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Women of the Beat Generation

Visionaries, Rebels and Activists

Fernanda Bisi

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Aos meus pais, cujo apoio e encorajamento foram fundamentais para a conclusão desse trabalho.

Sumário

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Fernanda Bisi

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Resumo

A Geração Beat é maioritariamente associada ao trabalho de escritores do sexo masculino.. Embora fossem tão prolíficas quanto os seus colegas, as escritoras Beat são menos conhecidas, menos publicadas e menos reconhecidas pelos seus contributos para a cena literária da época. O objetivo desta dissertação é examinar a poética da Geração Beat produzida por mulheres à luz das suas perspetivas, experiências e expressões criativas únicas. Nomeadamente, analiso os poemas de Elise Cowen, Joanne Kyger, Lenore Kandel, Janine Pommy Vega, e Anne Waldman que, como poetas, desafiaram as restrições do seu tempo, esculpindo as suas identidades como rebeldes, visionárias e ativistas dentro de um movimento predominantemente dominado por homens.

Palavras-chave: Geração Beat, estudos femininos, conformismo, poesia.

Abstract

The Beat Generation is largely associated with the work of male writers. Although they were as prolific as their male counterparts, female Beat writers are less known, less published, and less recognized for their contributions to the literary scene of the time. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the women's poetics of the Beat Generation in light of their unique perspectives, experiences, and creative expressions. Namely, I analyze the poems of Elise Cowen, Joanne Kyger, Lenore Kandel, Janine Pommy Vega, and Anne Waldman who, as poets, defied the constraints of their time, carving out their identities as rebels, visionaries, and activists within a movement predominantly dominated by men.

Key-words: Beat Generation, women studies, conformism, poetry.

Introduction

The Beat Generation stands as a literary movement characterized by its rebellion against societal norms, a chorus of voices challenging the status quo, and a vibrant tapestry of unconventional perspectives. However, amidst the resounding echoes of Jack Kerouac's road trips, Allen Ginsberg's howls, Gregory Corso's christian-patriotic verses, and William S. Burroughs's junkie confessions, there is a collective of visionaries, rebels, and activists whose contributions have often been relegated to the margins of this historical movement — the women writers and poets of the Beat Generation.

Their works, at times celebrated but more often obscured, serve as vital signposts in understanding the complexities of a movement often characterized by its masculine *ethos*, as most critical discussion has maintained the identity of the Beat movement linked to its white male writers' adventures, whilst ignoring the work of the women from the period, even if they were advocates of Beat aesthetics and who collaborated in the resistances Beat engaged. Through meticulous exploration and analysis of their poetry, this dissertation seeks to shed light on the unique perspectives, experiences, and creative expressions of women poets within the Beat Generation. It aims at unraveling their artistic production, delve into the socio-political contexts that shaped their poetry, and highlight their contributions as writers challenging the constraints of their time, carving their identities as rebels, visionaries, and activists within a predominantly male-dominated landscape. Their voices, though muted by the overwhelming echoes of their male counterparts, pulsate with a fervent urgency, challenging norms, and advocating for change.

In the fifties, in mainstream American society, middle and upper-middle class women were supposed to conform, to agree with being a housewife and mother. This often meant conforming to what Betty Friedan described as the *Feminine Mystique* (1963), the image of the perfect housewife – prioritizing domestic duties, caregiving, and maintaining the family unit while largely excluding themselves from the workforce. After interviewing white middle-class college-educated women, Friedan identified the "problem that has no name", which is the dissatisfaction and frustration felt by those

women when they had to conform to that idealization of the feminine linked exclusively to the domestic sphere. For Friedan, this stereotypical mystique of femininity, reinforced by the media and the school system, can only be overcome with a new life plan for women that does not mistake housework for a career, and marriage for life's main ambition. In her own words:

> When society asks so little of women, every woman has to listen to her own inner voice to find her identity in this changing world. She must create, out of her own needs and abilities, a new life plan, fitting in the love and children and home that have defined femininity in the past with the work toward a greater purpose that shapes the future… [Once she realizes] neither her husband nor her children, nor the things in her house, nor sex, nor being like all the other women can give her a self – she often finds the solution much easier than she anticipated. (Friedan 278)

What Friedan offers here is a reflection on the challenges women faced in defining their identities in a society that traditionally offered them limited roles and expectations. According to her, women must turn inward, listening to their own inner voices in order to be able to create new life plans that would reflect both their personal needs and abilities. Once a woman realizes that external factors cannot provide her with a true sense of self, she may find it easier to redefine her life in a way that is more authentic and fulfilling.

The women within the Beat movement, through their prose, poetry, and unyielding spirit, transcended the conventional roles prescribed to them, embracing nonconformity as a means of artistic expression and social commentary. As Brenda Knight mentions in her book *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (1996), many of them developed "a natural predilection for art and poetry" having received liberal arts educations (Knight *Women* 3). They were as "fearless, angry, high risk, too smart, restless, highly irregular" as their male counterparts, as Knight points out. They were "muses who birthed a poetry so raw and new and full of power that it changed the world. Writers whose words have spells, whose stories bind, whose vision blinds. Artists for whom curing the disease of art kills" (*ibid* 4). Their vision was not merely limited to the confines of literature; it extended to the very fabric of society, pioneering movements and ideologies that echoed their fervent desire for societal transformation.

Nevertheless, “Beat” is usually equated with their most famous male figures – Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs – and what they represent as described in *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (2002), edited by Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace: “iconoclastic, freewheeling, masculinity community and dissent from both literary convention and ‘lifestyle’” (1). This “dissent from literary convention and lifestyle” (*ibid*) came from a generation of postwar America in the 1950s and 1960s, centered around the bohemian artist communities of New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, as mentioned by Florian Hardt (10):

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

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

For instance, Ginsberg saw the Beat literary movement as a gathering of “friends who had worked together on poetry, prose, and cultural conscience from the mid-forties until the term became popular nationally in the late fifties” (Ginsberg xiv); he also assumed that there were just one or two women writers who deserved merit, as he counted Diane di Prima and Joanne Kyger amongst the working friends: “where there was a strong writer who could hold her own, like Diane di Prima, we would certainly work with her and recognize her” (Richard Peabody 1). Moreover, a year before he died, Ginsberg reformulated some definitions of the Beat Generation, “explaining that Beat was originally a hip word meaning ‘exhausted, at the bottom of the world, looking up or out, sleepless, wide-eyed, perceptive, rejected by society, on your own, streetwise’” and that “an inquisitiveness into the nature of consciousness, leading to an acquaintance

with Eastern thought, meditation practice, art as extension or manifestation of exploration of the texture of consciousness, spiritual liberation as a result" would help locate the Beat *ethos* (Steven Belletto *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* 3). However, these characteristics are at once useful and limiting, as they comprise some but not all the work generated by the movement (*ibid*), more notably the poetry and prose produced by women.

All in all, apart from the triumvirate Kerouac-Ginsberg-Burroughs, a host of other authors from the movement are seldom read, and their publications are difficult to find. In the case of the women writers of the Beat Generation, the literary works produced are currently either out of print or available only in used books bookshops, with a few to be found here and there scattered around sales websites. In the same way, it is not easy to find reliable bibliography about the topic "Women of the Beat Generation", or at least it is not easy to find a voluminous body of research that gathered enough critical essays which analyzed the Beat women writers' literary production. The scholarship and research revolving around the Beat male writers is much more prolific, therefore more accessible and more affordable to acquire.

In terms of academic writings, in recent years, one can more easily find research about these women's prose or autobiographical works, and more prominently, in anglophone countries. In Brazil, some research could be found, especially regarding their erasure from the canon, such as *"De todo modo, era a minha revolução": Silenciamento de vozes femininas na Geração Beat* (2021), by Ariane Ribeiro Santana, and *Elements for a history of the exclusion of North American white women from the literary field: Joyce Johnson's works* (2022), by Ariane Ribeiro Santana, Graziela Menezes de Jesus e Rafaela Scardino. None could be found in Portugal, except a MA dissertation from the University of Aveiro about small publishing houses which were the "flagships" of the Beat literary production, both for male and female writers. All in all, the existing body of research appears to revolve more around the women Beat writer's silencing and exclusion from the canon, with a few articles dedicated to the critical analysis of their prose (especifically their memoirs as a way of providing insight into their zeitgeist, not

necessarily valuing their aesthetic-literary content), and even fewer critical articles regarding the poetry produced by women in the period.

Having said so, as a finer review of the textual analysis of the poems by Beat women seems to be an absence in the scholarly community, my aim is to dedicate my research to a critical analysis of some of the poems written by these women.

Most of the references that give basis to my research were fairly recent, but also vital for an intended expansion of the Beat studies and scholarship. My main sources were *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (2002) and *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers* (2004), both edited by Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, which are collections of essays; *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (1996), by Brenda Knight, and *A Different Beat: Writings by Women of the Beat Generation* (1997), edited by Richard Peabody, which are anthologies, mostly commenting on each authors' lives and influences and compiling some of their work together with the names of other women that either influenced or were linked with the movement of the Beat.

The canon of Beat women writers is yet to be established, "with debate about the constitution of the group manifesting itself in editorial choices conveyed through the publishing industry" (Johnson and Grace *Girls* 11). Although the Knight and Peabody works bring several names, they also raise "unanswered questions of standards of Beat inclusion and exclusion" (*ibid*), which is still transitory and subjective in the case of women writers, as both volumes included names that do not overlap. According to Peabody (2), not all critics would agree on the choices of names to include in an anthology or compilation of the Beat women writers, and "arguments could also be made for the inclusion of poets and writers" as varied as Denise Levertov (who navigated in between San Francisco and New York, and is considered as a representative of the Black Mountain school of poets much more than a Beat representative), Diane Wakoski, Barbara Guest (who had associations with the New York School of poets), and other names.

The possible reasons for the removal of the Beat women writers from the literary canon revolved around questions for which their Beat male peers were first condemned

(and later praised): the rejection of conventional narrative, the rejection of consumer culture, the nonconformism, the exploitation of self-expression, the existential questioning and questing, and the sexual liberation. But the fact that they were women added a different layer, that is, being a woman writing in such style and about such topics was the utmost offense for that historical period, as they had to juggle with the roles assigned to women at the time (being a housewife and a mother), and the freedom of (sexual) expression, drug use and experimentation. Anne Waldman, one of the most active figures of the Beat movement, gives her testimony:

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

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

Notwithstanding the absence of the Beat women writers from the canon, they were always a presence in the meetings and in the life of the Beat community: living together with other writers (both as lovers or just as roommates), in gatherings, poetry readings, and involved in the publication of magazines such as *City Magazine* (in which Anne Waldman published her work upon arriving in New York), *Angel Hair Magazine*, *The World*, and *Yugen* (founded by Hettie Jones and her then husband LeRoi Jones, also known later as Amiri Baraka), in which many poets and writers of the new literary scene published). Anne Waldman was friends with Allen Ginsberg, whose farm in Cherry Valley was also her home in the seventies, and was invited along with Ginsberg to found the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder,

Colorado; she also befriended Joanne Kyger, Lew Welch, Brenda Frazer, and others, and was involved with the New York School of Poets and met Frank O'Hara before he died (Knight *Women* 288-9). Despite declaring she did not receive condescension from her male peers, Waldman also comments:

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

The point here is not to deny the importance of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, but to highlight the diversity of texts and characters that might be also included in the Beat canon and that have so far received little or no recognition. As Johnson and Grace point out, "the exclusion of female Beat writers diminishes understanding of the Beat literary and cultural movement, creates insufficient representations of the field of Beat literature, and distorts views of the era during and after the Second World War when Beat emerged" (*Girls* 2).

The Beat women writers can be organized into two generations that are concurrent with the first and second well-known male Beat writers' generations and "extend beyond them to a third generation" (*ibid* 12). The first generation is contemporaneous with the first Beat male writers (Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs) and like them born in the 1910s and 1920s. Such women writers are Madeline Gleason, Helen Adam, Sheri Martinelli, ruth weiss, Denise Levertov, Jane Bowles and Carol Berge. Writing at the same time as the most famous trio of Beat male writers, Kerouac-Ginsberg-Burroughs, this first generation of Beat women writers approached work "free of academic or traditional literary models, or innovate new ones for their post-bomb, cold-war era experience" (*ibid* 12). As the male writers, they could be found in connection with "diverse literary enclaves", such as The Maidens in San Francisco, an "eccentric and insular San Francisco troop begun by Helen Adam in 1957 to which Madeleine Gleason also belonged . . . antecedent to and contiguous with the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat literary movements" (*ibid*), as Johnson and Grace

explain, which helped clarify "the way that Beat emerged contemporaneously with several other avant-garde literary communities" (*ibid*).

The second generation comprises women writers born in the 1930s and who shared the community and cultural environment with an already established male Beat Generation (Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, LeRoi Jones). Second-generation Beat women writers include Joanna McClure, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Lenore Kandel, Elise Cowen, Joanne Kyger, Diane di Prima, Hettie Jones, Joyce Johnson, Brenda Frazer, Brigid Murnaghan, Margaret Randall, Rochelle Owens, Diane Wakowski and Barbara Moraff. There is no consistent approach to gender among the themes of the second generation of Beat women writers, but some in the group recognized the importance of asserting their gender in the alternative environment where they dwelled (Johnson and Grace *Girls* 13).

The third generation brings women writers born in the 1940s, such as Janine Pommy Vega and Anne Waldman, who were the vanguard of the sixties women's movements and profited from the "empowerment of the sixties counterculture, and second-wave feminist demands for women's civil and economic rights and sexual self-determination" (*ibid* 14). Moreover, their writings were influenced by the continuity of the sexual revolution, the drug counterculture, the surge of the Vietnam War and the rage against it denounced by fellow third-generation Beat Bob Dylan (*ibid*).

For the purposes of this study, I have decided to approach the writers according to the tropes and themes in their poetry, having grouped them as Visionaries, Rebels and Activists, and not necessarily according to each of the three generations aforementioned. Moreover, both mine and Johnson and Grace's divisions do not imply that each generation or group would not deal with similar tropes.

The variousness and hybridity of the Beat production and Beat tropes is well known. However, there is an agreement in regard to the breadth of jazz influences amongst these writers. Johnson and Grace define Beat as a "spontaneous composition, direct expression of mind, no censorious revision, jazz-based improvisation; or factualism, cut-up, surrealism; or first-thought-best-thought, cataloguing piled-up images, following breath line, prophetic utterance" (*ibid* 2). Both men and women

writers of the period were influenced by this "new ease of flow", and "the openness of a jazz improvisation was echoed in the open verse uttered within a breath" (Elena Maria Rogalle 8).

In regard to literary and aesthetic influence, the three generations of Beat women writers brought a diversity to the already hybrid literary heritage of the whole Beat generation, if not even more varied. British and American male modernists (Wolfe, Williams, Joyce, Faulkner) and male romantics (Shelley, Keats, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman) are commonly considered important influences on the male Beat writers. However, not only male, but also female predecessors are very influential for Beat women writers, especially from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some examples cited are the Brontës, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Gertrude Stein, Anais Nin, and Emily Dickinson. They also claimed having been influenced both by their male and female Beat peers and other artists, such as the film director François Truffaut (in the case of ruth weiss):

> The juxtaposition of the disparate and eclectic influences cited by women Beat writers with the male modernists and romantics cited by the male Beats provocatively complicates conceptions of a Beat aesthetic, which is evidently not monolithic and consistent, but multiple and divergent and more experimental than has been thought. . . . Beat is an avant-garde whose sources are as diffuse, unpredictable, and innovative as its practitioners. (Johnson and Grace *Girls* 15)

Another difference between men and women Beat writers is their approach to literary production, most notably in relation to the revision of their work. Most Beat women writers were careful enough to revise their text, in a "contradistinction to popular clichés of Beat writing as well as famous statements by Kerouac and Ginsberg, in particular" (*ibid* 16), who considered revision an act "against the purity of the unmodified literary utterance" and "spontaneity" (*ibid*). Despite Ginsberg's defense against revision, an analysis of *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile* (2006) shows he did revise focusing on "condensing the poem to make it sparser" (Erik Mortenson *Allen Ginsberg and Beat Poetry* 80) and reinforcing what later would be recognized as his style that left out less necessary parts of speech such as prepositions and articles (*ibid*). Ginsberg's revision meant that he was tidying the poem up since "capturing immediacy" was at the center of his practice anyway (*ibid*).

A third difference between men and women Beat writers would be, within an already very diverse literary production, the writing of memoirs by the women in a more prolific manner. They participated then in a form of "collective memorialization" (Heike Mlakar 1), which also helped to give insight into a countercultural revolution and shed light upon the mechanisms at work within the movement. Many of their accounts are confessional and intimate, as Mlakar further explains:

> . . . they depict unflattering accounts of illness, madness and suicide, sexual orgies, abortions, homelessness, alcoholism and depression. What is also typical for female Beat writings is worrying about race, gender, and the establishment which is pervaded by sexism and oppression of women. Traditional myths about female silence are rewritten, resisting their objectification as mere "chicks" or "ellipses"[1]. (20)

For women writers of the Beat Generation, writing poetry, novels, biographies or memoirs demanded a degree of courage, sacrifice, nonconformity and separation from the mainstream values, beliefs and practices of their eras that differentiated them from their male peers as they faced a double exclusion: they were the wrong gender in an already marginalized group whose members defied conventions. Hence, their work both expands their male peers' by showing an even more oppressed and hidden side of the Beat Generation and broadens an already eclectic literature by adding issues of motherhood, abortion, sexual exploitation, etc., and should not be dismissed. In shedding light on their visionary prose, poetic rebellion, and activist zeal, this study aims to reclaim their positions as pivotal figures within the Beat Generation. It endeavors not only to celebrate their literary achievements but also to underscore their roles as agents of change, amplifying their voices as catalysts for social and cultural revolution.

Although it is "quintessentially Beat" (Mlakar 2) to refuse categorizations and labels, it is the function of scholars to understand aesthetic tendencies and differences and to recover writers who were often disregarded as part of a canon. Bringing their work into light is a way of acknowledging their prominence as fair representatives of the Beat Generation and render their work more visible.

[1] "Ellipse" was Lucien Carr's pejorative nickname for poet Elise Cowen, as he saw her as Allen Ginsberg's shadow (Tony Trigilio *Who Writes? Reading Elise Cowen's Poetry* 121).

Thus, chapter 1, titled “Rebels”, will address the writings of Beat women poets in light of their rebellious stance against societal norms, gender roles, and literary conventions that tried (and succeeded) to obscure their relevance within the canon. More especifically, chapter 1 will look into the poetics of Elise Cowen and Joanne Kyger. Although Lenore Kandel and Janine Pommy Vega, as well as other poets of the era may also be considered rebels, I decided to include both of them in chapter 2, titled “Visionaries”, as they used their work as a means to search for spiritual enlightenment and transcendence, and to explore the complexities of female desire and agency within their poetics. Finally, chapter 3, titled “Activists”, will bring both the earlier and more recent poems of Anne Waldman, as the epitome of the Beat activism, whether in regard to feminism, anti-war or environmental concerns.

In the appendix I, there is a list of Beat women’s names that could be found in the works cited in this dissertation. I believed it was interesting to include this list to make it clear that there is a significant number of women left out of the canon. Although ruth weiss and Diane di Prima have become better known in recent years, I left them out of this dissertation due to both my personal choices and to the scarce availability of other poet’s works. In other words, I wanted to make the poetry of less known women more visible, as it is to my understanding that they were as influential as their more famous male counterparts.

1. Rebels

The Lady . . .
The Lady is a humble thing
Made of death and water
The fashion is to dress plain
And use the mind for border

— Elise Cowen (n.p.)

I resisted the Beat label during the time I was associated with the Beat writers because they never considered me a Beat writer. I didn't consider myself a Beat writer. And they never said, "Oh, you're one of us," ever!

— *Joanne* Kyger (2002)

Resisting labels is just one of the ways in which the Beat were considered rebels. Although this rebellion had already started with the Beat first generation, this first chapter delves into the works of prominent second generation Beat women poets, such as Elise Cowen and Joanne Kyger, who were expected to behave like ladies but who preferred to rebel and ended up taking the tool for this. Their poetry is marked by nonconformist ideals against patriarchy and the establishment, more specifically "a critique of traditional literary genres that have been based on women's subordination to men" (Heike Mlakar 17), among other concerns. Moreover, the chapter will link some of their poems through the metaphoric "weaving" as a trope for female creativity. Taking into account the environment in which these writings were first produced, that is, the late 1940s and the early 1950s, a time of conformist tendencies in mainstream American culture against which the Beat Generation emerged as a response, this chapter aims at shedding light on the rebellious spirit and contributions of these poets to this influential literary movement.

As already mentioned in the introduction, in postwar America, societal pressure encouraged individuals to adhere to traditional gender norms and roles. The cultural narrative reinforced the idea that a woman's primary role was within the home, catering to her husband and children. Any deviation from this prescribed role was often met with social stigma or disapproval. The media, including advertisements, films, and magazines, played a significant role in promoting and perpetuating these ideals, presenting an unrealistic and narrow view of women's capabilities and aspirations. Moreover, as one

of the epigraphs to this chapter points out, “the fashion is to dress plain”, with “full skirts” and “wasp waists” representing a more “feminine” fashion instead of the suits and padded shoulders of the women’s dress code in the war period (Mlakar 11). If people “use the mind for border”, their mind becomes a representation of reasoning deeply rooted in the subaltern experience which prevented people from achieving new ways of thinking and behaving. Hence, conformism in the 1940s and 1950s intersected with broader societal expectations regarding behavior, appearance, and values. Women were expected to embody traits such as modesty, obedience, and selflessness, further reinforcing the notion of their subservience to men and the domestic sphere.

All of this, plus the shift in global power dynamics, economic restructuring, and social upheaval in the postwar era, with men returning home from the war and finding women doing their jobs, had a profound impact on people’s lives. By an increase in economic investments triggered by the Second World War, the US became prosperous, and consumerism grew. Life in the suburbs seemed even more attractive with the purchase of household appliances that made the life of a housewife “easier”, which also meant women in the workforce were supposed to come home and “take their place” to keep a well-oiled home (Mlakar 4-5).

The impact of this economic growth and social change also had an impact in literature and culture, as the period was marked by the surfacing of various literary movements that rebelled against these traditional forms and conventions. The Beat Generation, characterized by its rejection of mainstream society and celebration of individual freedom, emerged as a prominent countercultural movement. Its writers challenged prevailing norms through their experimental writing styles and alternative lifestyles. However, being a rebellious woman at those times was different than being a rebellious man, who could get away with breaking from societal norms, while the women were severely judged and morally condemned; by establishing themselves as non-conforming to expectations, women ran the risk of becoming targets of a plethora of pejorative adjectives, such as hysterical, unfeminine or loose. Men could be criticized but were often forgiven. On the other hand, women took higher risks as they found no redemption, being tagged as “fallen” and “lost” and therefore losing their position in

society. In reality, they were revolutionary, and they shattered gendered boundaries on and off the page like their male counterparts of the Beat generation. The only difference is that they received no applause.

As Polina Mackay defines in her essay "The Beats and Sexuality" (1997), the Beats were in general "notorious nonconformists" who sought non-traditional forms of self-fulfillment that might be found in alternate forms of being as "perpetual travelers, spiritualists, or literary experimentalists" (179). For the wider audience, this notoriety would not quite involve the Beats' nuanced philosophies, but actually their approach to sexuality in their works. They were most famously men, many of which homo or bisexuals, living sexual adventures and writing about sexual experimentation, and then becoming famous for the obscenity charges that targeted two of "the most seminal Beat texts: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) and William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959)" (*ibid*)[2].

However, for women writers of the Beat Generation, writing poetry, novels, biographies or memoirs demanded a higher degree of courage, sacrifice, nonconformity and separation from the mainstream values, beliefs and practices of their eras that differentiated them from their male peers as they faced a double exclusion: they were the wrong gender in an already marginalized group whose members defied conventions. For instance, writing about the female body and bodily functions as these women did was shocking for the audiences of postwar America. Moreover, this rebellious female Beat poetry brought a reflection on social misfits, on their lives at the margins of what was socially acceptable at that time, as well as on shared creative spaces, since many of them had relationships with their male counterparts and lacked a "room of their own" (Woolf 3) where they could dedicate to their writings.[3]

These issues are explored in Patricia Hill Collins' essay *Learning from The Outsider-Within* (1986), to the extent that it revolves around the idea of racism, sexism,

[2] Ginsberg's *Howl* and Burrough's *Naked Lunch* were objects of obscenity trials in 1957 and 1977, respectively. With almost ten years separating them, it is notable the breadth of the feeling "abomination-must-be-destroyed" that was pervasive in the American discourse of the period.

[3] Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) asserts that for women to achieve their full creative potential, they need financial independence and a space to develop their artistic expression freely.

and other intersectional oppressions that create obstacles for women. In Collins' essay, she describes how a social group's perspective on the world may be influenced by its position within the particular, historical context of gender, racism, and economic inequality. Hence, the "outsider-within" is the marginalized party within a specific group. Although Collins' theory is applied to black women's contexts, she clearly states that a variety of individuals can learn from black women experiences as "outsiders-within": black men, the working class, white women, religious and sexual minorities and all the individuals that, even benefiting from their status as "insiders", never felt comfortable with the perks and assumptions of their "insiderism" (Collins S29).

Hence, Beat women's work both expands their male peers' by showing an even more oppressed and hidden side of the Beat Generation and broadens an already eclectic literature by adding issues of motherhood, abortion, sexual exploitation, etc. As Richard Peabody mentions, although not all of them were invisible or silent (ruth weiss was frequently on stage in the same clubs as the men), many were silenced by their families, by their partners, by their own choice of not publishing their work, but mostly by literary criticism and acclaim (3). Moreover, they also lost their creative spaces, their "rooms of one's own", as many were institutionalized or had to give up writing in order to assume their roles as mothers, housewives, and breadwinners that supported their male partners' bohemian lifestyle and writing careers. A good example is the life and work of Elise Cowen.

1.1. Elise Cowen: "Please let me out – Please let me in"

According to Brenda Knight, in her book *Women of the Beat Generation*, the following succeeded in the Naropa Institute's tribute to Ginsberg in July 1994, when a woman from the audience inquired about the absence of female names in the program:

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

Although Gregory Corso's answer did not clearly state who he was referring to, this event is narrated by other scholars who dedicated chapters to Elise Cowen's poems, as she was one of the women poets that did not fit the mold of the "perfect daughter" her well-off traditional family expected, having her works destroyed by her parents to "preserve her reputation". Cowen was institutionalized many times as she suffered from depression and at a certain point was haunted by auditory hallucinations and paranoia, as well as her own inner shadows (*ibid* 141-2). Unfortunately, this fact is very often mentioned in any account of her life in detriment to the richness of her *oeuvre*: Cowen's poetry shows not only the effort to fully live her inadequacy in the current society, but also brings elements of the weakness of maintaining a necessary marginality; her eagerness for freedom and an intense reflection on the poet's authority over her own body and soul.

Elise Cowen (1933-62) attended Barnard College in 1950, in the same class as Joyce Johnson, and appears as a major figure in Johnson's *Come and Join the Dance* (1961) and *Minor Characters* (1983). She also appears in Irving Rosenthal's *Sheeper* (1967) and Herbert Huncke's *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* (1980), and in his autobiography *Guilt of Everything* (1987) (Peabody 226). She met Allen Ginsberg through one of her teachers from Barnard and Elise recognized "a twin soul", becoming his lover for a while (Knight *Women* 142). Tony Trigilio referred to her working as a typist for Ginsberg's *Kaddish* and his influence both as an inspiration to her own writings regarding "subjectivity and sacred language", and as a shadow to the reception of her work, since Beat scholarship has been focusing more on their relationship than on her contribution to the Beat canon (*Who Writes? Reading Elise Cowen's Poetry* 122).

None of her work was published in her lifetime, but Leo Skir, a lifelong friend who she met at Barnard College, gathered 83 poems from her notebooks and journals and sent them to be published in *The Ladder,* in the *City Lights Journal,* and other small literary magazines after her death (Knight *Women* 142-3; Peabody 226). One of these poems, which is supposed to have been her last, resembles a goodbye letter as it claims that she had enough:

No love

No compassion
No intelligence
No beauty
No humility
Twenty-seven years is enough

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

(qtd. in Knight *Women* 165)

In this poem, Cowen employs an economy of words to send her message across in a likelihood with the Beat aesthetics. It is haunting what she can accomplish with just a few lines, and her message to Leo Skir brings both her idea of suicide as a way of freeing herself from the constraints of her environment (as she killed herself by jumping out of her parents' apartment window) and a reference to religion (a trope so much present in her *oeuvre*): "Leo – Open the windows and Shalom". Cowen takes advantage of this moment to ask for forgiveness, to thank other people in her life, and, by understanding the context in which the poem was written, it is possible to recognize the names of most of the people she is leaving her messages to: Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Joyce Johnson, and a supposed partner named Keith. Although it is a poem that both demonstrates her insertion within the Beat community, it also highlights her struggles with an existential crisis, in a fight for liberation against an oppressive system. The verses "Let me out please– / –Please let me in" resonate with Collins' theory of *Learning from The Outsider-Within*, to the extent that they represent Cowen's "outsider-within" invocation and claim to her Beat community.

Hence, in a generation whose rebellious literary voice was prominently male, Elise Cowen was not only silenced by her family, which burnt her manuscripts for their sexual themes and allusions to bisexualism and drug use, but was also silenced by those

within the Beat movement and by the critical reception of her work. Due to that silencing, it is difficult to find Elise Cowen's (and other Beat women's) writings both in print and digitally, so the few poems collected both in *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996), by Brenda Knight, and *A Different Beat* (1997), edited by Richard Peabody, somewhat helped to spot some of the themes Elise Cowen approached, such as (bi)sexuality and drug use, but also madness, death and the afterlife, religion and mysticism, "cold war notions of matronly, muse, distaff women", "deterritorialized representations of the body", and even the "scarcity of attention" to women writers (Trigilio *Who Writes?* 122-136).

Elise Cowen's poem ["Dear God of the bent trees of Fifth Avenue"] (Peabody 27) is an introspective but rebellious piece that delves into the complexities of faith, doubt, and existential questioning:

> Dear God of the bent trees of Fifth Avenue
> Only pour my willful dust up your veins
> And I'll pound your belly-flat world
> In praise of small agonies
> Suck sea monsters off Tierra del Fuego
> Fuck your only begotten cobalt dream
> To filter golden pleasure through your apple glutted heaven
> Filter the uncircumcized sin of my heart.
>
> (*ibid*)

Through the format of a letter to God, Cowen grapples with the uncertainty and disillusionment that often accompany the human experience "in praise of small agonies" (*ibid*). The poem's raw and unfiltered language ("Fuck your only begotten cobalt dream / To filter golden pleasure…") resonates deeply, as Cowen navigates themes of desire and addiction, whilst searching for meaning in religion outside a conservative institution which reinforces gender inequality with its traditions. Her use of vivid imagery and evocative (provocative) language adds depth to the poem, inviting readers to explore their own existential dilemmas and spiritual uncertainties in a seemingly indifferent universe. The juxtaposition of religious symbolism with earthly desires and struggles, as she urges God to "Only pour my willful dust up your veins", further emphasizes the tension between the divine and the human. Overall, "Dear God" captures the universal

struggle to reconcile faith with doubt, offering a compelling exploration of the human condition and the quest for transcendence.

Cowen's poetry often delves into dark and existential themes, which can also be found in ["I took the skin of corpses"] (Robin Gow 63)[4], whose first line evokes a sense of morbidity and the macabre, setting the tone for what follows:

> I took the skins of corpses
> And dyed them blue for dreams
> Oh, I can wear these everywhere
> (I sat home in my jeans).
>
> I cut the hair of corpses
> And wove myself a sheath
> Finer than silk or wool I thought
> And shivered underneath
>
> I cut the ears of corpses
> To make myself a hood—
> Warmer than forget-me-nots
> I paid for that in blood.
>
> I robbed the eyes of corpses
> So I could face the sun
> But all the days had cloudy skies
> And I had lost my own.
>
> From the sex of corpses
> I sewed a union suit
> Esther, Solomon, God himself
> Were humbler than my cock.
>
> I took the thoughts of corpses
> To by my daily needs
> But all the good in all the stores
> Were neatly labeled Me.
>
> I borrowed heads of corpses
> To do my reading by
> I found my name on every page
> And every word a lie.

[4] I found two versions of this poem, one in Richard Peabody's *A Different Beat*, and the one I decided to include here, taken from Robin Gow's essay "The Bird that Flew Backwards" (2018). This version is more complete than the one in Peabody's anthology, since it includes the stanzas 8-11 (from "A machine from bones of corpses" to "And mine became a ghoul's").

A machine from bones of corpses
Would play upon my human love
The only sound the keys would make
Were the hissings of a dove.

I dug among the endless graves
I thought my time well-filled
The mirror giggles when I look
I'm bald and blind and quilled.

I thought the corpses vital
That the risk involved ensured
The stuff that I had taken
Be precious marble pure.

But when tempted by a heart
(Replacing it with small jewels)
I found it bloodied as a mind
And mine became a ghoul's.

Now when I meet the spirits
In whose trappings I am jailed
They buy me wine or read a book
No one can make my bail.

When I become a spirit
(I'll have to wait for life)
I'll sell my deadly body
To the student doctor's knife.

(Elise Cowen qtd. in Gow 63)

The act of taking "the skin of corpses" suggests a metaphorical or psychological exploration of death and decay, perhaps symbolizing a desire to confront or understand the darker aspects of existence. Throughout the poem, Cowen employs vivid and visceral imagery to depict scenes of suffering and anguish, and her beatitude is then detected in the lines "Now when I meet the spirits / . . . When I become a spirit …" as her body will only be freed when she becomes a spirit. Beats like Kerouac saw their beatitude against what was being interpreted as "beaten", "loser", and other derogatory terms; he defined Beat as "beatific" to indicate the correct use of the word: "the necessary beatness or darkness that precedes opening up to light, egolessness,

giving room for religious illumination" (Ginsberg xiv), which is exactly what Cowen is trying to do with her poem.

Lines such as "Oh, I can wear these *everywhere*" and "To make myself a hood" evoke a sense of shared experience and armory amidst the darkness. In her armor in the ways of a Frankenstein, she feels protected from third parties' influence in a way to guarantee her self-sufficiency ("I cut the ears of corpses / To make myself a hood— / Warmer than forget-me-nots"). The use of the first-person pronouns "I" and "myself" suggests a direct address to the poet, implicating the speaker's journey of grappling with mortality.

As in ["Dear God"], the language within ["I took the skin of corpses]" is both haunting and raw, conveying a sense of desperation and longing for connection amidst the harsh realities of life and death. Cowen's exploration of the human condition and the fragility of existence is both unsettling and deeply compelling, inviting readers to confront their own mortality and search for meaning in the face of inevitable decay.

Tony Trigilio was the first to bring a different and not less interesting interpretation of the poem, mentioning that verses such as "I cut the hair of corpses / And wove myself a sheath… / I cut the ears of corpses / To make myself a hood… / From the sex of corpses / I sewed a union suit…" (Peabody 29) resemble a "Frankensteinish" world (Trigilio *Who Writes?* 133-4). In this world, she "combines domestic, female-coded sewing with male-coded writing and creativity…" in an "allegory of a woman's search for inspiration in a poetic tradition dominated by men" (*ibid* 134) as she "borrowed heads of corpses / to do my reading by / I found my name on every page / And every word a lie" (Peabody 29). For Trigilio, the female Beat poet in Cowen can suggest that the recycled bodies of others serve as a "metaphor for originality", in reference to the lack of attention given to women writers in this genre (*Who writes?* 134). Her "weaving" might represent a metaphor of the feminine creativity, and she expects the weaving to bring her the recognition otherwise entitled only to male poets.

It is possible to conclude then that there is no point in creating a poetic body using the theft of other bodies, as the spirits to which her work reverberates will no longer be able to help her, and this work will be analyzed only in the future, when the

texts are discovered and dissected with "the student doctor's knife". Overall, "I took the skin of corpses" showcases Cowen's distinctive rebel voice and her ability to capture the complexities of the human experience with striking language and emotional intensity. Not only can the poem be considered a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of life, death, and the blurred boundaries between the two, but also a fascinating reflection on originality and creativity as Trigilio (*Who Writes?* 133-4) commented.

1.2. Joanne Kyger: "Some people have well-lived rooms"

Tropes on originality, creativity and the "female-coded sewing" and "weaving" (*ibid* 134) can also be found in Joanne Kyger's poems entitled *Tapestry*, and other poems from her collection *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965). Kyger (1934-2017) was born in California and attended the University of California at Santa Barbara before moving to North Beach in San Francisco, where she wrote her first important poem, *The Maze* (Peabody 229). Her books include *The Tapestry and The Web* (1965), *Places to Go* (1970), *The Japan and India Journals 1960-64* (1981), *Mexico Blonde* (1981), *Up My Coast* (1981), *Going On: Selected Poems 1958-1980* (1983), and *Just Space: Poems 1979-1989* (1991), all of those out of print as the works of other Beat women writers. She taught at the New College of California in San Francisco and in the Poetics Program at the Naropa Institute (founded by Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg) in Boulder, Colorado (Peabody 229).

In an interview for Nancy M. Grace in 2002, she mentions meeting Diane Wakoski, ruth weiss, and Denise Levertov in San Francisco, Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman in New York. Hence, her associations go from the literary scene of the San Francisco area (with the San Francisco Renaissance) to the Beats on the other coast of the US, as she also was friends with Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Philip Whalen and Lew Welch (Grace and Johnson *Breaking* 133-153). Although Kyger emerged amidst the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat generation literary circles, she was not limited by those and therefore could be identified as one of the rebels chosen for this chapter, as her poetics often responded to canon or myth. However, her "independent, personal poetry" and her future "influences and interests – Buddhism, psychedelics, American Indian lore, practices of New Age communities" extended beyond the fifties and looked

into the sixties counterculture (*ibid*). When asked about her sense of being labeled San Francisco Renaissance or Beat, Kyger answered:

> It's useful for people in an academic way to have a label, to get a handle on it. I resisted the Beat label during the time I was associated with the Beat writers because they never considered me a Beat writer. I didn't consider myself a Beat writer. And they never said, "Oh, you're one of us;" ever! . . . The biggest names were Ginsberg and Kerouac — they had the media celebrity status, at least Kerouac did. Then Snyder, Whalen, McClure, Corso. We can see that historically. . . . So it was the media that made it the movement it was. (*ibid* 140)

She was married to the Beat poet Gary Snyder from 1960-64, with whom she traveled to Japan and to India in a pilgrimage that included Ginsberg and Orlovsky in their pursuit of understanding the Zen Buddhist practices (*ibid* 134). While in Japan, Kyger exchanged correspondence with her friends who remained in North Beach in San Francisco, and "continued to identify strongly as the one woman among her male peers", realizing that "everyone seems to be writing and publishing", except her (Linda Russo 189). According to Ronna C. Johnson (*The Beats and Gender* 166-7), she kept on protesting against the explicit sexism and misogyny of male-authored, male-centered Beat writing many years after the trips to India and Japan, as her poem *Poison Oak for Allen* (clearly dedicated to Ginsberg) partially reads:

> Here I am reading about your trip to India again with Gary Snyder and Peter Orlovsky. Period. Who took the picture of you three
>
> With smart Himalayan backdrop
> The bear?
>
> (Kyger 102 qtd. in Johnson *The Beats* 167)

With these words, Kyger highlighted the fact that the female and the feminine poetry was as easily erased from history as from a simple photograph, and by "claiming authorial literary status . . . resisted her exclusion from cultural and literary salience in the movement and in the global literary history it charted" (Johnson *The Beats* 167).

During the trip to Japan, she also perceived other sex-based limitations, having to marry Gary Snyder soon upon arriving as it was expected by the Zen Buddhist center where he was a student. According to Linda Russo, "She felt at times 'trapped', 'overpowered', wished she had not married, and was reticent toward his matrimonial

prerogative: 'He seems to have plans for me, although he claims no – and I will not fit into them'" (qtd. in Russo 190). Kyger also realized that Snyder fit into the patriarchal narrative of the man who needs to assert himself by disregarding her desires or identity in order to avoid feeling threatened by her; she was told that he had always treated women that way (*ibid*).

In a not-so-subtle reference to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* Kyger describes her space as a "room all my own to decorate with pictures and plants just the way I wanted with no one to intrude, high ceilinged light & airy" where she would write and "someday be able to make it alone" (*ibid*). However, this desire conflicted with her sense of obligation towards Snyder's conventional expectations, and in a tentative dialogue to express her wishes, he denied her the possibility of dedicating to her writing instead of doing the housework (*ibid*). The manner to which a woman maintained her household was a criterion for her ability as a successful wife and mother (Mlakar 5), a fact to which Pat Mainardi referred as "a sore" caused by men over women in her well-known essay "The Politics of Housework" (Mainardi 290-1). This "sore" is the women's feelings of "guilt over a messy house" or facing the household as their "exclusive responsibility" – and not a chore that should be equally shared (*ibid* 291). Kyger also faced female marginalization as the center where Snyder studied Zen did not accept female students. Not being able to attend lessons there, she dedicated herself to such studies at home, "though she always felt inadequate in light of Snyder's strict discipline" (Russo 190).

According to Linda Russo, "Zen informed her poetic sensibility", and Kyger found in the "imported figure of Penelope . . . more poetic tools" to address her "gendered struggles for self-definition" (Russo 191). Penelope, whose name literally means "with a web over her face" (*ibid* 193), claimed she would choose a husband once the shroud she was weaving to her father-in-law was completed. However, as a deviant and empowered agent in control of her own destiny, she secretly unraveled at night what she had done during the day. By rewriting Penelope's role in *The Odyssey*, Kyger was prodded on by the Zen-like "questions of identity and how to act" (qtd. in Russo 192), which she pursued while blending her own determined vision. In other words, through

Buddhist practice, Kyger sought a similar discipline towards her art that made her able to "aim for a whole new way of using language" (*ibid* 191).

Her fascination with Penelope is evident in the collection *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965), which re-reads classical mythology as a female-centered nontraditional narrative. Kyger transgresses traditional definitions of the epic genre in favor of a poetics that allows for the inscription of the female poet as a maker or artisan, who crafts a text like a tapestry, crossing and recrossing the page in an effort to create an open space for the work of reading. Kyger deliberately employs a mythic cycle to break through limits that constrict one's ability to place oneself in the poetry, either as poet or reader. The use of myth prevents her poetry from becoming personal or confessional, yet, it is a female-centered epic, a category that in and of itself breaks down conventional poetic barriers. Thus, Kyger's poetry "transforms *The Odyssey* into a multi-vocal, transgressive narrative, which de-centers and destabilizes the epic masculine narrating 'I'" (Manwell 55; Russo 179):

Waiting again
What for

I am no picker from the sea of its riches
I watch the weaving, the woman who sits at her loom
What was her name? the goddess I mean
Not that mortal one

Plucking threads
As if they were strings of a harp

(Joanne Kyger qtd. in Peabody 140)

In *Tapestry #3*, Kyger weaves together various threads of perception and invites readers into a meditative space where the boundaries between inner and outer worlds blur. Specifically, Kyger's words "The eye / is drawn / to the Bold / DESIGN" represent her path on building a "new design" on her own poetry. As she explains herself, "The world has changed. I thought people on the street looked at me differently" (qtd. in Russo 187):

Tapestry
The eye
is drawn

to the Bold
DESIGN
the Border
California flowers
nothing promised that isn't shown
Implements:
shell
stone
Peacock

(Joanne Kyger qtd. in Peabody 140)

The poem unfolds like a series of snapshots, each capturing a fleeting moment or sensation with vivid detail and sensitivity. Throughout those few verses, through sparse yet evocative language, Kyger invites the reader to engage with the visual and tactile elements present in the poem's imagery. At its core, *Tapestry #3* is a meditation on the beauty and transience of life, inviting readers to slow down and attune themselves to the subtle wonders of the world around them. It is a testament to Kyger's skill as a poet that she is able to evoke such a profound sense of wonder and awe with such economy of language.

Kyger's poems are often "snapshots of the realities of daily life" (Knight *Women* 199), combining an "immediate and accessible voice" and "her Buddhist beliefs to form precise imagery and powerful ideas" (*ibid*), as one can observe in the poem ["Breakfast"], which brings domestic spaces both as places of harmony and as places of conflict:

Breakfast. He assured me
orange juice, toast & coffee.
Just the way I like it. I flang
the cawfee cup to the floor. After
three times it split into a million
pieces. She worried about the
small supply of dope in the other room.
Both
of them, Lewis and Tom, were busy
collaborating. The record
playing. The wind howling
The electric heater going by
her side, as an ache over
increased herself. It was a fact
about what she thought
a moment before, which

was me, it was the love, He's
fine. I wonder why he
doesn't exchange some of the
mescaline for dope. Give Tom
some of the dope.
I wouldn't go there, into their
minds. I'm here, ain't I. Now
thru the mirror one can she see
pine branches nodding nodding
in the blue California sun.

(Joanne Kyger qtd. in Knight *Women of the Beat Generation* 200)

Kyger delves into the complexities of human relationships and the undercurrent tension that lies beneath seemingly ordinary moments. Through the depiction of the household dynamic and fragmented narration, she paints a picture of a breakfast scene that quickly unravels into a chaotic and introspective exploration of love, addiction, and existential longing. She infuses this moment with layers of meaning through her use of simple language and everyday imagery, inviting readers to contemplate the significance of seemingly trivial experiences.

The poem opens with a seemingly innocuous scene: a couple sharing breakfast together. Her partner's assurance of a breakfast "Just the way [she] likes it" suggests domesticity and routine, while the mention of "orange juice, toast & coffee" evokes a sense of comfort and familiarity. Yet, beneath the surface, there is an undercurrent of tension hinted at by the "broken cawfee cup", which was flung "three times" until it was broken "into a million pieces", suggests the magnitude of the emotional turmoil brewing beneath the surface probably due to her worries regarding the drugs present in the "other room."

As the poem progresses, Kyger introduces a shift in perspective. The speaker's attention turns outward, observing the world and the surrounding environment beyond the breakfast table. "The record playing / The wind howling", and "The electric heater humming" create a cacophony of sound that mirrors the inner turmoil of the characters. Amidst this chaos, the speaker experiences a physical ache, perhaps symbolic of a deeper emotional pain or longing. The narrative becomes more fragmented, reflecting the disjointed thoughts and emotions of the speaker. There is a sense of introspection as Kyger reflects on their feelings of love and longing. The mention of mescaline and

dope suggests a desire for escape or alteration of reality, highlighting the characters' attempts to numb themselves from their existential angst. The poem concludes with a surreal image of pine branches nodding in the California sun, observed through a mirror. This image juxtaposes the natural world with the artificiality of the indoor setting, creating a sense of dissonance. It suggests a longing for connection to something greater than oneself, yet ultimately feels out of reach.

In ["Breakfast"], Joanne Kyger masterfully captures the dissonance between the mundane and the profound, offering a glimpse into the inner lives of her characters as they grapple with love, addiction, and the search for meaning in a chaotic world. Through her use of fragmented narration, Kyger invites readers to contemplate the complexities of human experience, the marital tensions and the fleeting nature of connection.

Although they faced institutionalization, prejudice, misogynistic partners and peers, these rebellious women were brave enough to challenge the behavior of the times and bring concerns of women's lives and existence to their writings – which shocked audiences enough to encourage those offended to try and silence them. Writing from the borders, the ostracized women poets of the Beat Generation refused to remain silenced. In addition to being rebels, they were also visionaries by challenging conventional notions of femininity and exploring the complexities of female desire and agency, as well as searching for means of spiritual enlightenment and transcendence, as it will be seen in the next chapter.

2. Visionaries

Poetry is never compromise. It is the manifestation/translation of a vision, an illumination, an experience. If you compromise your vision you become a blind prophet.

– Lenore Kandel (1967)

You're looking for something yourself, and by 'yourself,' I mean the total self. You'll always be looking for that. You're a human being.

– Janine Pommy Vega (2002)

This "search" Janine Pommy Vega refers to is very much present throughout Beat literary production. Whether they are looking for their identity, or for an understanding of the world through their poetics, she means that both women and men are equally always searching for something in order to transcend. However, for women, again, the means through which one can transcend have been concealed and kept secretive by most religious institutions, so their struggles in their search involved an extra effort. As "a blind prophet" is the one whose vision had been compromised, their poems bring a characteristically visionary approach to the historical moment in which they navigated. Although their vision extends to the Beat aesthetics and poetics, and to the social concerns of their time, I investigated these women's poems in light of their sexuality and identity, to the extent that women writers of the Beat Generation challenged conventional notions of femininity and explored the complexities of female desire and agency, especially Lenore Kandel. The chapter will also look into tropes of spirituality and mysticism, as many of them incorporated elements of mysticism and Eastern philosophy into their work, seeking spiritual enlightenment and transcendence, more specifically Janine Pommy Vega.

Although they are associated with different generations of Beat poets, as Kandel belongs to the second generation and Pommy Vega to the third, their work is an example of the tropes that might be interwoven and intersected throughout different moments in the movement. While second generation Beat women generally approached poetry in a nonconformist stance against patriarchy and the establishment, third generation

Beat women like Pommy Vega were the vanguard of the sixties women's movements and profited from the period's empowerment; moreover, third generation poets used their writings to protest against the Vietnam War (Johnson and Grace Girls 14). This intersection of counterculture and Eastern philosophy Beat women poets such as Joanne Kyger, Lenore Kandel and Janine Pommy Vega, in their adoption and adaptation of Buddhist principles into their personal narratives and writings.

Buddhism appealed to the Beats for several reasons. Its emphasis on direct experience, inner exploration, and the transient nature of existence resonated deeply with their quest for meaning beyond the superficialities of modern life. The Beats were particularly drawn to Zen Buddhism, with its focus on meditation, simplicity, and living in the present moment. Erik Mortenson defines this experimentation as more than a "desire simply to 'make it new'", but also a search to "alter the categories of subject, body, and language" (*The Beat Moment, Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* 6). Beat poetics' spiritual endeavor held particular promise for women, since traditional religions barred women from full participation in the spiritual realm and religious practices and services, but the Beats' *ethos* that every individual has a connection with their own beatitude without institutional mediation theoretically allowed women to fully establish themselves as spiritual authorities[5].

Both Beat women and men were visionaries to the extent that the poet is seen as someone who got access to an epiphany of superior knowledge and truths through language: as Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, in his influential essay "The Poet" (1844), the poet is the sayer, the translator, the namer, and the one who has got new thoughts and is obliged to transfer this knowledge to their readers (*The Poet* 234-6). Emerson, who was inspired by the idea of the Romantic poet proposed by the British poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley, as well as Blake, plays a central role in the

[5] It should be noted that, although Buddhism offered a less subaltern role to women, it also discriminated them. As Alice Collett explains, "women have been and are discriminated against in certain Buddhist traditions and Buddhist communities today and continue to suffer discrimination and be denied equal opportunities to men. These negative views on women, having found their way into canonical and other literature, often viewed as sacrosanct, can be and are used to devalue women, and this devaluation, although not global, has become, in some quarters, a mainstay of Buddhist tradition" (565-6). One proof of this fact is the exclusion of Joanne Kyger from Buddhist studies while her husband was a regular (accepted) student in the center as mentioned in chapter 1.

American transcendentalism which profoundly influenced the Beat Generation particularly in their embrace of individualism and rejection of materialism. Emerson's emphasis on self-reliance, as articulated in his essay *Self-Reliance* (1841), resonated with the Beats' desire to break free from societal norms and explore their own paths. His advocacy for intuition and the inner voice as guides for living authentically inspired key Beat figures like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs. They drew from Emerson's belief in the idea that true fulfillment comes from within, rather than conforming to societal expectations. Furthermore, Emerson's celebration of nature and spirituality played a significant role in shaping the Beat Generation's worldview. The Beats' search for spiritual experiences outside of organized religion, often turning to Eastern philosophies, resembles Emerson's transcendental approach to spirituality that was rooted in nature and personal experience. Emerson's ideas about the interconnectedness of all things and the divine presence in the everyday world influenced the Beats' pursuit of enlightenment through travel, meditation, and creative expression. This spiritual quest, combined with a critique of mainstream culture, cemented Emerson's ideas as a foundational influence on the Beat Generation's countercultural movement. As Grace points out, "in the Romantics Beat encountered a tradition . . . including Emerson's demand for a new poet for the new world" (*The Beats* 73). Moreover, their visionary approach to poetry manifests itself in their fashioning "a role as poet–prophets who sought a spiritual alternative to the relentless materialist drive of industrial capitalism" (Skerl 2). Transcendent states such as dreams were a source of inspiration for Beat poets in general as "a refuge of authentic and spontaneous thought" (Mortenson *Allen Ginsberg and Beat Poetry* 81). The fascination with this "prophetic and transcendental artistic individualism", which became "a hallmark of Beat literary production", is what Nancy Grace also points out in her chapter on ruth weiss's *Desert Journal*:

> It is this definition of the artist that propelled Allen Ginsberg to imagine his rebirth from out of the sea in the conclusion of *Howl*; that guided Diane di Prima to recreate herself in the mythic *Loba*, and that Jack Kerouac sought as he sang about art, jazz, and the Buddha in Mexico City Blues, always returning to the beatific chronicle of Jesus . . . (60)

Moreover, as Ginsberg states in his "Foreword" to *The Beat Book*, these poets' viewed art as sacred practice and tried to understand it "as an extension or manifestation of exploration of the texture of consciousness. . ." (xvi). Taking all of this into consideration, both Lenore Kandel and Janine Pommy Vega are outstanding representatives of Beat poets as visionaries.

2.1. Lenore Kandel: "Until love lies dreaming in the crotch of god"

Lenore Kandel (1932-2009) was born in New York City, but the family moved to Hollywood because her father was a screenwriter. She attended Los Angeles City College and the New School for Social Research in New York City. Her publications include *An Exquisite Navel*, *A Passing Dragon*, and *A Passing Dragon Seen Again* (all 1959). In Beat histories, Kandel is typically associated with *The Love Book* (1966) and its obscenity trial or with Jack Kerouac's imagination of her as Romana Swartz in *Big Sur* (1962). However, "Kandel was long known in Beat or bohemian circles as a prolific and powerful poet who preferred to read her work in coffeehouses rather than attempt to get it published (Belletto 105)."

As aforementioned, Kandel's *The Love Book* (published by Stolen Paper Editions in 1966), which she called "holy erotica" as it celebrated sexuality and sex as a means of transcendence, became famous after being subject to an obscenity trial. The "abomination-must-be-destroyed" (Grace *The Beats and Literary History* 64) dominated American discourse at those times as already mentioned in the introduction. In Kandel's case, her book was apprehended in San Francisco in 1966 after police raids on the Psychedelic Shop and City Lights bookstore seized it and considered it pornographic and obscene (Peabody 227-8). In court, she defended it as a "twenty-three-year search for an appropriate way to worship" and a tentative way to "express her belief that sexual acts between loving persons are religious acts" (Knight *Women* 281). In addition, other poets, publishers, and college professors testified in her favor and the book was eventually acquitted. From that experience she wrote the essay "Poetry is Never Compromise", which became the introduction to *Word Alchemy* (1967), and is reprinted in *Collected Poems of Lenore Kandel* (2012) as well as other anthologies (Waldman *The Beat Book* 274). As Knight comments:

> Bold and beautiful, Lenore Kandel's poetry attempts to bridge the chasm between the sacred and the sexual, between religion and the eroticism of the body. Replete with Tantric symbolism, her works reflect her Buddhist influence as well as a celebration of the corporeal. (*Women* 279)

Through the passage above, one would think it is only natural to include Lenore Kandel in a chapter about women poets of the Beat generation as visionaries, to the extent that her work implies ideals of the spiritual, of beatitude, or Beat in its most absolute form of progressing towards transcendence. As John Clellon Holmes stated, ". . . the problem of modern life is essentially a spiritual problem; and the capacity of sudden wisdom which people who live hard and go far, possess" (115).

Kandel's involvement with Buddhism started at the early age of twelve, and by that time she also started writing and reading as much as possible. In 1960 she moved to San Francisco, where she initially lived in the co-op East-West House, home to many key poets and a spontaneous meeting place for readings and conversation with writers, filmmakers, and visual artists. There she was introduced to Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, and other Zen students and met other Beat women in between her moves, like Carolyn Cassady and Joanne Kyger, but had a closer friendship with Diane di Prima, whom she met when they both joined the political group Diggers[6]. She had an interest in Jack Kerouac's poetry, and likewise he also admired her work and intellect and referred to her as a "monster beauty . . . intelligent, well-read, writes poetry, is a Zen student, knows everything." (Kandel *Collected poems* 353; Knight *Women* 279-281; Belletto *Five Ways* 105). Not only Kerouac praised her work: Kenneth Rexroth, from the San Francisco Renaissance, also considered the "fluidity" and "austerity of her words" in the manner in which they outlined "the sharp paradoxes of the body and the soul" (qtd. in Knight *Women* 281). Knight further explains his views:

[6] The Diggers were a group formed in San Francisco in 1966, with the goal of feeding, clothing, and providing medical care to the poor through collective action in their community. They took their name from the 17th-century group of English farmers who believed in free land, abolishing private property, and ending the system of commerce. Like these predecessors, the Diggers believed that everyone should have free access to basic needs. The collective also served as a useful creative hub — this is where Lenore Kandel, Diane di Prima, and Mary Norbert Körte met and became good friends. "Their dedication to serving others, sharing everything communally and eschewing personal property for the sake of enlightened poverty, illustrates the 'beatific' impulse behind the Beat" (Laura Jane Kuhlman 26-7; 138-9; 190-2).

> Disregarding convention, she delves into the essence of being, writing provocative poems that intend to stir the heart as well as the mind. Her strong Buddhist influences mold emotions into stanzas, giving shape to the ineffable. (*ibid* 281)

Kandel's poem "Invocation for Maitreya", published in *Word Alchemy* (1967), illustrates these quotes, as it brings a vivid and evocative exploration of divine love and unity, employing rich, sensual imagery to transcend the mundane and touch upon the mystical. The poem interlaces themes of love, alchemy, cosmic wholeness, and divine transfiguration, culminating in an intense, almost tangible experience of spiritual and physical union.

> **Invocation for Maitreya**
>
> to invoke the divinity in man with the mutual gift of love
> with love as animate and bright as death
> the alchemical transfiguration of two separate entities
> into one efflorescent deity made manifest in radiant human flesh
> our bodies whirling through the cosmos, the kiss of heartbeats
> the subtle cognizance of hand for hand, and tongue for tongue
> the warm moist fabric of the body opening into star-shot rose flowers
> the dewy cock effulgent as it bursts the star
> sweet cunt-mouth of world serpent Ouroboros girding the universe
> as it takes in its own eternal cock, and cock and cunt united join the circle
> moving through realms of flesh made fantasy and fantasy made flesh
> love as a force that melts the skin so that our bodies join
> one cell at a time
> until there is nothing left but the radiant universe
> the meteors of light flaming through wordless skies
> until there is nothing left but the smell of love
> but the taste of love, but the fact of love
> until love lies dreaming in the crotch of god….
>
> (Kandel *Collected poems* 31)

From the outset, the poem sets a tone of invoking divinity within humanity through the "mutual gift of love." This opening line brings the central thesis: love as a transformative and divine force. The reference to Maitreya, a future Buddha prophesied to bring enlightenment, positions the poem within a context of spiritual awakening and messianic hope. Kandel's invocation is not just a plea but a call to action, urging the realization of our latent divinity through the power of love. The imagery of love as "animate and bright as death" introduces a paradox that underscores the intensity and totality of the emotion. Death, often seen as the ultimate end, here symbolizes a form

of transcendence — a necessary counterpart to life that is equally vibrant. The juxtaposition suggests that love, in its most profound form, is an all-encompassing force that rivals even death in its significance and transformative power.

The poem's central motif is the "alchemical transfiguration of two separate entities / into one efflorescent deity made manifest in radiant human flesh." Alchemy, the medieval precursor to modern chemistry, is traditionally associated with the transformation of base metals into gold. Here, it metaphorically represents the merging of two souls into a single, divine being. This fusion is not merely spiritual but also deeply physical, as the lovers' bodies and souls intertwine to create something greater than the sum of their parts.

The imagery intensifies as the poem progresses, depicting the lovers' bodies "whirling through the cosmos" and engaging in a dance of cosmic significance. The "kiss of heartbeats" and the "subtle cognizance of hand for hand, and tongue for tongue" evoke a sensual connection that transcends mere physicality, hinting at a deeper, almost telepathic bond. This connection is further illustrated by the "warm moist fabric of the body opening into star-shot rose flowers," merging the biological with the celestial, and imbuing the physical act of love with a sense of cosmic wonder and creation.

As the poem delves deeper into the metaphor of cosmic unity, it introduces the image of the "dewy cock effulgent as it bursts the star." This line, rich in eroticism and cosmic imagery, aligns the act of love with creation myths and the birth of stars, suggesting that sexual union is a microcosm of the universe's creative processes. The subsequent imagery of the "cunt-mouth of world serpent Ouroboros" reinforces this by referencing the ancient symbol of the serpent eating its own tail, a symbol of eternal cyclicality and unity. The merging of "cock and cunt" to "join the circle" symbolizes the ultimate unity and completeness, echoing the poem's alchemical theme of transformation and oneness.

The latter part of the poem explores the transcendence of physical boundaries, where love "melts the skin so that our bodies join / one cell at a time." This dissolution of physical separateness into a unified whole echoes mystical experiences where individual identities merge into a collective or universal consciousness. The resulting

imagery of the “radiant universe” and “meteors of light flaming through wordless skies” paints a picture of a love so profound that it permeates the entire cosmos, transforming the lovers into beings of pure light and energy.

In the closing lines, the poem returns to a more tactile and sensory experience of love, emphasizing the “smell of love,” the “taste of love,” and ultimately, the “fact of love.” This grounding in sensory experience amidst the cosmic and mystical reinforces the idea that divine love is both an ethereal and an earthly experience, one that lies “dreaming in the crotch of god.” This final image is both provocative and reverent, encapsulating the sacred union of the physical and the divine, where the divine presence is intimately and immanently connected to the act of love.

“Invocation for Maitreya” is a profound meditation on the transformative power of love, blending eroticism, spirituality, and cosmic imagery to explore themes of unity, transfiguration, and divine awakening. The poem’s rich and evocative language invites readers to contemplate the profound interconnectedness of love, divinity, and the universe, offering a vision of love that is as boundless and radiant as the cosmos itself.

Nancy M. Grace affirms that the “Beat’s poetic voicing of personal experience and the articulation of positions of marginality” is a “shared vision for a new type of literature”, and for a “writing that escaped the boundaries of academia and employed an organic use of language.” She continues her thoughts by suggesting that through the deliberate merging of “high and low cultural practices and artifacts”, Beat writing continues to reshape our perceptions of the world (*The Beats and Literary History* 67). And indeed, Beat writing not only established a tense relationship between the “mainstream and the marginal”, but also ironically joined “the experimental” (drugs, jazz improvisation, sex experimentation) with “the conventional” (admiration for the classical gods, reverence of the mythic and the arcane) in an attempt to have another understanding of the world through their poetry (*ibid*). As Belletto points out, such experimentation produced poems that aim to see the truth both in their content and in their visual arrangement on the page (*Five Ways* 101).

Kandel’s poem “Peyote Walk”, also published in the collection *Word Alchemy* (1967), is a good example of the visual arrangement on the page that presents a vivid

and hallucinatory journey-meditation on existence, form, and existential unity. It is a multi-layered exploration of human experience, using the metaphor of peyote-induced visions to transcend the ordinary perceptions of reality. The poem's structure, with its three distinct sections, captures a progression of profound realizations, blending the mystical with the corporeal, and the personal with the universal. Through its vivid imagery and profound insights, it challenges the reader to look beyond the ordinary and embrace a more fluid and interconnected view of reality. The poem's journey through visions culminates in a realization of divine unity, offering a sense of profound interconnectedness with all things.

Peyote Walk

1

VISION: that the barriers of time are arbitrary; that nothing is still
we, the giants of the river and universe, commencing the act of love, enclosing our bodies in each other's wilderness, vast hands caressing pinnacles of meat, tracing our titan thighs

one month we touch extremities
next year a kiss

the giant prick engorged began its downward
stroke at years
beginning into years end giant cunt (a) (slow) (sea) (clam)
hips and rotundities earth-moving from month to month and
promises of spring

orgasmic infinity
one (!) second long"

EARTHQUAKE!
FLOOD! FLOOD! FLOOD!

huge pelvises shuddering
while worlds burn

2

VISION: that the barriers of form are arbitrary; nothing is still
now now now
moving
tangled my fingers tangle in
sticky life threads
moving

between my fingers
a geode, granite walled crystal universe
I see both sides at once
how easy why didn't I before

I AM

part of the flow

the lamp the fig and me
we the redwoods
us the walls and winds
body mine?

you?
MOTION

beingness my fingers t-
angle

the only light our vital glow our radiance
turning to you your face becomes a skull
MY SKULL!

protean the form encloses space and time
moving

NOWNOWNOWNOWNOWNOWNOWNOW
NOWNOWNOWNOW

3

VISION: that yes
(we) is (god)

(Kandel *Collected poems* 51-2)

In the first section, Kandel explores the concept that "the barriers of time are arbitrary." The imagery is grand and mythic, depicting humans as giants within the universe, engaged in an act of love that defies temporal constraints. This union is described with physical and erotic metaphors, suggesting a deep, almost primal connection that spans vast temporal distances. The lines "one month we touch extremities / next year a kiss" encapsulate this temporal fluidity, where moments blend into each other without clear boundaries. The sexual imagery, "the giant prick engorged began its downward / stroke at years / beginning into years end," conveys a sense of

continuous, cyclical motion. The act of love becomes a metaphor for the eternal cycle of time, culminating in “orgasmic infinity” which lasts “one (!) second long,” capturing the paradox of a timeless moment of climax. The section ends with a cataclysmic vision of natural disasters — earthquake and flood — emphasizing the immense power and uncontrollable nature of this cosmic union. The physical world is shaken by the enormity of the experience, reflecting the profound impact of transcending temporal barriers.

In the second section, the focus shifts to the idea that “the barriers of form are arbitrary.” Kandel delves into the interconnectedness of all things, where distinctions between objects and beings blur. The repetition of “now” and the word “moving” underscore the continuous flux of existence. The speaker’s experience is tactile and immediate, with “fingers tangle in / sticky life threads,” symbolizing the intricate and inseparable web of life. Kandel uses the image of a geode to represent a “granite walled crystal universe,” suggesting that within the seemingly solid and unchanging forms, lies a hidden, multifaceted reality. This realization leads to a powerful affirmation of unity: “I AM / part of the flow.” She recognizes the inherent oneness of all existence, from the inanimate “lamp” and “fig” to the living “redwoods” and “walls and winds.”

The transformation of the beloved’s face into a skull, mirroring the speaker’s own, introduces a moment of existential awareness. This ever-changing quality of forms emphasizes that life and death, creation and destruction, are part of the same continuum. The repeated “NOWNOWNOWNOW” reinforces the immediacy and perpetuity of this vision, a relentless affirmation of being in the present moment.

The final section distills the poem’s insights into a concise, almost cryptic revelation: “VISION: that yes / (we) is (god).” This statement summarizes Kandel’s ultimate realization of divinity within unity. The parenthetical insertion suggests that the collective “we” encompasses the divine essence, dissolving the separation between the individual and the godly. This concluding vision brings together the themes of temporal and formal fluidity into a single, profound understanding. It suggests that by transcending the arbitrary barriers of time and form, one can perceive the inherent divinity in all things. The poem thus offers a transformative perspective, inviting readers to reconsider their own perceptions of reality and their place within the universe.

2.2. Janine Pommy Vega: "The divinity in yourself requires a certain discipline on your part"

Ten years younger than Lenore Kandel, Janine Pommy Vega is another Beat poet who brings similar concerns in search of the spiritual, the mystical and the transcendental understanding of the world through her poetry. However, her quest and her poetry were not as infused with drugs and sexual experimentation as her male and female counterparts: for her, traveling offered a more powerful alternative "in one's search for self" (Knight *Women* 223). Whether because she was attracted to the nomadic lifestyle that the Beat environment would offer her, or due to the tragedy of losing her husband prematurely, Pommy Vega writes poetry that invokes a God that is "the prime mover and ultimate source of creativity and love itself" (Damon 207).

Janine Pommy Vega (1942 – 2010) was born in New Jersey and during her high school years made frequent weekend trips to New York, where she met Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky and Herbert Huncke. After graduating from high school, attracted by the wanderlust her reading of Kerouac's *On the Road* provoked, she announced she would move to New York, where she shared an apartment with Elise Cowen. When she was twenty years old, she met and married the painter Fernando Vega, with whom she traveled to Israel, Paris and Spain, until Fernando died three years later. To overcome the pain of her loss, she took up traveling again, exploring "new parts of herself and her personal *mythos*", writing, teaching and studying sacred practices, in a pilgrimage throughout the world. Her books include *Poems to Fernando* (1968), *Journal of a Hermit* (1979), *Morning Passage* (1976), *The Bard Owl* (1980), *Apex of the Earth's Way* (1984), *Drunk On A Glacier Talking To Flies* (1988), *The Road To Your House Is A Mountain Road* (1995), and *Tracking the Serpent: A Pilgrimage to Four Continents* (1997), which includes logs of her travels and would be the closest one would get to her autobiography, as well as being her spiritual and feminist manifesto. (Grace and Johnson *Breaking* 231; Knight, *Women* 223-4; Knight, *Memory Babes* 145; Peabody 231-2).

Brenda Knight affirms that Pommy Vega's writing was "the truth of her experience, threaded through with mysticism and her search for the extraordinary", as her "experience" implicates leaving home to take the road in a "holy quest to cross four continents in search of the kundalini energy of the sacred feminine" (*Memory Babes*

145). Truly in danger, she ventured alone to the heights of the Himalayas, hiked through blinding snowstorms, and searched nonstop from the inside out. As Pommy Vega's herself explains her impetus:

> I had to give up everything to find my way back to who I was. I hiked the cordilleras, lived with somebody, I got pregnant, I had a miscarriage. And still, I didn't go far enough. By which I mean, I wanted to have no one. What I was asking for I was not yet big enough to contain. The divinity in yourself requires a certain discipline on your part. We practice until we get it perfect. (*ibid*)

Through meditative practice, the poet's job is to focus the attention on the natural world as a symbol so that it can transcend the material and temporal realm and become conscious of the divine, attaining "a self-possessed clarity through language" (Grace and Johnson *Breaking* 233). In an interview for Nancy Grace in 2002, when asked if writing was part of the meditative and contemplative practices, Pommy Vega declared that it was definitely one of the ways of making our egos disappear, together with loving and walking. She also affirmed that everyone she saw during her time living within the Beat environment, and did not die or go mad, is involved in some kind of practice in order to satisfy a desire to "fulfill the life's purpose of becoming part of the totality" inherent in all of us (*ibid* 237). However, "becoming part of the totality" involved an extra struggle from a woman's point of view, when said woman desired to "travel and to take in all these experiences" and having to "do it in a man's world at that time" (*ibid*).

In the same referred interview, when asked if she considered herself a Beat poet, Pommy Vega just answered that she "was there then", listening, writing, reading, imbibing, but not showing her work to almost anyone. In regard to showing her work to Elise Cowen, who was her roommate in New York for one year and a half and to other Beat poets, Pommy Vega presented an interesting view of the environment in which they delved:

> The fact that we did not, as roommates, share what today's young women might take for granted I think speaks for an era when what women were going through in terms of their own chosen art seemed unimportant next to the art of the men. I don't mean in my own mind for my own work, which was to me the most important, but out in the air with others. The young lover Ray Bremser . . . was asked to read his poems aloud in the company of all of us, and they were amateurish and wanting depth. Nevertheless he was encouraged, and I remember thinking, "Hmmmm, there it is. We're both the same age, I'm a better writer, the only difference is he's a cute guy." (*ibid* 245)

However, she pays compliments to Herbert Huncke, to whom she actually showed her poems and from whom she received constructive feedback. To her, he was an egalitarian who could relate to every point of view, perceived people as individuals and who opened her eyes to gender-biased language in ways that a man most often did not do at that time (*ibid* 247-8). This egalitarianism manifested in Pommy Vega's poetry as she matured and changed her literary and spiritual influences from male to female voices, as she explained:

> But before that time, because the only ones who were speaking with any authority were men, when I was speaking with authority the voice had to be male. I guess that's how I perceived it. Until I myself was going out . . . And yes, the male characters that come into the story are rather peripheral, just as in a male's adventure story the females would be peripheral . . . But then it's really bigger than that. You're looking for something yourself, and by "yourself", I mean the total self. You'll always be looking for that. You are a human being. I just don't see the difference. (*ibid* 251)

In regard to Pommy Vega's search for the female poetic sacred voice, the recognition and worship of God as feminine by Hindu teachings bring a just motif to her work. Hinduism is the only major religion that has always worshiped God in female form and many of its festivals are wholly dedicated to Goddesses; it is also one of the few major religions in which women have occupied some of the most respected positions in spiritual leadership. Moreover, Hindu scriptures acclaim the qualities of the feminine divine as well as the spiritual sameness of male and female deities, often using gender neutral language when describing God, even if, in reality, in India, this is not translated in the social order as women are often oppressed and victims of discrimination and violence. One of Pommy Vega's latest works, entitled *The Road To Your House Is A Mountain Road* (1995), is a short collection of poems dedicated to Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, a Siddha Guru who defines her mission as spiritual teacher in terms of helping seekers to awaken their own potential for enlightenment – and teaches the Siddha's message that the experience of divine consciousness is attainable in this human body:

> In truth, the gift of life must always be recognized and never be taken for granted. Why is life so precious? In Siddha Yoga philosophy, we recognize that in this human life we have a rare opportunity. We can transform an ordinary perception of this universe into an extraordinary vision. To be on this planet and to behold the universe from the divine

> perspective is a sign of an illuminated heart. To put this vision to best use in the best way possible is a human being's highest duty. (Gurumayi Chidvilasananda: para. 5)

This search is easily recognizable through the poems in the collection, whose titles mostly refer to Hindu goddesses, having been written in the South Fallsburg Ashram in New York, and in trips to the top of mountains such as the Peruvian Andes, the Black Dome Mountain and the Mount Tremper in New York, among others, and even on the road.

The first poem in the collection, "Hymn to Lakshmi", refers to the Hindu goddess of wealth, prosperity, and fortune. She is often depicted as a benevolent figure who grants blessings and abundance to her devotees. Through a series of symbolic images, Pommy Vega explores the multifaceted ways in which Lakshmi presence is felt and sought in the world, bringing a profound meditation on the nature of divinity, human yearning, and the grace of the goddess herself.

Hymn to Lakshmi

I've been given another name
for you, Lakshmi
a gold foil

crushed on the ground
shines in the sun
it could be a medallion

or a candy wrapper
or two rivers running down
to wash your feet

What will I do with this one
who is perpetually
crying for your grace?

I turn away from people
so they will not mistake it
for sadness

the I
that arrives at this meeting
is breaking apart

"overflowing its boundaries
not the seen

but the seeing one, O Lakshmi

your name falls on my heart
like rice in times of hunger
like rain in the dust

I approach your throne
through a candle
your immense love under a tree

the cup is a crescent moon
that pours down blessings
from your hand

gold coins
one of them is the sun
in the cave of my heart.

South Fallsburg Ashram, NY, November 1991.

(Pommy Vega *The Road* 5-6)

The image of the "gold foil / crushed on the ground" that "shines in the sun" suggests that even the most mundane or discarded object can be a metaphor for the elusive and varied manifestations of divinity, waiting to be recognized. The mention of "two rivers running down / to wash your feet" evokes the sacredness of natural elements and their role in rituals of devotion and purification. Pommy Vega then shifts to a more personal note, expressing the human struggle to attain divine grace. The line "What will I do with this one / who is perpetually / crying for your grace?" captures the deep longing and the sense of helplessness that often accompanies spiritual seeking. Pommy Vega's turning away from people "so they will not mistake it / for sadness" highlights the internal, private nature of this quest as the shadow of her husband's passing many years before the poem was written may be still present in Pommy Vega's search, and her longing is further articulated through the "I / that arrives at this meeting / is breaking apart." The fragmentation of the self is a common theme in mystical poetry, where the dissolution of the ego is seen as a necessary step toward union with the divine. Her identity is "overflowing its boundaries," indicating a transcendence of ordinary consciousness and a move towards a more expansive, spiritual awareness.

The encounter with Lakshmi is described in terms of sensory and emotional richness. The goddess' name "falls on my heart / like rice in times of hunger / like rain in the dust." These similes convey the essential nourishment and relief that divine grace provides. Just as rice sustains the hungry and rain revives parched earth, Lakshmi's grace revitalizes the soul. The role of light and illumination in spiritual practice is evident as the devotee/poet approaches Lakshmi's throne "through a candle". The "immense love under a tree" invokes trees as symbols of life and growth, adding a layer of natural beauty and serenity when one is offered shelter and protection by the divine.

The final stanzas of the poem introduce the motif of the "cup is a crescent moon / that pours down blessings / from your hand." The crescent moon, a symbol of change and cycles, suggests the waxing and waning of fortune and grace. The blessings from Lakshmi's hand are likened to "gold coins," with one being "the sun / in the cave of my heart." This powerful image unites the celestial and the personal, depicting the heart as a sacred space illuminated by divine light. Through Pommy Vega's eyes, we see the interplay of the sacred and the mundane, the perpetual human quest for grace, and the transformative power of divine love. The poem not only pays homage to Lakshmi but also serves as a reflection on the universal themes of longing, devotion, and the search for transcendence.

Such search has been present throughout Pommy Vega's *oeuvre*, and her short four-poem volume *Apex of The Earth's Way* (1984), published more than ten years before *The Road to Your House Is a Mountain Road*, also brings tropes of the female sacredness and devotion, especially in pagan rituals. As the introduction to the volume explains, the four poems "chronicle the apex of each season, which refers to the point midway between the solstices that was celebrated by the earliest people on August eighth, Halloween, February second, and May Day". Through the worship of the "Mother" and in synchronicity with Her, these people saw themselves as supporting actors in the season's "mystery play of live [*sic*], death, and rebirth" (Pommy Vega *Apex* 5).

Especially the last poem of the volume, "Beltane", revolves around the May Day or Fire Festival, which is an ancient Celtic celebration that marked the halfway point

between the spring equinox and the summer solstice, welcoming the summer season and the return of the sun. The festival celebrated the fertility and abundance of the earth and was often associated with love, passion and new beginnings ("Beltain" para. 1-3). It was also a time for communities to come together, give thanks for the gifts of the earth and honor the gods and goddesses who ruled nature. The name "Beltain" is thought to originate from the Irish Gaelic word "Bealtaine", meaning "bright fire". The lighting of bonfires was a central part of Beltain celebrations as it was believed to bring good luck, fertility and protection from evil. Bonfires were often lit on hills or other prominent locations, and people jumped on them to bring good luck and wealth ("Beltain" para. 4-5). Many traditions are associated with the festival, and one of the most common is the May ribbon dance, where people weaved ribbons around a tall pole decorated with flowers and foliage. This dance symbolized the fertility of the earth and the union of masculine and feminine energies. Another important Beltain tradition was the coronation of the May Queen and May King. The May Queen represents the goddess of spring and fertility, while the May King represents the god of sun and growth. The coronation ceremony is a way to honor these gods and celebrate the renewal of life and the arrival of summer ("Beltain" para. 6-7). In addition to these traditions, Beltain is also a time of celebration and joy. People often gathered with friends and family to share food and drink and to enjoy music and dancing. It was a time to leave behind the old, welcome the new, and embrace the energy and vitality of the season (*ibid*).

Pommy Vega brings some of these tropes into her poem, which was written on May Day in 1982. She skillfully weaves together vivid imagery and symbolic references, evoking the rituals, natural phenomena, and the cyclic patterns of life and death inherent in this time-honored observance:

Beltane

Hay fires roll down dragon hill
the strolling planets in
single file
stars above us, stars below us
three times around the pillar of stone
three times around the well
we follow the sun

Thrust of peas, garlic, onion grass
old iron in the fields bereft
stone ardor of buried cold
in the spears of crocus, iris, daffodil
the arching foot of jonquil
at attention

Battered coat of ravenous deer
cropping bright green mosses
the white-tailed rabbit leaps
four feet in the air
trillium opens at the mouth of a cave
by the fiddlebow, wild onion

Mating woodpeckers hammer on
live trees, loud, insistent
crones wait for warm hands, watching
as the plow goes in
you are old, old
the king and the queen meet
once again.

New York, May Day 82.

(Pommy Vega *Apex* 10)

The poem establishes a sense of mystical movement and cosmic alignment. “Hay fires roll down dragon hill” invokes a dramatic and mythological scene, where fire, a purifying and transformative element, cascades down a hill imbued with legendary significance. The mention of “strolling planets in single file” draws our attention to the celestial bodies, suggesting a harmony and order in the universe that is mirrored in the earthly celebrations of Beltane. This celestial alignment is juxtaposed with the earthly ritualistic actions: “three times around the pillar of stone / three times around the well.” These actions, allusions to ancient druidic or pagan practices, emphasize the human desire to connect with and honor the natural world through repetition and reverence.

The second stanza shifts focus to the burgeoning life of spring. “Thrust of peas, garlic, onion grass” depicts the vigorous emergence of plant life, symbolizing fertility and growth. The “old iron in the fields bereft” hints at the agricultural past, a time when tools now forgotten once tilled the soil. This reference to “stone ardor of buried cold” contrasts the life-affirming spring with the harshness of winter, now vanquished by “the

spears of crocus, iris, daffodil." These flowers, with their pointed shapes and vibrant colors, epitomize the energy and beauty of the season, while the "arching foot of jonquil / at attention" adds a sense of readiness and anticipation, as if nature itself is poised for the full arrival of summer.

In the third stanza, Pommy Vega introduces animal life, further enriching the allusions to Beltane's celebration. The "battered coat of ravenous deer" and the "white-tailed rabbit" leaping evoke the vitality and dynamism of wildlife emerging from winter's scarcity and seclusion. The reference to the trillium opening "at the mouth of a cave" suggests a hidden, almost sacred emergence of life, while "by the fiddlebow, wild onion" conjures images of traditional music (as the Irish fiddle-bow technique) and the foraging of early spring edibles. This stanza encapsulates the interaction between fauna and flora, underscoring the unity of all life during this fecund time.

The final stanza brings the focus back to human activities and the cyclical nature of time. "Mating woodpeckers hammer on / live trees, loud, insistent" symbolizes the urgency and persistence of life, paralleled by the actions of humans preparing the land. The "crones wait for warm hands, watching / as the plow goes in" conveys the wisdom of the elders who have witnessed many cycles of planting and harvesting, their knowledge passed down through generations, as the repeated line "you are old, old" might refer to the timelessness of these rituals and the enduring presence of those who perform them. The climax of the poem, "the king and the queen meet / once again," as a trope for the union of male and female, refers to the May King and the May Queen and the divine marriage that ensures fertility and the continued prosperity of the land.

Through its full of imagery and symbolic depth, which honor the cyclical nature of life, the interdependence of all living things, and the human rituals that celebrate and sustain these eternal patterns, "Beltane" clearly states its relations to the Mother, like other poems in the collection do. Another example is the first poem in the collection, "Lammas", which refers to the first harvest festival of the year that takes place on August first. Lammas, also known as Lughnasadah, marks the beginning of a sacred cycle celebrated by several pagan and neopagan religions in which the land gifts are honored and the life, death and rebirth cycles are acknowledged ("Lammas" para. 1). The original

Lammas festivals have roots in ancient farming societies and in the pre-Christian celtic traditions. Its name derives from the old English “hlaf-mas”, which means “bread mass”. During this time, communities offered to the divinities the first loaves of bread made with the newly harvested wheat as a symbol of gratitude for their blessings (“Lammas” para. 2-3). It was a moment of abundance and transformation in which each one’s achievements after a hard period of work were celebrated, and the recognition of the interdependence of humankind and nature. Some of the festivals symbols include the first harvest itself, sacrifice and renovation (as a reminder that every end brings a new beginning), gratitude and generosity (in which those in need are supported), sun and light (as the summer’s apex in which the sun brings warmth, energy and growth) (“Lammas” para. 4-8). In modern times, the Lammas is celebrated through the Harvest Festivals, in which the bread is baked and eaten, and ceremonies bring to light the gratitude and the freedom from what is not useful anymore. Many practitioners spend time in nature, connecting to the earth and expressing gratitude for its abundance (“Lammas” para. 9-14). Some of these old and new Lammas’ traditions are brought to the poem:

Lammas

Owl woman
squats at midnight
sits fullbellied on the hills
at noon

hayfields
heavy with the sun
the channels open
to the coming grain

a pilgrimage
includes the holy body
passing
over and into the power
of fountains, tower
on a lonely hill

we have passage
to the dark field
ample foothold on the craggy
climb the body

holy animal its footsteps
plant the dark the light behind us
we are shouldering the stars.

Silbury, England, August 80.

(Pommy Vega *Apex* 6)

The poem delves into themes of nature, spirituality, and the cyclical rhythms of life and harvest, in a visionary evocation of the connection between human existence and the natural world in the figure of the "Owl woman", as well as the motif of pilgrimage.

It starts with the image of the "Owl woman" who "squats at midnight" and "sits fullbellied on the hills at noon." This woman seems to be a central symbol, embodying wisdom, mystery, and the cyclical nature of life[7]. The owl, traditionally associated with wisdom and the nocturnal world and mystery, may also represent knowledge that transcends ordinary understanding. The duality of her presence at both midnight and noon signifies a balance between opposites: darkness and light, introspection and illumination, life and death. The "fullbellied" description roots her in the earth, suggesting fertility and the nurturing aspect of nature, as well as the culmination of a cycle, ready for harvest.

The second stanza brings us to what might be the heart of the poem: the harvest. "Hayfields heavy with the sun" and "the channels open to the coming grain" evoke the peak of the growing season, a time of abundance and fulfillment. The hayfields, laden with sunlight, symbolize the fruition of hard work and the promise of sustenance. One might say that the imagery extends beyond the physical harvest to suggest a spiritual

[7] It is curious that the figure of the "Owl Woman" resonates with Diane di Prima's *Loba* (1998) to the extent that it rewrites the tradition in order to establish women's reconnection to nature in another form of visionary stance towards poetry. Di Prima wrote *Loba* in a span of almost thirty years, starting it in 1971, so Pommy Vega's "Lammas" was published amidst Di Prima's "construction" of the *Loba*. In her epic, she attempts to give the she-wolf a voice by digging up the female presence in many classic discourses (Mackay *Beat Feminisms* 81), and by transforming her into "a being who contains the soul and consciousness of all women" (*ibid*). Moreover, "the work offers a female beatitude, in that the multifaceted woman-poet is a consciousness marked by the want to search for the meaning of female desire, transcendence and spiritual fulfillment" (*ibid* 94), as well as being an attempt to reinstate the female Beat poets within the canon by revising patriarchal myths and narratives towards female authorship (*ibid* 96).

ripening, where the “channels open” to new possibilities and insights, preparing for a time of gathering and renewal.

In the third stanza, Pommy Vega introduces the concept of pilgrimage, which is so close to her heart in her quest for the sacred and the transcendence. This pilgrimage, which “includes the holy body / passing / over and into the power / of fountains, tower / on a lonely hill”, signifies a journey of transformation and enlightenment. The “holy body” can be seen as both the individual and the collective human experience, engaging again with sacred elements of nature such as fountains which are often associated with purity, renewal and spiritual ascent; it can also be seen as the “holy body” of Christ and his sacrifice in the Passover (“passing over . . . on a lonely hill”). The “lonely hill” suggests a solitary path, a personal quest and sacrifice for meaning and connection with the divine.

The poem’s final stanzas take us on a profound journey “to the dark field,” where there is “ample foothold on the craggy climb.” This journey into the “dark field” may represent an exploration of the unknown, a descent into the depths of the soul or the subconscious in which the “holy animal” of the body leaves behind the light of the known world. This movement from light to dark and back again is a transformative process in the heart of the Lammas celebrations, one that echoes the cycles of nature and the rhythms of life. The very final stanza, which brings humanity “shouldering the stars” in a way that it carries the weight and wonder of the cosmos in its journey through life, elevates the human experience to a universal scale, highlighting our integral role within the larger tapestry of existence. The act of “shouldering” implies both burden and responsibility, as well as a profound connection to the celestial, suggesting that our earthly journey is imbued with cosmic significance. The poem as a whole is a visionary meditation and a reverence for the natural world and our place within the cycles of life, death and renewal. The figure of the “Owl woman”, the imagery of the harvest, and the metaphor of the pilgrimage all serve to illustrate the rhythms that sustain life, inviting readers to contemplate their own journey and their place in the cosmos.

All in all, whether through an understanding of the mysticism or her search for the extraordinary in *The Road to Your House Is a Mountain Road*, or by trying to make

sense of the sacred feminine and the devotion for the Mother in *Apex of The Earth's Way*, in Maria Damon's words, Pommy Vega's work is a visionary representation of "a faith in the sacred nature of human experience" and an "yearning for transcendence and an intuition that solitude, nature, … are all inextricably linked in the visionary life" (217; 221).

Both Lenore Kandel and Janine Pommy Vega deal with transcendence and the spiritual realm, however in different ways. Kandel has a more explicit approach to sex as a means of transcendence, using provocative and reverent language to encapsulate the sacred union of the physical and the divine, where the divine presence is intimately and immanently connected to the act of love. On the other hand, Pommy Vega approaches her search for the sacred feminine using different metaphors for the celebrations she encountered during her visionary pilgrimages. Although their attitudes toward their visions were different, both Kandel and Pommy Vega tried to obtain spiritual enlightenment, transcendence, and an understanding of the world through their poetry.

As "Poetry is never compromise" in a way that it "has moved out of the classroom and into the street" (Kandel qtd. in Waldman 275), many of these poem-visions evolved into a more activist form of art. Either worried about the wars, or still against patriarchy and the establishment, some of the Beat women poets may also be categorized as activists, as the next chapter will explore.

3. Activists

> *Women artists rise up. We are on the mound, which is our stage, our platform, a throne for the manifesting deity. It's Sappho stage. It is an image of "becoming" […], a pattern or process which reoccurs and it is in constant motion. We no longer have to be fetched up, Nor do we have to fetch for anyone else. This also serves as paradigm for performance. Literally: taking center stage.*
>
> Anne Waldman – *Fast Speaking Woman* (1974)

"Women artists rise up" is an invitation from Anne Waldman to all female poets and writers in order to make them take center stage and become independent in their creative processes. By "taking center stage", she means something that is very particular in her own view of poetry, and particularly evident in her readings of *Fast Speaking Woman* (1974): that it is a kind of performative art which allows the poets to treat their works as tools for activism.

As seen in the previous chapters, Beat women poets expand the Beat visionary *ethos* with a quest for female authorship that envisions transformational female identities. Hence, women in the Beat Generation delved into diverse tropes that ranged from a visionary approach to poetry and writing as a whole, to a rebellious stance towards their environment. This rebellion evolved into a more activist attitude towards poetry as a political expression. From civil rights to feminism, from anti-war protests to environmental causes, women poets of the Beat Generation were actively engaged in social and political movements, using their art as a tool for activism and resistance. Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger, Hettie Jones, ruth weiss, and Janine Pommy Vega are just some of the Beat writers who were engaged in those concerns. All in all, the epitome of that activism would be Anne Waldman, whose poems this chapter will look into, whether on the production of anti-war protest poems or on her feminist poems as "revisions of patriarchal discourses, on interventionist poetics within the context of activism and on gender" (Mackay *Beat Feminisms* x-xiii).

Since the initial stages of her writing career, Anne Waldman has emphasized "the idea of writing as a form of activism" (Mackay *Beat Feminisms* 126). The following can be found at her website:

> Internationally recognized and acclaimed poet Anne Waldman has been an active member of the "Outrider" experimental poetry community, a culture she has helped create and nurture for over four decades as writer, editor, teacher, performer, magpie scholar, infra-structure curator, and cultural/political activist. Her poetry is recognized in the lineages of the Beat, New York School, and Black Mountain trajectories of the New American Poetry. But has raised the bar as a feminist, activist and powerful performer. . . . Her work is prophetic, multidisciplinary, energetic, passionate, panoramic, fierce at times. (*About Anne Waldman*: para. 1)

Using her poetry as a tool, she exemplifies the most outspoken poet-activists associated with the anti-war movement and to the opposition towards nuclear energy. Moreover, being a third generation Beat poet, she brought "the resistances of second-wave feminism" to the "Beat generation's antiestablishment impulses" (Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson *Breaking the Rule of Cool* 256). Waldman was born in 1945 in New Jersey and grew up in Greenwich Village, "the heart of the New York alternative artistic scene" (Brenda Knight *Women of the Beat Generation* 287). Her father was a journalist and a "bohemian piano player", and her mother was active in the New York theater (Richard Peabody 232). At the age of six, she joined the Greenwich Village Children's Theatre and performed until she was fourteen. The bohemian and artistic environment in which she was raised were influential in her development as a poet (Grace and Johnson *Breaking* 268; Knight *Women* 287). After she graduated from Bennington in 1966, she moved to the Lower East Side and started the literary magazine *Angel Hair*, and since then has been the editor of numerous magazines and anthologies. She was the director of both the Seminal Poetry Project in New York and founded, together with Allen Ginsberg, the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado (*ibid*). Her group of friends included not only Allen Ginsberg, whose farm was her home for a period in the seventies, but also Diane di Prima, Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, and Brenda Frazer among others (*ibid*). She mentions the importance of hearing other Beat poets such as Joanne Kyger and Lenore Kandel at the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference and their influence in her writing, to the point of using them as models for her own work (Grace and Johnson *Breaking* 257). As Polina Mackay mentions, although Waldman also includes Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Amiri Baraka as sources for inspiration and "significant voices in the tradition in which she sees herself" (*Beat Feminisms* 138), the "direct references and allusions to

fellow female Beats" in her *oeuvre* "determine Waldman's idea of Beat roots as intertwined with the history of female Beat emergence and, in particular, the construction of the poetic voice from within this specific literary context" (*ibid* 139-140).

As aforementioned, Waldman has published more than ninety poetry and non fictional collections; some of her books include *Helping the Dreamer: New & Selected Poems 1966-1988* (1989), *Baby Breakdown* (1970), *Giant Night* (1970), *Journals & Dreams: Poems* (1976), and *Fast Speaking Woman* (1978); in 1996 she edited the anthology *The Beat Book: Poems & Fiction from the Beat Generation*, which has been revised and republished over the years (Knight *Women* 287; Peabody 232). From all the women's writings of that time, Waldman's is the easiest to be found, as she has still been writing and publishing, and even some of her earlier works are still in print.

With such a prolific written production, it is not an easy task to choose some of her poems to comment on a chapter about the activism of Beat women poets. From the very beginning of her career, Waldman's poetry has not been simple, and it has evolved into an even more complex poetics, as the struggles of the world have also come to be more complicated, and the urgency to which they needed to be addressed has become more pressing. All this complexity and performative form of her poetics is addressed in Grace and Johnson's introduction to an interview with Waldman:

> . . . Anne Waldman encompasses diverse literary schools and eras in her work, embracing Beat and New York school poetics; drawing from Sappho, Stein, and the Mazatec shaman Maria Sabina; and performing slam poetry. Her works are produced from a profusion of media and art forms, many inspired by collaboration with writers, musicians, and dancers, and created to be performed. Waldman balances an aesthetic that advocates both personal expression and political activism; her longstanding practice of Buddhism merged with her affinity for postmodern literary theory and praxis to produce a poetry of complex visual and linguistic structures that seek visionary existential points on the edge of the noumenal. (255)

Moreover, it is a poetry full of symbolism, often intertwined with Sanskrit, Tibetan and even Spanish and French terms, and with unusual arrangements on the page, in the same manner as other Beat poets; however, it is not a poetry designed only to be read, but an incantatory poetry designed to be performed on stage. As Tony Trigilio points out, in the mid-1960s, Ginsberg was one of the first poets who started to use language as a "performative vehicle" and as a "practice of the sacred" (*'Will You Please*

Stop Playing with the Mantra?': The Embodied Poetics of Ginsberg's Later Career 188). Besides its sacredness, performative language also assumed an ideological dimension in which an invitation to collective counter-ideological action is implicit (and, more often than not, explicit). In fewer words, this performative poetry was used as a tool for activism by many Beats, and especially Waldman as the next section will demonstrate.

3.1. "I am a creator woman"

Fast Speaking Woman (1974), one of her most celebrated works, exemplifies not only this stage-poetry but also Waldman's woman-centered sensibility and refusal of female stereotypes of Beat. It is a thirty-page poem to which she often added and altered to suit its performance, and as Grace and Johnson explain, naming it "'interminable' in the motion of its lines as in its composition" (*Breaking* 257-8). *Fast Speaking Woman* also brings "the ultimate woman-centered innovation on Beat poetics" in its "relationship to its sources" (*ibid* 258), as it intersects with the chants "water that cleans / flowers that clean / water that cleans as I go" of the Mazatec shaman Maria Sabina (*ibid*), reinforcing the idea of an incantatory poem. Although Waldman recognizes this practice as "cultural colonialism" (*ibid*), this collage transfigures the Beat aesthetics "by the infusion of a woman's material discourse that integrates women into the male-exclusive Beat mythoi" (*ibid*). Furthermore, Waldman has also acknowledged di Prima, Kyger and Kandel and the works of other women poets as models for this intertextuality in her poetry. To that, she acknowledges a *"genus femininum*", which is "a female authorial voice who . . . is formed through a series of possessions by other female voices" (Waldman *apud* Mackay *Beat Feminisms* 144). About this, Mackay comments that:

> Waldman's attention to the female literary tradition helps to bring home an important point of feminine criticism, which is to use an existing lineage of women's authorship to chart the female voice as it may be drawn from within an oppositional discourse. (*ibid*)

Fast Speaking Woman is a celebration of the female voice and an invocation of its power. Through her dynamic and repetitive incantations, Waldman channels the energy of the shamanistic traditions and the spontaneous style influenced by her Beat Generation contemporaries. The repetitive, chant-like quality of the poem mimics the

rhythms of ritualistic speech, suggesting a deep connection to old communal practices, as "chant is heartbeat . . . an ancient efficacious poetic practice" (Waldman *Fast Speaking Woman* 35). This ritualistic element not only enhances the poem's performative aspect but also invokes a sense of sacredness, elevating the everyday experiences of women to a spiritual plane. The repetition of "I am the woman" followed by a series of attributes underscores the multifaceted nature of female identity and power. This litany of declarations serves to assert the speaker's presence and agency in a world that often marginalized women's voices. One might say that Waldman's choice to repeat "I am" coupled with various identities and roles throughout the poem might be a sign of one of the themes she brings to it, the one that signifies transformation. These transformations not only suggest fluidity and resilience, reflecting the capacity of women to adapt and thrive in diverse circumstances, but also challenges fixed notions of gender and self, promoting a vision of identity as dynamic and evolving. Mackay explains some of these notions:

> *Fast Speaking Woman* explores female identity from the perspective of a woman who has decided to take action that would come to shape her authorial agency, which is to speak. The book puts forward the idea that there is a sense of urgency in the woman's speaking out, which is principally expressed in the Beat-style incantations. Waldman's shift towards questions of gender is evident from the first section of *Fast Speaking Woman*, which starts off by drawing attention to the poet's process of looking inwards into a distinctly female self. (*Beat Feminisms* 127)

This fluid identity challenges fixed notions of gender and self, promoting a vision of identity as dynamic and evolving. Waldman's invocation of different archetypes — from mythical to everyday figures — also underscores the universal aspects of the female experience, linking individual identity to a collective consciousness. The figure of the fast-speaking woman "comprises many contradictory versions of female identities", which provide a "humorous take on the idea of the multifaceted woman" (*ibid* 128) as depicted in the verses below:

> . . .
> I'm a know-nothing woman
> I'm a know-it-all woman
> . . .
> I'm the accomplished woman
> . . .
> I'm the embryo woman

. . .
I'm a ready woman
. . .
I'm a stay-at-home woman
. . .
I'm a traveling woman
. . .
I'm a moon woman
I'm a day woman
. . .
I'm a devilish clown woman
I'm a holy-clown woman
. . .
I'm a city woman
I long for the country
. . .
I'm the baby woman
. . .
I'm the old woman

(Anne Waldman *Fast Speaking Woman* 3-17)

Waldman also draws heavily on the language and structure of ritual, reinforcing the image of an incantatory poem. F*ast Speaking Woman* is one of Mackay's examples of Waldman's inspiration from the teachings of Maria Sabina, aligning itself with Waldman's interest in shamanistic traditions, where the spoken words hold the healing and transformative power. This idea of transformation is reinforced by the repetition of the verses "water that cleans / flowers that clean / water that cleans as I go" that work like a chorus and a recurrent reference to water and the word "clean":

I'm a whirling-foam woman
. . .
I'm a tidal-pool woman
. . .
I'm the river woman
I'm the singing river woman
I'm the clear-water woman
I'm the cleansing woman
. . .
(Anne Waldman Fast Speaking Woman 8-11)

With these verses, Waldman gives the female speaker a sense of rejuvenation and a renewed sense of purpose. She skillfully illustrates the necessity of purification via poetry before the feminine voice can start to take shape by centering the idea of

chanting as a means of self-discovery around the cleansing process. *Fast Speaking Woman* is closely related to feminist techniques of female writing since, in a way, it is a detailed illustration of the need for poetic purification prior to the emergence of the female voice.

Originally, *Fast Speaking Woman* was written as a performance piece, with Waldman placing "greater emphasis on the significance of the act of self-expression and on speaking out as a female author" (Mackay *Beat Feminisms* 131). Hence, it's fitting that many verses revolve around movement, with verbs such as traveling, hitching, leaping, fleeing, very present throughout the poem. In an interview to Grace and Johnson, she explains her process, which the interviewers call "kinetic aesthetic" (*Breaking* 270), as the flow of the poem came from the possibility of moving around during its performances and interaction with her audience and venue. As Mackay further explains:

> . . . As a signifying figure, bodily presence, physicality and gesturality depend on the existence of an audience who would be the recipient of the message. Waldman's comment that the live performances of *Fast Speaking Woman* affected the text speaks to the value the author sees in the audience as integral part of the process of making meaning on stage.
>
> Waldman's understanding of live performance as feeding into the meaning of the text also speaks to the idea of community, ... However, Waldman's idea of community goes beyond the symbiotic relationship of performer and audience and extends to a wider sense of literary community within textuality. (*Beat Feminisms* 131)

As Waldman's poems regularly refer to other writers, it might be said that she crafts a literary community discourse within the text itself with which the authorial voice engages in constant dialogue. It is significant that Waldman included women's experiences in her analysis of Beat female writing because it clarifies the type of feminism Waldman supports, which appears to be as much centered on the writing and poetry of earlier female authors as it is on the actual, lived realities of women (*ibid* 140). Moreover, as seen in the epigraph to this chapter, "Waldman reads Sappho as the initiator of an awareness of the power of a community of female authors" (*ibid* 132), and her references to a "wider tradition and community of female artists . . . places *Fast Speaking Woman* firmly within the tradition of revisionist female literature" (*ibid*). Waldman's emphasis in taking action in *Fast Speaking Woman* also indicates poetry as

a space where the poet not only "speaks out", but also where it is possible to speak "loud enough in order to be heard" (*ibid*), specially when advocating for marginalized women and those who struggle to be heard: "the abandoned woman" (4), "the woman under tyranny" (4), "the woman with wounds" (4), "the bruised woman" (5), "the woman forgotten" (13), "the spaced-out woman" (24), "the stigma woman" (27), "the beaten woman" (27), among other references. In Waldman's own words in the commentary of *Fast Speaking Woman*:

> I remember the delight I had when I began *Fast Speaking Woman,* thinking every woman can do this, every woman *is* doing this. Like the dakini principle in Buddhism, Everywoman is a dakini or sky-walker who changes the world through the play of her imagination. She is both messenger and protector and embodies the qualities of compassion, emptiness, and sagacity. (42)

Waldman then shows a consistency between her words in the poem and her argument that poetry should be a form of activism, the activism that makes use of the arts to bring forward political arguments. By framing her activism in literary terms, she demonstrates to us that, although it is important to recognize the potential influence poets may have on the world, their work also contributes to the literary history that these authors both draw from and actively contribute to (Mackay *Beat Feminisms* 133).

These notions were captured in one of her latest collections, *Bard, Kinetic* (2023), where she "assembles a multifaceted portrait of her life and praxis as a groundbreaking poet" as she "discusses the philosophies that guide her as a writer, activist, performer, instigator and Buddhist practitioner" (*ibid*). *Bard, Kinetic* brings poetry and nonfictional pieces in an invitation to anyone "committed to making the world a conscious and conscientious place" (*ibid*). In one of those poems, "Attenuate the Loss and Find", the provocative epigraph by Adrienne Rich says "There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men. The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (Waldman *Bard* 180). In this poem, Waldman explores the themes of the female body as a site of resistance against the physiological reductionism imposed by patriarchal structures. Feminist theory often scrutinizes how women's bodies are portrayed and controlled in literature and society. Hélène Cixous, in her influential work "The Laugh of the Medusa (1975)," advocates for women to reclaim their bodies through

writing. She posits that writing can be an act of liberation, enabling women to transcend the constraints placed on their bodies by patriarchal norms (Cixous 347-8). Waldman's poem echoes these feminist concerns by foregrounding the body and its experiences. It opens with the line "name appears—ad rien / everywhere and in dream," suggesting an omnipresence and an erasure, themes that resonate with feminist critiques of how women's identities are often subsumed under male-dominated narratives:

Attenuate the Loss and Find

name appears—ad rien
everywhere and in dream
"sleeping with monsters"
body armor removed
what now, legacy, archivum
archons preserve of
intensity a durance a hand you recognize
(sounds sound) as restraint
assurance lives on in women
as almost suffocated, then drowned
downed but never
what she could only know
as herself living in brute time
the words are purposes.
speak of a syntax of rendition?
politics of empire chip away
as poetry attests
curve of a water-starved globe
to follow and be following?
fighting for a choice?
sexism, racism?
our causes
everything an intense grasp of her
consciousness —cut in lucent observation
for a rapid and perched intellectus
privacy opens to vibrant flights
of love
stuff of Eros, of empathy
passionate edge of Adrienne
the American skeptic
close up in rich pluvials
axiomatic, raging in this light
our new flight

(Anne Waldman *Bard, Kinetic* 180)

Patriarchy often reduces women to their physiological functions, a form of reductionism that feminist scholars vehemently oppose (Mackay *Beat Feminisms* 109). In the poem, Waldman writes “body armor removed / what now, legacy, archivum,” which can be interpreted as the removal of societal and patriarchal constraints (“body armor”), revealing the true essence of womanhood beyond mere physicality. The “legacy” and “archivum” refer to the historical and ongoing struggle of women to assert their identities and autonomy. The notion of “assurance lives on in women / as almost suffocated, then drowned / downed but never / what she could only know / as herself living in brute time” further encloses the struggle against patriarchal oppression. The image of being “suffocated” and “drowned” evokes the historical silencing of women, yet there is a persistent assurance that endures, suggesting resilience and an enduring fight for self-recognition and liberation. “Attenuate the Loss and Find” emphasizes the female body not just as a site of oppression but also as a site of resistance and empowerment. The lines “curve of a water-starved globe / to follow and be following? / fighting for a choice? / sexism, racism?” connect the personal with the political, illustrating how bodily autonomy is central to broader struggles against sexism and racism. The “water-starved globe” might symbolize a world deprived of empathy and equality, where women’s bodies and choices are battlegrounds for rights and recognition.

Waldman continuously attests to the power of poetry as a form of resistance throughout her *oeuvre* and “Attenuate the Loss and Find” is no exception. The line “the words are purposes” underscores the significance of language in the feminist struggle. Language, for feminists like Cixous, is a powerful tool for reclaiming identity and articulating resistance (Cixous 348-9). The poem’s fragmented and evocative style challenges traditional, linear narratives, reflecting a rejection of patriarchal modes of thinking and writing. The lines “speak of a syntax of rendition? / politics of empire chip away / as poetry attests” directly link poetic expression to the dismantling of patriarchal and imperial power structures. The concluding lines of the poem, “privacy opens to vibrant flights / of love / stuff of Eros, of empathy / passionate edge of Adrienne / the American skeptic / close up in rich pluvials / axiomatic, raging in this light / our new

flight," also suggest a transcendence of patriarchal constraints. The imagery of "vibrant flights" and "passionate edge" evokes a sense of liberation and empowerment and the reference to Adrienne Rich positions this transcendence within a tradition of feminist thought and resistance.

Waldman's musings on giving a voice to silenced women is present throughout her *oeuvre*. But more than that, her feminist poetry presents a vivid critique of the power structures and cultural dynamics that shape our world. In *Trickster Feminism* (2018), a collection published more than forty years after *Fast Speaking Woman*, she shows that these concerns are still very much present in her writings as she stresses the importance of female agency to the extent that it might be a tool of denunciation. One of the seventeen pieces in the book is "patriarchus", a dense, fragmented, and fiercely impassioned work that grapples with themes of patriarchy, technology, culture, and resistance:

> **patriarchus**
> *detour of a clinamen*
> *—Jacques Derrida*
> drone & cope? **did** trap culture ruinously triage **did** chaos
> reshape history girls in the dark trying to read a man's world
> free electron with atom collides then enfolds **didn't** grok tangent
> *patria* to make kinder spread dissing widening then worsening word-lore
> **did** assassin's teeth *patriarchus* tectonics tethered pathological oligarchy
> **did** memory bites surrounds money **did** this a grammar digital
> language entwined polis vernacular holds **does** this **does** this
> curses tightening coil antic of animal on kill irreparable
> marked **did** this enslave "get lost" **does** this spits out derivatives
> **did** this out of nothing: *anamnesis* out of *lethargon* un-forgetting
> fields of unsheathed wheat cots bunk prisons inside are cussed **did** this
> conditions apocalyptic scenarios laws to ensnare agency! agency!
> grind & toil of meat wheel how dallied this world gone mute you **did** this
> in oscillation **does** this a coup all turns **did** this stressed this world
> crude in light iron fist photon disquiet waves of probability *Gematria*
> code to names & words **am** diamond fortress **am** forest of refugees
> rescue men & boys **am** escape falling city poets with cusp on zodiac **did** this
> projectiles continuum *I feel love I feel love* and *gnosis* **am** your spy agency
> hacking & cyber warfare "Winterlight" "Fox Acid" servers
> impersonated as person **am** legitimate imposter topos woman
> politic proletarian linked in profile not happy in melancholia
> identity page be tracking gems quotients situate the frame **did** this
> transcendent *philosophia perennis* theater of dreams **never** give up
> **never** forget you sold us out "sold us down the river" **did** this in cheap coinage
> slaver's tongue "bank's closed" "goosed outta here" "shrank us"

> “greased us over” lifetimes will remember you **did** this you do this
> *will be pacifying will be enriching will be magnetizing will be destroying*
> **and never wear out a cosmic war on you**
> my name is anne waldman and I approve this message.
>
> (Anne Waldman *Trickster Feminism* 100)

The poem opens with a barrage of questions and fragmented thoughts that set the tone for the rest of the poem. The mention of “drone & cope” juxtaposes the idea of enduring or managing against the backdrop of drone technology, possibly alluding to surveillance and warfare. This immediately introduces a sense of conflict and control, which is a recurring theme throughout the poem. Waldman seems to be questioning the impact of modern technology and culture, suggesting that “trap culture ruinously triage” and “chaos reshape history.” These lines imply a world where the rapid advancement of technology and the pervasive influence of culture are causing irreparable harm and disorder. The phrase “girls in the dark trying to read a man’s world” is particularly significant as it evokes the image of women struggling to navigate and understand a world that has been historically dominated by men. This line captures the essence of patriarchal oppression, and the challenges faced by women in a male-centric society. The subsequent lines continue this exploration of power dynamics, with references to “patria” (fatherland) and “patriarchus tectonics,” suggesting the foundational and often destructive impact of patriarchal systems.

The poem is filled with fragmented syntax, reflecting the chaotic and multifaceted nature of the issues being addressed. Words like “grok,” “dissing,” and “anamnesis” add layers of meaning and texture to the poem, requiring the reader to engage deeply with the text to unpack its significance. Waldman references “assassin’s teeth,” “memory bites,” and “digital language entwined,” creating a plethora of visceral and abstract images that convey a sense of violence, memory, and technological entanglement, which serve to underscore the pervasive nature of patriarchal power, to the extent that it infiltrates every aspect of life, from the personal to the digital.

A significant portion of the poem is dedicated to critiquing the impact of technology on society. References to “free electron with atom collides,” “waves of probability,” and “*Gematria* code” suggest a world increasingly governed by scientific

and mathematical principles, often at the expense of human values and experiences. The poem's allusions to cyber warfare, hacking, and surveillance ("hacking & cyber warfare 'Winterlight' 'Fox Acid' servers") further emphasize the theme of technological dominance and its implications for privacy and autonomy.

Waldman also critiques the commodification and exploitation inherent in capitalist systems. Phrases like "sold us down the river," "cheap coinage," and "slaver's tongue" highlight the dehumanizing effects of capitalism and the ways in which it perpetuates inequality and oppression. The repeated use of the phrase "did this" serves as a powerful indictment of those who uphold and benefit from these systems, implicating them in the ongoing destruction and degradation of society.

Despite the bleakness of much of the poem, Waldman also weaves in elements of resistance and hope. The lines "never give up / never forget" serve as a rallying cry, urging readers to continue fighting against oppression and injustice. The poem's conclusion, with its reference to a "cosmic war," suggests a larger, universal struggle between forces of oppression and liberation. Waldman's declaration, "my name is anne waldman and I approve this message," at the end of the poem is a bold and personal statement of ownership and agency. It reinforces the idea that poetry can be a powerful tool for social and political commentary, and that the poet herself is an active participant in the struggle for justice and equality.

3.2. "How tired I'm of revolution"

Anne Waldman is mostly recognized as a feminist writer. However, she sees herself mostly as an anti-war poet-activist to the extent that she frames her poetics in opposition to contemporary politics of war. As Grace and Johnson point out, "Waldman participated in the anti-war movement of the sixties, and, through her poetry and activism, has been an outspoken opponent of nuclear energy, helping to close Colorado's Rocky Flats power plant" (*Breaking* 267). Hence, this section will deal with some of Waldman's poems in light of her anti-war activism.

As Jonah Raskin explains, in the second half of the twentieth century, both men and women Beats promoted the encouragement of critical thinking aiming at liberating the citizens of the world "through a combination of shock, satire, and a sense of the

absurd" and advocated for "the transcendent power of the human imagination" (47). Moreover, Raskin mentions Ginsberg's words in an essay entitled "A Definition of the Beat Generation", in which he argues that the Beats in general "disseminated ecological consciousness, generated opposition to the military-industrial machine civilization, pushed rhythm and blues into rock n'roll, and sowed the seeds for causes that improved the lives of gays, African Americans and women" (43). Throughout the 1960s "era of protest", Beat nonconformity was one of the influences which inspired students to join the Civil Rights movement, to denounce capital punishment and, more specifically, from about 1965, to march in mass anti-war protests on the streets bearing "rocks, bottles and rage" (Raskin 48). Raskin further explains the resonance of Beat nonconformity throughout generations of Americans:

> Time and again, the anti-war and anti-bomb sentiments of the Beats were echoed in one generation of Americans after another as the nation sent troops to fight in countries around the world and continually tried to contain and control African Americans and other minorities all through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. . . . Moreover, they offered alternatives to Main Street consumerism and shrill patriotism, valorizing a genuine tradition of dissent and nonconformity that had long flowered in Greenwich Village. The Beats and the beat were marching on and on. Indeed, nearly every counterculture born in the 1950s and 1960s still thrives in the twenty-first century on Main Street, in isolated pockets nearly everywhere, and in far-flung corners of the world. (*ibid* 49)

The anti-war sentiment fostered the culture of resistance and nonconformity even more, challenging the status quo and advocating for global harmony; the Beat's lifestyle characterized by spontaneity, exploration, and a search for a deeper spiritual meaning reflected the disillusionment with post-war American values and a critique of the pervasive consumer culture.

One of Waldman's collections, *Baby Breakdown* (1970), brings the poem "How the Sestina (Yawn) Works" in what seems a satirical enunciation of doubts towards the anti-war movement (Peter Puchek 229-230) and weariness regarding her activist stance. It also explores themes of personal engagement in those issues, as well as the role of poetry and media in contemporary life. Respecting the traditional 39 verses in a sestina, Waldman juxtaposes feelings of weariness and ennui against the backdrop of a desire for genuine change. Through the repetition of the six end words – yawn, revolution,

television, poetry, methedrine, and personally – she creates a rhythm that mirrors the cyclical nature of her reflections and frustrations and critiques both passive consumption and the superficiality of modern cultural expressions:

How the Sestina (Yawn) Works

I opened this poem with a yawn
thinking how tired I am of revolution
the way it's presented on television
isn't exactly poetry
You could use some more methedrine
if you ask me personally.

People should be treated personally
there's another yawn
here's some more methedrine
Thanks! Now about this revolution
What do you think? What is poetry?
Is it like television?

Now I get up and turn off the television
Whew! It was getting to me personally
I think it is like poetry
Yawn it's 4 AM yawn yawn
This new record is one big revolution
if you were listening you'd understand methedrine

isn't the greatest drug no not methedrine
it's no fun for watching television
You want to jump up have a revolution
about something that affects you personally
When you're busy and involved you never yawn
it's more like feeling, like energy, like poetry

I really like to write poetry
it's more fun than grass, acid, THC, methedrine
If I can't write I start to yawn
and it's time to sit back, watch television
see what's happening to me personally:
war, strike, starvation, revolution

This is a sample of my own revolution
taking the easy way out of poetry
I want it to hit you all personally
like a shot of extra-strong methedrine
so you'll become your own television
Become your own yawn!

O giant yawn, violent revolution
silent television, beautiful poetry
most deadly methedrine
I choose all of you for my poem personally

(Anne Waldman *apud* Peabody 217-8)

The poem opens with a yawn, setting a tone of fatigue and disinterest. This recurring motif of yawning symbolizes not only physical tiredness but also a deeper, existential boredom with the current state of affairs. Waldman's yawns, punctuated throughout the text, emphasize a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction and disengagement. This ennui is contrasted with the potential vibrancy and urgency of revolution, creating a tension between apathy and the desire for change and revolution. As it happens with the other recurrent themes, the repetition and revisitation of the word "revolution" throughout the sestina reinforce her frustration with the way it was depicted on television, the medium seen by the Beats as a sign of brain washing (Raskin 48). Waldman criticizes how television presents the revolution, implying that it is reduced to mere entertainment; by shutting it off, one might escape from its numbing influence and find a more authentic connection to the historical moment. The use of "revolution" in various contexts highlights her yearning for genuine, meaningful change that would impact individuals personally. This desire for revolution is not just political but also personal and artistic, as Waldman seeks to revolutionize both society and the medium of poetry itself. She repeatedly contrasts poetry with television and methedrine, highlighting its potential for deeper emotional and intellectual engagement. Her own creative process is presented as a form of revolution, to the extent that poetry is depicted as a more fulfilling and impactful medium, capable of conveying complex feelings and inspiring personal and societal change.

It is not surprising that "methedrine" works as one of the anchor words for the sestina, as the Beats infamously experimented with drugs in search of a transcendental understanding of worldly matters. Reality is a place from which to escape, and methedrine serves as a metaphor for artificial and superficial means of coping with life's challenges. Waldman's ambivalence towards methedrine reflects a broader critique of quick fixes and escapist solutions. Instead of relying on drugs or mindless entertainment,

she advocates for poetry as a more meaningful and sustaining source of energy and inspiration. Moreover, the word "personally" anchors the poem in the realm of individual experience and agency. Waldman emphasizes the importance of personal involvement and the impact of art and revolution on one's life. By addressing the reader directly and sharing their own reflections, she seeks to forge a personal connection, encouraging others to engage actively with the world around them. The readers are then challenged to move beyond passive consumption and superficial "fixes", advocating for a deeper, more personal commitment to art and societal change. Puchek interestingly explains this challenge as follows:

> Waldman's speaker urges readers to "become your own television / [become] your own yawn," another version of the sixties call to "do your own thing," a slogan perilously situated on the border between the Beats' dual urges to self-fulfillment and anarchic romanticism. . . . From this perspective "How the Sestina" reads as Waldman's fantasy of social desire devolving to the personal and back again ad infinitum, utopian ambition latent or manifest in all the sestina's seven attempts to use each of the six words. (232)

On the other hand, the "giant yawn" may also be interpreted as a parody and not as an object of ideology and revolution (*ibid* 233). This ambiguity may have been designed to mislead readers in "personal or political mind games" (*ibid* 234), to the extent that the title mocks itself and "is a nod in agreement with all those who find poetry a yawn" (*ibid*).

In yet another poem of the same *Baby Breakdown* (1970) collection, "Revolution", Waldman evokes even more dysphoric tropes, as she reflects upon the turbulent socio-political landscape of her time, resonating profoundly with the anti-war movement that was particularly active during the Vietnam War era (*ibid* 235). Waldman expresses her disillusionment and yearning for change by capturing the spirit of rebellion against oppressive systems and the quest for peace and justice:

Revolution

Spooky summer on the horizon I'm gazing at
from my window into the streets
That's where it's going to be where everyone is
walking around, looking around out in the open
suspecting each other's heart to open fire
all over the streets

like streets you read about every day
who are the network we travel through on the way to the center
which is energy filling life
and bursting with joy all over the screen
I can't sit still any longer!

I want to go where I'm not feeling so bad
Get off this little island before the bridges break
(my heart is a sore thing too)
No I want to sit in the middle watching movies
then go to bed in my head
Someone is banging on it with a heavy stick like the enemy
who is he going to be turns into a face you can't recognize
then vanishes behind a window behind a gun
Like the lonely hero stalking the main street
cries out Where are you? I just want to know
all the angles of death possible under the American sky!

I can hardly see for all the buildings polluting the sky
until it changes into a barrage of bottles
then clears up for a second while you breathe
and you realize you'e still as alive as ever and want to be
but would like to be somewhere else perhaps Africa
Start all over again as the race gets darker and darker
and the world goes on the way I always thought it would
For the winner is someone we recognize out of our collective past
which is turning over again in the grave

It is so important when one dies you replace her
and never waste a minute

(Anne Waldman *Helping the Dreamer* 24)

The opening lines, "Spooky summer on the horizon I'm gazing at / from my window into the streets", reflect a sense of foreboding and anticipation towards the atmosphere of tension and uncertainty prevalent during the anti-war movement. The streets, stage for protests and demonstrations, symbolize the collective struggle and resistance against war.

The poem delves into themes of alienation and conflict, both personal and societal. Waldman writes "suspecting each other's heart to open fire / all over the streets", portraying a society rife with mistrust and violence, as well as the internal and external conflicts fueled by war, where individuals are pitted against each other, and the fabric of community is strained. Waldman's longing for escape — "Get off this little

island before the bridges break" — underscores a desire to transcend the chaos and find solace, a sentiment echoed by many who sought refuge from the violence and turmoil of the era. Therefore, the repetition of the desire to leave — "No I want to sit in the middle watching movies / then go to bed in my head" — reflects a coping mechanism, a retreat into oneself amid the chaos.

Waldman's tone oscillates between despair and defiance, mirroring the emotional landscape of those engaged in the anti-war movement. The poem's restless energy is palpable in lines like "I can't sit still any longer!", which conveys a sense of urgency and impatience with the status quo, urging action and change through the employment of stark, visceral imagery to critique the destructiveness of war. The "enemy" is a faceless, elusive figure, symbolizing the dehumanizing nature of conflict. In addition, "all the angles of death possible under the American sky" powerfully convey the omnipresence of violence and its normalization within American society. Waldman's language here is both haunting and evocative, capturing the pervasive sense of doom that characterizes wartime consciousness.

The poem's depiction of polluted skies and buildings obstructing vision serves as a metaphor for the moral and ethical decay brought about by war. The "barrage of bottles" clearing up momentarily might symbolize fleeting moments of clarity and hope amidst the confusion and despair. Waldman's reference to Africa ("would like to be somewhere else perhaps Africa / Start all over again as the race gets darker and darker") suggests a yearning for a fresh start, free from the taint of war and colonial exploitation. Moreover, this line also touches on themes of racial consciousness and solidarity, integral to the broader social justice movements of the time. The notion of a "collective past / which is turning over again in the grave" alludes to historical cycles of oppression and resistance, reinforcing the need for continuous vigilance and activism.

"Revolution" is ultimately a call for renewal and transformation. The closing lines ("It is so important when one dies you replace her / and never waste a minute") underscore the urgency of sustaining the fight against injustice. This sentiment reflects the *ethos* of the anti-war movement, which emphasized the importance of solidarity and

collective action. The poem's insistence on not wasting a minute resonates with the activism imperative to seize the moment and drive change.

Waldman's poetic voice serves as both a witness and a catalyst, capturing the zeitgeist of a generation determined to challenge the militaristic and imperialistic policies of their government. "Revolution" thus stands as a testament to the enduring power of poetry as a tool for social and political critique. Through its tone of urgent defiance, and a call for transformative action, the poem critiques the destructiveness of war and the societal malaise it engenders. Waldman's work not only captures the emotional and psychological toll of conflict but also inspires a vision of renewal and hope, aligning with the aspirations of those who fought against war and for a just world:

> . . . Poets oppose this monstrous aggression and further aggressions with our voices, breath, our wits, our bodies, our words, our cultural/activist interventions. We continue our activity in the nation's streets and in concert with other outraged citizens of the world. (Waldman *In the Room of Never Grieve*, iv, *apud* Mackay 133)

Not surprisingly, with this quote Waldman captures the essence of poetry as a form of resistance and activism and underscores her ongoing commitment to activism. By using their "voices," "breath," "wits," "bodies," and "words", poets embody a powerful form of cultural intervention, standing against oppression and injustice. This commitment to activism, both in the streets and alongside global citizens, underscores the interconnectedness of artistic expression and social change. It is a call to action, reminding us that the arts have always been at the forefront of societal transformation, serving as a beacon of hope and a catalyst for progress.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout this work that the women writers and poets of the Beat Generation are a group of visionaries, rebels, and activists whose contributions have been frequently left out of dominant narratives about this historical moment because of their rejection of conventional narrative, their refusal of the prevailing consumer culture, their nonconformism, their exploitation of self-expression, their existential questioning and questing, and their engagement in the sexual liberation. Although all the Beats were marginalized, being a woman added a different layer to this exclusion, that is, being a woman writing in such style and on such subjects was a greater transgression for that historical period, as they challenged the traditional roles assigned to women at the time (being a housewife and a mother or simply not having professional ambitions, let alone artistic ones). Because of this, their work should not be disregarded: it broadens the already diversified Beat production by addressing topics like maternity, abortion, sexual exploitation, and other topics, which enriches the perspectives of their male contemporaries by revealing an even more marginalized and hidden side of the Beat Generation. This research tries to reestablish their positions as key figures within the Beat Generation by shining light on their artistic rebellion, visionary prose, and activist zeal. In particular, I focused on these women's unique perspectives, experiences, and creative expressions within the socio-political contexts that shaped their poetry and highlighted their contributions as writers challenging the constraints of their time, carving their identities as revolutionaries, rebels, and activists within a predominantly male-dominated landscape.

Moreover, the available body of research seems to focus more on the marginalization and exclusion of Beat women writers from the canon, with a small number of publications critically analyzing their prose (specially their memoirs) and even fewer analyzing their poetry. Having said that, I favored a close reading analysis of a selection of poems authored by these women in order to deepen the critical reading of their poetics. The reasons for these choices revolve around the lack of availability of both Beat women's collections and a reliable voluminous body of research that gathered

enough critical essays which analyzed their literary production. The scholarship and research revolving around the male Beat writers is much more prolific, which reinforces these women's exclusion from the canon. Because there are these unresolved concerns about Beat inclusion and exclusion, which is still transitory and subjective in the case of women writers, many of the existing volumes of research include names that do not overlap. Besides, not all critics would agree on the choices of names to include in an anthology or compilation of the women Beat poets.

Although the Beats refused categorizations and labels, it is the role of scholars to retrieve writers who were frequently overlooked in the canon and to understand aesthetic patterns and differences. Increasing the visibility of these women's work and recognizing their importance as legitimate representatives of the Beat Generation can be achieved by bringing them to light. Therefore, this research aimed also at repositioning them as key figures within the Beat Generation by highlighting their artistic rebellion, visionary prose, and activist zeal as agents for change, as well as elevating their voices as initiators of social and cultural revolution in addition to honoring their literary accomplishments.

Despite not being included in the canon, Beat women writers were constantly present in the meetings and daily activities of the Beat community. They cohabitated with other writers, sometimes as lovers and sometimes just as roommates, and participated in events, poetry readings, and magazine publishing. The idea here is not to minimize the significance of Burroughs, Ginsberg, or Kerouac; rather, it is to draw attention to the variety of writings and figures that could be included in the Beat canon but have, up until now, gotten little to no attention. They were often seen as the girlfriends, wives, lovers, muses, breadwinners and supporters; this dissertation presents them as their artistic peers or equals.

Generally, men and women Beat poets are categorized into three generations; I suggested a more thematic categorization, as poets from different generations approached tropes that sometimes overlap, highlighting three main concerns: poetry as rebellion, as vision, and as a form of activism. The initial objective was to mirror and group the poets who belonged to each of the three generations into these new

categories, but as the research advanced, I realized that some of these authors could be paired under the same category with poets from a different generation. This happened because their concerns were either similar or evolved into similar expressions: some developed a more recognizable Beat aesthetic; others are more closely aligned with the Beat bohemia; most poets explore linguistic experimentation and innovate the arrangement of the poems on the page; but, above all, every one of these poets express an antiestablishment critique of women's worth and position in a patriarchal society. That is, they demonstrate an understanding of the importance of their assertion as women in that zeitgeist and in those communities, and which denied them their value as artists.

Therefore, chapter 1, titled "Rebels", brought the poems of Beat women targeting their rebellious stance against societal norms, gender assigned roles, and literary norms that were successful in hiding their significance in the canon. Although the majority of the Beat women would be categorized under "Rebels", in this chapter I looked more closely into the poetics of two of the second generation Beat women, Elise Cowen and Joanne Kyger, to the extent in which both used metaphors for the female creativity that questions conformist beliefs about patriarchy and the status quo, particularly by attacking literary clichés that have been based on the premise that women are less valuable than men.

Chapter 2, "Visionaries", included poems by Lenore Kandel (second generation) and Janine Pommy Vega (third generation) as they used their poetry to search for spiritual enlightenment and transcendence, and to explore the complexities of female desire and agency, though through different pathways. While Kandel has a more explicit approach to sex as a means of transcendence, Pommy Vega approaches her spiritual search using different metaphors for the celebrations she encountered during her visionary pilgrimages, which are so close to her heart in her quest for the sacred and the transcendence. Hence, as the chapter demonstrated, both Kandel and Pommy Vega attempted to use their poems to achieve spiritual enlightenment, transcendence, and an understanding of the world, despite taking distinct paths toward their visions.

Finally, in chapter 3, although many Beats were activists and used their art for political expression, I turned my attention to both the earlier and more recent poems of third generation Beat Anne Waldman, as the epitome of the Beat activism, whether it may be regarding feminism, anti-war or environmental causes. Moreover, having such a prolific writing production, I thought it best to focus on Waldman alone and demonstrate how her poetry evolved, whereas keeping similar concerns. I started the chapter with Waldman's invitation to fellow poets to "take center stage" and use their performative art as tools for activism; many of the Beats had already been on stage with their poetry (ruth weiss and her readings with jazz accompaniment; Lenore Kandel during many conferences; Allen Ginsberg with his disruptive readings in conferences too), but in Waldman, "performativism" is a way of extending her narratives in order to include her audience and adapt the poem to the venue in a reinforcement of that activism. I divided the last chapter into two sections to analyze Waldman's poetry in light of two main tropes: her feminist activism and her anti-war activism. There are other tropes in her activist-poems (environmental causes for instance), but it was my decision to focus more on those two due to the importance of those issues in her poetry, as well as the number of poems revolving around these two concerns.

All this considered, this dissertation wanted to bring to light poetry written by the women of the Beat Generation. My research examines these works by focusing on how they challenged their marginalization and exclusion from the Beat canon and shows the obstacles these poets confronted whilst creating and publishing their collections. By drawing attention to the number of female authors and the voluminous body of their work, I aimed at demonstrating how a piece of literary history is missing, and although the collections produced by Brenda Knight, Richard Peabody, Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson bring some of these women's work into the light, they are already the products of an almost twenty-year research that should be retaken into consideration.

Women of the Beat Generation accepted nonconformity as a method of artistic expression and social commentary, transcending the traditional roles assigned to them through their prose, poetry, and unwavering spirit. The group includes many other names, such as Diane di Prima, Joanna McClure, Sheri Martinelli, Barbara Moraff, ruth

weiss, and Denise Levertov in poetry; it also includes the writers who dedicated their works to autobiographical accounts like Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones and Brenda Frazer (see Appendix 1). Due to my personal choices and to the unavailability of other women poets' works, I did not include the Beat women ruth weiss and Diane di Prima in this dissertation. In recent years, with the rescue of these women' works, weiss and di Prima were a little more present in the scholarship than others. However, as they are all still less acknowledged than the men, I aimed to increase the visibility of even lesser-known women poets because, from what I gather, they had just as much influence as their more well-known male colleagues. As this dissertation focuses on working with their poetry instead of their prose, I leave here the invitation for other studies on the matter. For instance, to what extent women's poetry analysis targeting only their biographical data are more likely to be reductive or limiting? How are their memoirs treated as a lesser form of art than their male counterparts'? How can these writings be recovered into more complete anthologies? Or even, how can these works be recovered into women studies' syllabus? More extensive papers could approach exclusively Anne Waldman's poetics or the (ignored) existence of a women triumvirate with ruth weiss, Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman. Furthermore, it would be interesting to have essays on Anne Waldman, Joanne Kyger and Diane di Prima reinvention of the epic genre using a female heroine. These are just suggestions in a plethora of different approaches to a study on female Beats, whose voices, though silenced by the overwhelming howls of their male counterparts, question conventions and push for reform.

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

Writers:
Anne Waldman
Diane di Prima
Mary Fabilli
Elise Cowen
Joyce Johnson
Hettie Jones
Joanne Kyger
Denise Levertov
Joanna McClure
Janine Pommy Vega
ruth weiss
Mary Norbert Körte
Brenda Frazer
Lenore Kandel
Jan Kerouac
Bridget Murnaghan
Barbara Moraff
Sheri Martinelli
Margaret Randall
Bobbie Louise Hawkins
Diane Wakowski
Rochelle Owens
Precursors:
Helen Adam
Jane Bowles
Madeline Gleason
Josephine Miles
Carol Berge

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

Artists:
Jay DeFeo
Joan Brown

“Lesser-known writers, artists, coffeehouse scenesters” (Peabody, 2)
Grace Paley
Daisy Aldan
Jean Garrigue
Patsy Southgate
Gloria Oden
Carolyn Sotoloff
Kaye McDonough
Hazel Ford
Lenore Jaffa
Elia Kokkinen
Marion Zazeela
Marianne Raphael
Ruth Fainlight
Rosemary Santini
Mimi Margeaux
Penny Carol
Marcia Lord
Ann Giudici
Mary E. Mayo
Betty E. Taub
Ruth Krauss
Elizabeth Sutherland
Mary Caroline Richards
Anne Wilson
DeeDee Doyle (Sharon Morill)
Jan Balas
Jeanne Phillips
Edith Kutash
Fran Sheridan
Sheila Platt
Sally Stern
Madeline Davis
Anne Frost
Anabel Kirby
Alice Pankovits
Francine Marshall
Gloria Tropp
Susan Sherman
Joan Block
L. S. M. Kelly
Susan Gorbea
Marietta Greer