Prima actively encounters spaces that are unconventional and radical, allowing her to creatively construct beyond the binaries.

A Revolution Against Reductionism

Di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* is a poetic manifesto; a manual for political and personal protest. In the form of written letters, Di Prima supplies tactics for taking to the street and addresses the social issues of oppression, war, and corruption. *Revolutionary Letters* not only offers the reader an intimate understanding of di Prima's involvement in protests but also provides evidence for how she utilizes contradictions to refrain from conforming to a singular side of the fight. Her poetry has been described as "wildly uneven; its ideological excesses are sometimes extreme," yet, her language reflects life and its inability to propose answers that are perfectly coherent and singular (Libby 68). Di Prima recognizes that life and poetry align only through their complex nature and elusive meanings. In *Revolutionary Letters*, Di Prima's poetry reflects the radical activity that she engages in throughout her life. For di Prima, "Her refusal to fit neatly into the progressive assumptions she herself played a major part in creating…is also the source of her strength as a poet" (Libby 49). The contradictions in *Revolutionary Letters* enable di Prima to dwell in the space between binaries, believing that all beings cannot be reduced to something unitary.

In "Revolutionary Letter #12," di Prima contradicts herself by suggesting that the thing that creates also has the capabilities to destroy. The first line of the poem states, "the vortex of creation is the vortex of destruction" (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 23). She continues by

proposing, “the vortex of artistic creation is the vortex of self destruction / the vortex of political creation is the vortex of flesh destruction” (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 23). Di Prima’s language suggests that during creation, there is destruction. Despite opposites, their simultaneous presence is possible. By employing contradictory language, di Prima identifies dualities when considering the birth of a revolution. Her letter ends with “for every revolutionary must at last will his own destruction / rooted as he is in the past he sets out to destroy” (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 23). She recognizes that for a revolution to be successful, for change to occur, the revolutionary must be engulfed in flames and eradicate what once was. A revolution is indicative of overthrowing the past to thrive in the future. Di Prima reveals that the one who sets out to change the world must also obliterate a part of themself that persists in the past. In order to move forward and create in the future, destruction will be necessary.

Di Prima’s poetry blurs the boundary between contradictory terms, such as “creation” and “destruction.” In doing so, she reveals through the “vortex” that not all things simply create or destroy. A revolution cannot succeed without the presence of both. Di Prima illuminates the coexistence of these perceived opposites rather than respecting the boundary that divides them. Libby states that di Prima’s texts “provide a fascinating glimpse of the underlying contradictions that animate a writer riding the waves of a new consciousness while still deeply immersed in the struggles of the old” (Libby 47). Her poetry does not manifest out of fear of the absence of concrete categorization. When di Prima proposes that “the vortex of artistic creation is the vortex of self destruction,” she invites her readers to understand that the vortex cannot be reduced to a single role. This is similar to how the self cannot be reduced to a singular state of existence, and it is best to acknowledge the dichotomies that persist. Her “tendency to combine opposites,

sometimes incongruously" is a primary characteristic of di Prima's prose, and balancing between these binaries remains a consistent theme throughout her poetry (Libby 54).

Di Prima's poetry plays with the idea of *freedom beyond the binaries* and welcomes the contradictions that arise from being unrestrained. In "Revolutionary Letter #47," di Prima writes, "TO BE FREE we've got to be free of / any idea of freedom. / Today the State Dept lifted the ban on travel to China; and closed / Merritt College" (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 60). She continues to use language that refuses reductionism, and di Prima believes that freedom derives from the ability to rid oneself of the idea of it—to be free from it. Di Prima's concept of freedom, explored in *Revolutionary Letters,* challenges the belief of an attainable end to the process of becoming free. It confronts the misunderstanding that freedom arrives after a won battle, an overthrown government, or a release from imprisonment or an oppressive social institution. Di Prima's poetry does not align with the proposition that freedom is a state of completeness. Alternatively, she suggests that to be free, we must rid ourselves of all the previous ideas of freedom we once held. There is no absolute state of freedom. Rather, it is an elusive and impermanent construct. To be free, we must be devoid of all expectations of it. In "Revolutionary Letter #47," di Prima reveals that with the State Department opening international travel to China and closing Merritt College, dichotomies exist beyond language and take the form of actions as well. She proposes that liberation through one action does not always promise freedom through another and can instead insinuate the opposite. According to Ian Davidson, di Prima challenges the "initial dualism of a radical "us," who are free, and a restrictive "them"'(Davidson 331-332). She unites these two parties with an understanding that our conceptual framework of freedom resides in our abidance of societal structures that dictate how free we actually are. This eliminates all attempts at true and absolute freedom.

Instead, di Prima finds freedom of movement in the space between two binary categories. Di Prima's poetry insinuates an opposition to critical categorization, and she values living in the margins by radically fusing opposites and inhabiting the space that separates them. Di Prima forms connective tissue between contradictory ideas, and her poems in *Revolutionary Letters* invite the reader to understand these contradictions as being alive and present within every entity and space that exists. Anthony Libby states that "both Life and poetry were never driven by a wish for purity or correct conclusions, but rather the will to explore "the bloody process," and di Prima, not only endures the process but generates art that reflects the cohesion of contradictions and the existence of multiplicities that give rise to the bloody process (Libby 68).

The Loba as an Infinite Figure

Two years after the publication of *Revolutionary Letters,* di Prima's *Loba* was released in 1973, and she continued to live and write outside of the binaries, further enhancing her exploration of the in-between. While she sustains the use of contradictory language in her poetry, di Prima's *Loba* also focuses on the creation of the *loba* as an embodiment of both woman and wolf. Like Joanne Kyger's reworking of mythic discourse, di Prima similarly takes on the myth of the "she-wolf" and creates a narrative emphasizing the preservation of female agency. Through the archetype of the wolf goddess, di Prima presents the powerful force of underlying femininity and female sexuality. Throughout her collection of poems, the *loba* balances and navigates both primal and domestic life as she complicates popularized notions of femininity and refuses to be categorized. The "she-wolf" character "transcends all simple oppositions" and "divisive categories"; her existence proves to be a complication of the anatomical structures

(Libby 66). Di Prima carefully constructs the *loba* by slipping in and out of categories, enabling the character to assume an infinite role in the poetry collection.

Similar to Kyger, Di Prima reworks a mythic narrative in *Loba* and undergoes a feminist revision of the story of "the she-wolf, a half-real and half-imagined mythical creature who is formed throughout the poems" (Mackay 2). Di Prima's collection begins with an animistic woman who then progresses into "a being who contains the soul and consciousness of all women" (Mackay 2). The character of the *loba* plays a central role in her poems, allowing di Prima to reimagine herself and her purpose within the literature. *Loba* is created through a collection of intertextual references to world literatures that hark back to "the she-wolf of Roman mythology" and "the Mexican *'la loba'*, or bone woman, collector of wolf bones who represents the reverse cycle of life from grandmother to mother to laughing maiden" (Encarnacion-Pinedo 3). Di Prima's *Loba* is riddled with several female archetypes who serve different purposes such as "incarnations of the goddess, or as counterparts through which the poet challenges the inscription of female subordination in history" (Encarnacion-Pinedo 4). The *loba,* herself, is an incarnation of the feminine who evolves across the collection of poems. At times she takes the form of a woman, while other times she represents various creatures. Sometimes di Prima complicates both distinctions by allowing them to exist dichotomously, the "she-wolf" submerged in both characterizations: "were it not for the ring of fur / around her ankles / just over her bobby socks / there's no one / wd ever guess her name …" (di Prima, *Loba* 28). In this poem, the *loba* is mistaken for a woman. Passing as both woman and wolf, she refuses the comfortable categorization of either label. Di Prima's focus on the creation of the *loba* enables her to reconsider femininity, the body, female sexuality, and gender through her own carved-out space.

The characterization of the *loba* shifts drastically, as she moves beyond just humanistic or animistic forms. In her poem "SOME SHAPES OF THE LOBA," di Prima describes the *loba* through elemental representation, personifying the ethereal complex of the character: "she is the wind you never leave behind / black cat you killed in empty lot, she is / smell of the summer weeds" and "she is cornucopia / that wails in the night, deathgrip / you cannot cut away, black limpid eyes / of mad girl singing carols behind mesh, she is / the hiss in your goodbyes" (di Prima, *Loba* 45). Here, the *loba* extends beyond the distinction of human and animal, and di Prima presents the opportunity for her fluidity to embody inanimate objects, spiritual allies, and natural forces.

Like much of *Revolutionary Letters,* Di Prima continues to deploy language that is inconsistent to reveal the expansiveness of the *loba.* Scattered throughout the poetry collection are contradictions of her character: "that she is ground only, that she is not ground," "She is formless / or that She is all forms," "She is dark / yet she illuminates the world," and "She is the web / and all that's caught" (di Prima, *Loba* 62, 288, 293, and 313). Di Prima invites the reader to see the *loba* as multitudinous, and her language creates the character out of resistance and subtle defiance. As di Prima overlaps the boundaries between tropes, she opens space for the *loba* to exist, allowing her the freedom to reinvent herself throughout the collection. In fact, she specifically confirms the idea that women have no bounds through a written prelude to one of the sections in *Loba:* "There is a way in which I am a double of myself my own mirror image or that I give birth to myself & am simultaneously mother & daughter like the double spiral" (di Prima, *Loba* 161). The simultaneous existence that di Prima plays with enables her to claim responsibility for her own creation. Di Prima's "double spiral" concludes *Loba*, and the final poem, "PERSEPHONE: Reprise," further suggests this notion:

one "life" is not more real than the other
not in "deflowering" do we come
into bloom; we have been always

there at the fluid boundary of Hades
we spring continuously into life & death
that is the province of the co-emergent mother
This is the daughter, sixteen, wrathful & ready

nor is the daughter separate from the mother
fruit within fruit; a sweetness
known only at the source where the fountain
                                        divides
                                        becomes itself
where fruit & seed & flower dance equally
exchanging shapes   exchanging essences

there is no knife can sever me from her
where I go down to bleed, to birth, to die. (di Prima, *Loba* 314)

With this conclusion, di Prima proposes that all things intertwine: life and death, mother and daughter, seed and fruit. With di Prima's suggestion of a "fluid boundary," she smashes the concrete divider that lies between these opposites and generates a space for them to coalesce.

Both of di Prima's poetry collections from the early 1970s serve as spaces to explore the area that lies in-between. In *Revolutionary Letters,* she focuses on revolutionary politics through the form of letters—some used to disperse revolutionary tactics and public information while others contain chants or poetics. Throughout the poetry collection, she employs the use of contradictory language to obliterate any idea of reductionism. Similarly, in *Loba,* she creates the "she-wolf" to represent a fluid and feminine identity that surpasses simple identification. Di Prima is unafraid of her written work residing in a space that is devoid of all classification. She is fearless in her pursuit of poetry and in the way that she chooses to understand life. She breathes into existence the idea of coexisting opposites and refrains from being limited in her understanding of life and poetry. By living and writing in the margins, di Prima experiences the

freedom to create to her own standards and in her own space. Instead of searching for freedom on the road, di Prima utilizes her work to give life to her radical thoughts. Her poetry does not reflect a satisfied state; she is still a revolutionary at heart. However, di Prima does find stillness in situating herself outside of conformist attempts to placate her rebellious flame. Di Prima ensures us that she remains untouchable, free from all attempts to reduce her and her words.

Chapter 6

Hettie Jones and the Art of Becoming

Hettie Jones, at one point Hettie Cohen, grappled with identity for much of her life. At the core of her poetry and prose, she often reflects on the construction of the self and the interwoven attributes that sculpt who she is and how she experiences the world. In 1934 in Brooklyn, New York, Jones was born into what would become known as the hub of the Beat Generation. Like many of the women Beat writers, Hettie Jones's life and work explored similar processes of inserting herself into spaces that women hardly traversed, presenting Jones with the opportunities to engage in writing, poetry readings, and publishing. As a woman whose identity assembles around a variety of minority attributes—a Jewish woman in an interracial marriage—Jones confronts these slices of herself and explores her relation to them. Rather than accepting labels, she wills herself to succumb to the process of "becoming," enabling Jones to shape her own identity that surpasses the fundamental characteristics that frame her image ever so loosely.

In a world that recognized her from her marriage to LeRoi Jones, Hettie's freedom resided in a return to herself. This manifested in a "becoming," which did not entail blossoming into someone new but rather signified a realignment with her own values, desires, and opportunities to write. In her 1990 memoir, *Becoming Hettie Jones*, her own writing did not appear to be overwhelmingly apparent in her life until near the end of the novel, in which she had already split from LeRoi Jones. Jones's "becoming" delivers her to a learned desire to write after channeling her voice into her written words, releasing her thoughts through poetry and prose.

Throughout her life, Hettie assumed multiple roles that coexisted to form her identity—wife, mother, woman, writer, and friend. Jones writes in her memoir, “Unlike any woman in my family or anyone I’d ever actually known, I was going to *become*—something, anything, whatever that meant” (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 28). For Jones, “becoming” meant creatively constructing herself independently. It meant assuming an identity central to *her* and surpassing all expectations. It meant releasing the focus on the shared identities that she held between her and her family and her and her ex-husband. By “becoming,” Jones experiences the freedom of choosing to build from the foundation up, laying each brick through her own pursuits. Rather than crossing physical boundaries, Jones’s work hinges on navigating outside of her inherent identity and arriving at a place of self-establishment.

How She Became Hettie Jones

In *How I Became Hettie Jones,* Jones writes an intimate account of her life, beginning with her childhood in Laurelton, Queens, born into a middle-class Jewish family. Jones shares how she endured acts of anti-Semitism on several occasions, especially upon entering college. She was aware of the cultural divide that existed as a child; “...there wasn't much for me in Laurelton…no Negroes, Hispanics, Italians, only some Anglos and Irish who couldn't afford to move away from the Jews…There was a firm inevitability to this; you just didn't mix, exactly the way you didn't serve milk with meat” (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 25). Even in her youth, Jones witnessed the classification of people by ethnicity and how it served as a way to define people within the community. This was one of her first encounters with how race and culture would affect her identity, its presence growing more prevalent as she aged.

Jones's memoir then documents her marriage to LeRoi Jones, which lasted from 1958 to 1965. LeRoi and Hettie initially met in 1957 when she worked for the New York jazz magazine, *Record Changer*. At the time, LeRoi was a music critic and emerging poet. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the pair's interracial marriage was regarded as uncommon for the era and incited negative dissent towards their union. At the beginning of her memoir, Jones's identity coalesces with the attributes of other individuals, first her family and then her husband. She is ushered into spaces that are defined by her relationship with these specific people. For example, her Judaism originated from her family and played a role in how she defined herself at a young age. Jones states, "In Laurelton the rabbi had said Jews were a different people, but my schoolmate Mulligan's priest assured her that I was another race" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 69). Being married to LeRoi Jones then placed her in a position where she was regarded as "his white wife, the former Hettie Cohen" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 372). Early on, her identity was attributed to her physical features and those of people who she associated herself with. Race overwhelmingly altered how she was regarded. Jones's identity was often reduced to these points of association before her active reclamation of identity is explored later in the memoir through her "becoming." Jones describes this process by stating, "I, like few other women at that time, would first lose my past to share his [LeRoi Jones], and then, with that eventually lost too, would become the person who speaks to you now" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 122). Jones's identity undergoes several transformations where she abandons her previous self. Peeling back and discarding layers of relationships that she once had with individuals plays as much of a role in her becoming as her independent creation does. In *How I Became Hettie Jones,* Jones reveals that through the many alterations of her identity, freedom

derives from arriving at one that is central to her, which is more than just an extension of the people she is associated with.

In 1958, Jones "traded Hettie Cohen for Hettie Jones" by marrying LeRoi Jones, which ignited the formation of an identity central to their relationship and specific to racial dynamics (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 117). Through the establishment of a literary magazine and printing press, LeRoi offered Hettie entrance to the writing and literary community that flourished in New York City in the 1960s. This brought opportunities for her to meet individuals such as Joyce Johnson, Jack Kerouac, Diane di Prima, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs while also working in publishing. However, despite finding herself in a community of poets, Jones did not write frequently. She states that much of who she was at this stage in her life was wrapped into working and fulfilling other obligations. Jones writes, "life as wife and mother was fine because of other pleasures—the unemployment insurance in my pocket, the promise, from friends in publishing, of free-lance editorial work. Yugen 7 was out, a sixty-six-page issue; Totem Press had eleven titles…but we—mostly me—still ran our business" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 259). Despite viewing these opportunities as beneficial, Jones's identity was still lacking. Her words were riddled with stagnation and discontent, a yearning for more—to *be* more.

Jones's marriage to LeRoi was complicated. She states, "to one of us a job is a slave, to the other it's a guarantee of freedom. And it's his male pride, with all that this entails, against my freedom to take it or leave it. He has lots of ways to make his side up, but I can only lose once. And I won't." (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 217). The unequal gender dynamics in the 1960s allowed LeRoi to travel and create, expanding his world of writing. Whereas, the jobs that Jones assumed often tied her to a desk, performing idle tasks for various magazines and

publishing companies. While her relationship with LeRoi proved to be beneficial in acquiring knowledge and experience in the literary community, Jones found her identity stifled, claiming that she "was an energetic young person of twenty-seven, serving others" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 259). Jones's discontent with her servitude strengthened her desire to become. In 1965, Hettie and LeRoi Jones filed for a divorce, and throughout the latter half of her memoir, Jones contemplates her identity unaccompanied by another person. As she reflects, Jones's "becoming" involves recognizing who she is, who she wants to be, and how she plans on narrowing this divide.

To be able to construct one's identity signifies having enough freedom to determine the course of action in one's life. Jones acknowledges the constraints that she previously experienced as a woman in a world of male writers while being closely linked to LeRoi and *his* pursuits. Jones writes, "Poor discarded Hettie Cohen. With all her grand ambition, all she'd ever "become" was Hettie Jones. I felt I owed her" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 207). Jones identifies that her attempts to construct her identity were largely influenced by her ex-husband and her, oftentimes, subordinate role to him. However, through an awareness of her shortcomings, Jones releases herself to the opportunity to reinvent Hettie Jones and to become the woman she longed to create. Just five pages later in her memoir, Jones concludes that "My future was mine" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 212). In this reclamation of her identity, she reaches beyond the physical attributes that had once played such a central role in defining her—such as her association with LeRoi and her family—and instead explores herself through writing.

After LeRoi's departure, Jones's "becoming" comes to full fruition when she grants herself time and space to explore her literary pursuits. She writes, "Without a him in the house, there was of course more space/time for her, and I tried to redefine the way a woman might use

it" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 401). In the later chapters of her memoir, Jones finally references writing consistently after splitting from her husband. Jones's departure from LeRoi evoked "a sudden, wonderful, liberating wave—completely unexpected—the heavy knot of regret rose from [her] breast and flew out the window…[she] was thirty-five years old and no longer needed what women were taught to live for!" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 405). The freedom that Jones obtains is initiated through newly acquired independence, enabling her to focus on the construction of her individuality. Hettie Jones's "becoming" signifies a return to herself—to a woman who is in control of her life and who is unafraid to invent without the threat of being overshadowed. Through her published works, the self-made "Hettie Jones" is released from the lines of her poetry, fulfilling her promise "to *become*—something, anything, whatever that meant" (Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* 28).

Drive* and *Doing 70

Hettie Jones's transition towards a life focused on becoming her own self is explored through her later works, *Drive* (1998) and *Doing 70* (2007), which offered Jones the necessary space to navigate her identity as a writer. Driving operates as a central theme in both poetry collections. Metaphorically, driving a car aligns with the "becoming" that Jones writes about in her memoir. Driving is representative of active change. The process involves a series of choices made by the driver—most voluntary but some enforced through the effects of external occurrences—that determine where they arrive, when they arrive, and what condition they arrive in. Driving requires both autonomy and choice. Similarly, the act of "becoming" unfolds in much of the same ways. To "become," is to enter a transitory state, one that aligns well with the idea of

Kerouac's "road." An individual leaves their current state and moves towards their destination—who they will be when they have finished "becoming." The in-between, or the driving, serves as a process of finding oneself and actively creating. The two processes are synonymous when considering Jones's construction of her identity and the journey that is required for the exploration of who she is as a woman and writer.

Drive is Jones's first collection of published poems and much of it is fused with driving. Over the course of the book, Jones's poetry begins with a series entitled "The Woman in the Green Car," where Jones writes "and so young women / here's the dilemma / itself the solution: / I have always been at the same time / woman enough to be moved to tears / and man enough / to drive my car in any direction" (Jones, *Drive* 11). Reflecting on the multiplicity of her identity, much of Jones's poetry alerts the reader to her transformation into a woman who is central in her life. She is no longer cast in the shadows of her ex-husband, rearranging her life to better suit his. Despite often using anonymous characters within her poetry, the language throughout *Drive* mirrors her own "becoming." Jones writes of her female protagonist: "she / invented her own life, she said / to the interviewer" and "but now it's on me / I switch / roles, I fix / the roof, I have to / love myself / the way I never did / before" (Jones, *Drive* 13 and 30). Jones's poetry entertains the independence of a woman—recklessly speeding through her life without hesitation or restraint. She is actively changing and assuming the roles that were stereotypically reserved for men. Jones drives, fixes, and loves authentically, remaining dedicated to herself— "love myself / the way I never did / before."

Drive also provides evidence of Jones's "becoming" through her focus on writing and prioritizing her literary efforts. In her poem "Ode to My Car," she writes of her car transporting her to a space where writing is influential. Jones states, "Take me surely to where I am now, in

this perfectly rounded silence, at this table of women writing. Because of you we can, and we do" (Jones, *Drive* 17). Jones extends gratitude for her car for delivering her to a space where women enjoy the freedom of writing. Dedicated to the Writing Workshop at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Jones's involvement in writing workshops within the women's prison emphasizes that she has not only found success in her own writing attempts but has extended this opportunity to encompass other women as well. For Jones, her writing is complex and derives from a space that is reflective of individuality: "I write a hall / of mirrors, risky distortions / to shatter / repose. / I write / from fear, from what I / can't know / but I write / on the high horse of my life / and I write with time in my one / good hand" (Jones, *Drive* 67). Jones's poetry collections are spaces where she can continue to explore her becoming. Through language that exudes power and poise, Jones evolves into a woman who is independent and capable of artistic and literary creation. *Drive* brings her closer to the woman she longed to be in *How I Became Hettie Jones.* Her poem "Finally Narcissa" encapsulates Jones's yearning for a life that surpasses what was expected of her and reveals how dreaming of this future enabled her to take the first step in achieving it:

The girl has found herself
for the first time, in a
mirror she will never look into
again. Far from home, under
gaslight, here is a thriller,
a woman she can live with.
She stares, entranced, eleven
and in love at last.

That night she dreams
a doorway out of
the flowered walls
of her ordinary life.
She sees herself in a larger,
darker, louder place
her body ecstatic

her thoughts like wild vines. (Jones, *Drive* 70)

Seeing herself in a space that exceeds expectations is what propels Hettie Jones's "becoming," driving herself to be visible within the literary community with "her thoughts like wild vines."

Published nearly a decade later, *Doing 70* maintains the theme of driving but includes meditations that hinge on the stories of strangers in New York City. Jones returns to the city that birthed her, where much of her "becoming" occurred. In *Doing 70*, Jones's poetry focuses on a conglomerate of strangers and people who have impacted her life directly and indirectly. *Doing 70* returns to the idea of constructing individuality, however, instead of building herself by dismantling her association with others, Jones relies on strangers to communicate new facets of her identity to the reader. Jones's self-confidence is evident when she writes, "The woman rising from my bed / puts her new foot into my old shoe / strides out never thinking / she'll go down like the rest" (Jones, *Doing 70* 17). Jones recognizes her transformation and, with conviction, rises with an understanding that she has set herself apart from the rest of the world's inhabitants. Jones's understanding of herself allows her to write about other individuals while never losing sight of who she has become. Much of *Doing 70* consists of Jones sympathetically connecting with strangers in observation, wanting to remember their narratives, and making a conscious decision to intertwine her life with theirs. She conveys a longing to understand their identities in a way that will enrich her own. She writes, "I rode its dazzle all through Chelsea / bearing this witness with / the open eye I want / to remember" (Jones, *Doing 70* 69).

Jones's memoir, *How I Became Hettie Jones,* reveals the difficulties that were present for women during the late 1950s and early 1960s regarding the construction of identity. However, through a longing to "become," Jones envisions herself surpassing the roles that she was expected to play—first as a daughter and then as a wife. Jones's early poetry collections

provided a space for her to write and focus on her own work rather than rearranging her life to support her ex-husband. Jones instead maintains her intent to "become something," which enabled her to create an identity independent of external people. Like Joyce Johnson, Jones inserts herself into spaces that are beneficial to her writing endeavors and reflects on them in both *Drive* and *Doing 70.* Jones's will to become is represented by her decision to get behind the wheel. She drives, speeding towards freedom, and, along the way, she creates and constructs herself while shedding remnants of the past, discarding them through the open window. For many women of the Beat Generation, creating their own identity served as an act of rebellion against institutions and individuals who tried to placate their existence. Jones breaks free of these restraints and, through the publication of her poetry collections, documents her "becoming."

Chapter 7

Becoming Offbeat, Again

In the past, the term "Beat" had been usually ascribed to the lives and works of its founders—Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs. Attributing the literary accomplishments of the generation to these male writers who lie at the core of the movement fails to fathom the cultural and social context as a whole. Failing to consider the women writers of the Beat Generation foils any attempt to address the entirety of the literary movement and clouds the understanding of its contributors, especially when wishing to analyze "Beat work and culture and not just individual, isolated texts" (Hunt 251). With Kerouac's publication of *On the Road,* an aesthetic of Beat literature was born, focused on "speed, spontaneity, and improvisation yielding discovery and vision" (Hunt 258). While applicable and influential to many of the men's literary achievements and the freedom they acquired, this precedent eliminates and effectively *erases* women Beat writers from the context.

The works and lives of Joyce Johnson, Joanne Kyger, Diane di Prima, and Hettie Jones demonstrate that embodying the idea of Beat was not simply concerned with crafting well-wrought literature, but rather served as a liberatory attempt to overcome the societal expectations that compounded women from the 1940s to the 1960s. Much of the freedom that the women experienced derived from actively identifying social pressures and resisting their influence—inventing themselves as offbeat. According to Beat scholar Tim Hunt, how these women chose to live their lives and pursue their writing served as the epitome of the Beat experience as both "literary experiment and oppositional (often violational lifestyle(s)" (Hunt 252). Their accounts remind us of alternative ways of writing, which were influenced by gendered institutions, spaces, and social structures. Through these circumstances, women Beat writers freed themselves by

exiting restrictive settings and cultivating a literary community. Women writers helped define the Beat Generation and their works are reflective of the values and elements of the movement, specifically their persistence and independence. When scholars or readers portray Beat writing manifesting under circumstances of obvious freedom, such as the ability to travel on the road, our imaginations revoke women writers' participation and literary achievements while narrowing our understanding of the canonical works as well. It narrows our very inheritance of the power of beat.

The remembering, reconstructing, and retelling within the works of Johnson, Kyger, di Prima, and Jones "help us understand the broader cultural negotiation of Beat that was not only the process of producing literary texts but also the process of creating literary communities and trying to leverage cultural change through those texts and communities" (Hunt 253). Acknowledging and grappling with the work of women Beat writers helps to define the literary movement and reconceptualize what it means to become—perhaps once again—offbeat. Rather than following the conventional rhythms that sounded throughout the nation and even settled amongst many of the male Beats, the women built their lives and writing careers on the offbeat and in the areas that were often composed by silence. The decision to write in ways that surpass conformity and reject the restriction of their often erased and effaced agency reveals the aspects within Beat women's writing that assist in achieving these goals.

Each woman engages in entanglement and escape. They complicate their narratives by forging their identities and transforming the spaces they were advised to reside in, such as academic institutions, parental homes, and subordinate jobs. Their works achieve freedoms that do not reflect the social or cultural circumstances of men. Instead, they emulate the female experience of women writing during the Beat movement and should not be dismissed when

placed beside the men. While the male writers of the Beat Generation were regarded as the cadence of the literary movement, the silent offbeat completed and complemented the beat in syncopation. The historical ripples of the Beat phenomenon are still being mapped today, and at the center of comprehending this community of poets, writers, and artists is the cognizance that the generation comprises a "range of Beat voices and Beat experience, not just the work and lives of a small set of men [who] initially caught attention of the public" (Hunt 259). Johnson, Kyger, di Prima, and Jones overcome the writing of the past and create possibilities for the literature of the future. To acquire the freedom to write, Beat women survived and countered the oppressive and discriminatory practices of 1950s America. Their ability to transgress and transform their lives is reflected in their works, serving as a representation for future women writers to take the risk to choose, construct, and create following their volition. Johnson recalls, "We had actually chosen those lives" (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 15). Often, the silence of the offbeat is louder than the beat itself—its emptiness tempting us to discover who was responsible for its creation. Women Beat writers emerge from what should not be considered a void but rather a space for opportunity where they left behind the example of their liberation. It is in the offbeat where we finally find their freedom.

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First Place — **2021**
The Edward J. Nichols Memorial Award in Creative Nonfiction Writing

Honorable Mention — **2019**
"Collegiate Laws of Life" Academic Essay Contest

PUBLICATIONS

"An Observance of Humanity" (creative nonfiction), *Penn State Liberal Arts Voices*, February 2019. University Park, PA.
"Gaudí to Grim" (creative nonfiction), *Folio,* January 2020. University Park, PA.
"On Glowsticks" (creative nonfiction), *Kalliope,* May 2021. University Park, PA.
"Raise High the Roof Beam" (creative nonfiction), *Folio,* January 2022. University Park, PA.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Universitat de Barcelona — **Barcelona, Spain**
January 2020 – April 2020

ACTIVITIES

Penn State Club Softball — *August 2018 – May 2022*
Secretary (2021-2022), Coach (2019-2022), Active Member (2018-2022)