

DANCING TO THEIR OWN BEAT: LIFE WRITING OF CAROLYN CASSADY,
HETTIE JONES, JOYCE JOHNSON, AND DIANE DI PRIMA

THESIS

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my cousin Tanja and all the other brave women who refuse to be silenced;
and to Steve, for believing that I can travel my own Road and for helping me pave It.

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CHAPTER 1

LIFE WRITING (AND FEMALE BEATS)

Whenever the term “memoir” appears in the scholarship of life writing, it is usually in relation to autobiography. *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* defines memoir as a “form of autobiography that subordinates the author’s personal life to the public events in which he or she has participated” (191). Even though the author of the memoir is still describing the events of her own life, she is describing these events by talking about the important people in her life and the events that happened to them. Technically, then, memoir is still autobiography, but it is also biography of people, places, and important events from the author’s life. Another distinction between memoir and autobiography that is usually mentioned is that memoir focuses only on a certain period of an author’s life, whereas autobiography describes the whole life. There are, of course, other characteristics that distinguish memoirs from autobiography, but before I start discussing this further, one other thing needs to be mentioned. Namely, that autobiography as a genre seems to be “divided” by gender.

When Margo Cully in her book *American Women’s Autobiography* discusses what exemplifies women’s life writing, one point particularly stands out. She states that “women publish significantly fewer autobiographies than American men” (6). Does this mean that they also write fewer? This question, notes Cully, cannot be easily answered. There is also another question which remains unanswered: “What is it ... that leads

American women as individuals and as a group to conclude that their lives are less remarkable than the lives of men?" (6) I believe that the answer lies in the history of gender-assigned roles, ideologies, and expectations. Whatever women did throughout history has been valued against the standards of men. It is no different when it comes to the scholarship of life writing. As will be seen from my discussion a bit later, autobiographical writing has been mainly considered to be men's "field." Not only, as Cully notices, are more men publishing autobiographies, it seems that there is a tendency to label women's autobiographies, or, for that matter, any piece of life writing, as memoirs. Compared to autobiographies, memoirs almost always gain negative connotation with scholars. They blame memoirs for having too much or not enough of whatever it is that autobiography needs to have in order to be considered a good one.

In *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography*, Estelle C. Jelinek warns the reader that "only since World War II" has autobiography been "considered as a legitimate genre worthy of formal study" (1). Before that, Jelinek notes, "autobiographies were considered of interest almost exclusively for the information they provided about the lives of their authors, there was virtually no interest in the style or form of the life studies" (1). Sidonie Smith, on the other hand, goes as far as to suggest that the proliferation of autobiographical studies has blurred the lines of its definition "until some now question whether autobiography exists at all" (3). This question seems to be going too far though, especially if one looks at it in the light of the history of autobiographical criticism outlined in Jelinek's book. In trying to define what autobiography is, Jelinek's outline, or at least some of her points, might be worth repeating. Since both she and Smith use some of the same critics to set the ground for their work about women's life

writing, I will try to combine both of their theories in my outline of the history of literary criticism about autobiographical writing

Both Jelinek and Smith mention Georg Misch as one of the pioneers of the autobiographical study in the first twenty years of the twentieth century. Misch, as Smith writes, argues “that the progressive unfolding of Western history can be read in the representative lives of the people who participated in its unfolding” (4). In the 1930s, biography and autobiography are not really seen as two separate genres, and Jelinek sums up the view on the autobiographies of this era with Edgar Johnson’s definition that every biography is founded in a kind of autobiography (2). This could be related to the ongoing “memoir or autobiography” debate. Since every act of writing is somehow autobiographical, why, then, is memoir as a subcategory of life writing being looked down upon because it is (in most cases) more biographical than autobiographical? Even so, after World War II, as mentioned above, the autobiography as a genre started to get the critical attention it deserves.

Around the middle of the twentieth century, the main concern was the question “whether or not autobiography was, indeed, a genuine literary genre or merely a branch of history” (Jelinek 2). Wayne Shumaker, Jelinek notes, was the first scholar “to come out clearly on the literary side of the debate” and advanced the assertion that “autobiography was a genre distinct from biography” (2). It is this moment in literary criticism of life writing that distinguished autobiography as a genre on its own. Getting closer to forming the definition of autobiography as we know it today, Jelinek points out that Barrett John Mandel agreed with Shumaker that autobiography is a “conscious shaping of the selected events of one’s life into a coherent whole” (Mandel 215). Also, in

comparison to other forms of life writing, Mandel writes, “And while at their best the memoir, reminiscence, and essay will be unified works, capable of as much form as the best autobiographies, none of them centers its chief attention on the life of the author as it was lived” (222). Some of the memoirs I choose to discuss in this thesis, however, have the life of their authors as a central focus. After all, memoirs do include the willed “coherent whole” of an author’s life and also describe the life as it was lived by its author. The same distinction between memoir and autobiography is also mentioned by Roy Pascal. Jelinek writes that Pascal “maintains that memoirs and reminiscences are work about others whereas autobiography is retrospective, coherent, and holistic shaping, the imposition of a pattern upon a life” (2). This definition proves to be wrong when put to test against all of the works considered to be memoirs. In my case, especially the texts by Diane di Prima, which the critics labeled as memoirs, are about her, even though she includes “others.” She does this, however, only to help her more successfully describe her own experience. Pascal’s distinction stood the test of time, and I will return to it in more detail later.

In the seventies, the prevalent belief was that the “content and form [of autobiography] may be indistinguishable” (Jelinek 3). This is not surprising considering the fact that in that time New Criticism was still powerful. This is, Jelinek suggests, “an opinion current today” (3). That many of the scholars, such as Francis Hart, James Olney, Elizabeth Bruss, and others, believe that autobiography is a mixture between truth and fiction, or “a process,” or even “each man’s metaphor of himself,” is another point I will be returning to later when discussing some of the events Diane di Prima describes in her texts. More comparable definitions appear in the nineteen-eighties. Karl Weintraub,

for example, suggests that autobiographies express “each author’s unique personality,” and William Spengemann believes that “each author invents a self in the process of the writing” (Jelinek 4). Similarly, Paul John Eakin “claims that autobiographical truth is not fixed but an evolving constant in a process of self-creation” (4). Smith believes that this generation of critics “attuned itself to the ‘agonizing question’ inherent in self representation” (5). Even so, for these critics, truthfulness is an important phenomenon. In Smith’s words,

Since autobiography is understood to be a process through which the autobiographer struggles to shape an ‘identity’ out of amorphous subjectivity, the critic becomes a psychoanalyst of sorts, interpreting the truth of an autobiography in its psychological dimensions rather than in its factual or moral ones. Moreover, once the autobiographical act is conceived as creative and interpretative, autobiography can be read as one generic possibility among many within the institution of literature, with the result that critics and theorists do with it what they have done with other genres. (5)

Thus, self-creation and self-discovery (on which I will be focusing later in my thesis) are important features of the autobiography. Because they offer the grounds for analysis, they consequently put autobiography in the category of texts or even genres worthy of literary analysis.

Smith defines autobiography as “any written or verbal communication” because “all gesture and rhetoric is revealing of the subject” (19). “More narrowly,” Smith suggests, the autobiography “can be defined as written or verbal communication that

takes the speaking 'I' as the subject of the narrative, rendering the 'I' both subject and object" (19). There are many different ways of defining an autobiography, and I agree with Jelinek when she suggests that this variety actually reveals "the lack of definition, which, after all implies consensus" (4). There are, however, some expectations that a text needs to meet in order to be considered a "good autobiography":

It must center exclusively or mostly on their [sic] authors, not on others, *otherwise it becomes memoir or reminiscence*. It should be representative of its times, a mirror of the predominant zeitgeist. The autobiographer should be self-aware, a seeker after self-knowledge. *He* must aim to explore, not to exhort. *His* autobiography should be an effort to give meaning to some personal mythos (4, emphasis mine)

This "definition" is important for two things. First, it distinguishes memoirs from autobiography and, second, by using male pronouns when talking about authors of the autobiographical texts, it concurs with Jelinek's conclusion that "expectations and definitions of autobiography are based on the reading—almost exclusively—of men's autobiographies" (5). Thus, as in many other areas, the recognition of the worth of women's work was neglected, or seen in the context of male authors

The ambivalence of critics, however, does not mean that women are not writing autobiographies. Moreover, as Jelinek notes in the epilogue to her book published in 1986, "more women than ever before ... are writing their life studies" (185). The rise in the number of published autobiographies (or memoirs) by women was especially high in the 1970s. That was a period "which gave legitimacy and affirmation to women's lives" (185). After this affirmation it was no longer necessary for autobiographers to "apologize

for writing about themselves; if anything, it has become a commonplace to write an autobiography” (185). I dare to suggest, though, that women Beat writers, especially Diane di Prima, claimed the affirmation of their lives and even acclamation of their art a decade before.

Attempting to define this new focus, Margo Cully, in her book *American Women's Autobiography*, notes that three observations about autobiographical texts written by women can be made. The first is that most critics have been focusing “on a narrow group of highly ‘literary’ texts and/or texts of writers known for their public achievements” (5). There exists a “corpus” of autobiographies written by American women, but, asks Cully, “what shall we say of all the famous-man-I-have-known and/or married boasts, all the living-with-or-cured-from-a-fatal-illness testimonies, all the ‘as told to’ life stories with clear commercial purposes?” (5) Cully does not ask the question directly, but let me ask it for her: Do texts that belong in the category of the above quotation also qualify as autobiographies? Are some of them perhaps more “memoir”? Coming from the known fact that the critics up until recent years did not comment on the texts by writers who are the focus of my thesis, such texts are labeled as memoirs. Certainly, there are critics who would put them into Cully’s category of “the famous-man-I-have-known and/or married boasts,” but would they label them as autobiographies or memoirs? Inconsistencies such as this one are proof of Jelinek’s point about lack of a strong definition.

A second observation Cully makes, the one about female writers publishing fewer autobiographies than male, was already mentioned above. That is why I am moving straight to her third point, which is that women’s autobiographies almost always have

“the gendered name on the title page” (6). Here, Cully is talking about white female autobiographers in particular. Her emphasis on white women comes from rephrasing Elizabeth Spelman in saying that “for white women who need not think of themselves in racial terms, gender becomes the foundational category for self-organization” (8). Moreover, “it is startling to see how often white women autobiographers *reinscribe* their gender in the title of their texts despite the redundancy of that act.... In the modern period one out of five white women either repeats her name in the title of her autobiography or uses some other sign of gender” (7). This confirms my speculation that gender is an important factor when it comes to discussing life writing. That most women autobiographers are using either their name or some other gender-revealing word in the titles of their texts shows that making sure their readers know that they are women is important to them. All this is true also for three of the four women Beat memoirs I will explore in my thesis (*How I Became Hettie Jones*, by Hettie Jones, *Minor Characters A Young Woman's Coming-of-Age in the Beat Orbit of Jack Kerouac*, by Joyce Johnson, and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman The New York Years*, by Diane di Prima).

But let us return for a moment to the question of women autobiographies and why they have been ignored by the critics for such a long time. “Perhaps,” writes Smith in her *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, “the absence of women's texts from the texts of autobiographical criticism ... speaks to a fundamental resistance to valuing women's experience and vision” (16). Employing Domna C. Stanton's position, Smith offers another possible reason for ignoring female life writing:

Male writing about self thereby assumed a privileged place in the canon;
female writing about self, a devalued position at the margins of the canon.

Here once again the sexual adjective prescribes the valence of the noun. When applied to texts by men “autobiographical” signals the positively valued side of binary opposition—the self-consciously “crafted and aesthetic.” When applied to texts by women, it announces the negatively valued side of opposition—the “spontaneous, natural.” (16)

Still today, women’s writing, especially life writing, is marginalized by scholars and literary critics. In order to find criticism on women Beat writers, for example, one has to be prepared to look in places other than the usual. The little that can be found is hiding in the margins—in the prefaces, forewords, and epilogues of anthologies and readers that sometimes are, but most often are not, dedicated to women writing in particular. This could lead to a simple conclusion that women’s life writing has less scholarly value than men’s. I disagree. Granted, women’s autobiographies are different from men’s, but that does not make them less valuable. How are they different?

The difference, as Jelinek notes, is that in most women’s autobiographies one can find “a sense of feeling of *other*, of being *different* from the rest of the society, even from other women” (187). This feeling of “otherness” stems from the different historical experiences of men and women. Namely, “men who have written autobiographies have done so from the privileged position of social, economic, and political acceptance. For women, such affirmation has been slow in coming” (186). Consequently, women tend to present a less confident self-image. Jelinek writes that women, even “when they are proud of themselves and their achievements, even when they assert a positive self-image, ... feel [that] they are different from, other than, or outside of the male world, a poor fit, indeed, in that world” (187). (Significantly, Beat women writers don’t feel other only

because they are women, but they are other amongst a group of males who are considered to be other as well.) Another thing that distinguishes women's life writing from men's is that

women do not project the "unique" or "special" self-image that is usually found in men's autobiographies; nor do they see their lives as "mythic tales." They do not write in heroic tones about their lives or outline the progress of their souls. They rarely write metaphorically, and they do not see themselves as symbols or mirrors of the era. (Jelinek 187)

Smith notices the same thing when discussing Misch's outlook on the autobiography.

What Jelinek calls "mirrors of the era" in the above quote, Smith describes as Misch's emphasizing of the "'representative' nature of autobiography" (8). She asks:

What precisely would it signify for a woman's life and her narrative to be "representative" of the period? Very few women have achieved the status of "eminent person"; and those who have done so have most commonly been labeled "exceptional" rather than "representative" women. Perhaps such women and their autobiographies would more accurately be "unrepresentative" of their period. Or perhaps such stories, while unrepresentative of women's lives, might be representative of men's lives (8)

What to me seems especially interesting is that what Jelinek names as characteristics of women's autobiographies appeared on the list of ten techniques "not to use when writing an autobiography," which was composed by Richard Lillard some fifty years ago (Jelinek 188). Lillard's list comprises the following: "flashbacks, anecdotes, reconstructed scenes

and dialogue, slabs of undigested diary or journal notes, set pieces on ancestors or parents, details of trips, random memories of youth, name dropping, racing too fast, and covering up” (Jelinek 188). Perhaps some of the women writers use the techniques enumerated above to deliberately break the rules and differentiate themselves from men.

Not surprisingly, then, women’s autobiographical writing is traditionally less valued than men’s. As Jelinek writes, “Women self-portraits are still classified as memoirs or reminiscences because of their episodic and anecdotal nature, their nonprogressive narratives, their fragmented forms, their focus on others, and their lack of heroic self-assertion, all of which are considered obstacles to the shaping of ‘true’ autobiography” (188). Even if all this is true, the problem I have with the definitions Jelinek describes is that, on one hand, they are trying to convince the reader that female autobiographies are as worthy of critical acclaim as male’s. But on the other hand, they are refusing to accept memoir as a legitimate form, sometimes even as a subgenre of autobiography. The solution seems to be offering itself. Why not accept the difference between women’s and men’s life writing and treat memoirs as an area of writing dominated and mastered by women? Who knows, maybe in a few years the critics will be writing articles about men’s memoirs and what they lack, instead of women’s autobiographies “only” deserving of the name “memoir.”

We are, however, *not quite there yet*. Memoirs are still distinguished from autobiographies in the ways discussed above. If the main distinction between autobiography and memoir is, as many critics seem to suggest, that the former is writing about one’s self and the latter is writing about others surrounding that self, I have to agree with Smith when she claims that “the generic contract engages the autobiographer in

doubled subjectivity—the autobiographer as a protagonist of her story and autobiographer as narrator” (17-18). Thus, any autobiographical writing has to address not only the autobiographer, but also the people around her who are “making” her life story. Smith also deals with the accusation that women mostly write about themselves in relation to others. She asks, “Is female preoccupation with the other an essential dynamic of female psychobiography or a culturally conditioned manifestation of the ideology of gender that associates female difference with attentiveness to the other?” (18) She is suggesting that the female perspective is preconditioned by long-enforced gender ideologies. Since I think that these ideologies are still alive today, and because the feminist in me thinks that it is high time for these ideologies to be changed, I choose to discuss the writings of women who feel the same way. They decide to act upon this belief in times when doing so put them in danger of being outcast and labeled as less female in the eyes of others.

It therefore comes as no surprise that so many women of the Beat generation adopted memoir as their means of expression. In Nancy M. Grace’s words, “That a telling number of women Beat writers have chosen to communicate through life writing, a form often maligned, trivialized, and marginalized as inferior literature and pseudo history—even denied status as a genre—makes their efforts of self-assertion provocative and our readings of them a challenge” (141). If, as Smith writes, “[t]he most radical difference [between men’s and women’s life writing] is that articulated by the French feminism in the language of *écriture féminine*, a process by which the female body inscribes itself in the milk-white ink of women’s sexual and textual desire” (18), the memoir is the perfect genre for the rebellious nature of women Beat writers. Namely,

French feminists believe that women inscribe themselves only in “phallogocentric *écriture* of Western culture” and therefore “women’s true autobiography has yet to be written” (18). If what they mean by “women’s true autobiography” is autobiography written in a way that is different from men’s, then I would argue that the memoirs of the women Beat writers, especially Diane di Prima’s, live up to the label of “true women’s autobiography.”

In her essay “Snapshots, Sand Paintings, and Celluloid,” Nancy M. Grace uses some of the definitions described by Jelinek and Smith and applies them to the life writings of Beat women. She relies especially on what the two writers had to say about memoirs, which Grace calls “the sibling[s]” of autobiography. Grace recognizes some of the definitions which distinguish memoirs from autobiographies as valid and worthy of putting to use when discussing life writing, and so do I. Namely, even though “the presence of the women in the Beat movement validates their personal stories as ‘different’ and ‘unusual,’ the stuff of which a tantalizing public story is made and thus constitutes the authority from and with which the women write,” their life writing is still focused on the men around them and “it chronicles their intimate relationships ... [with] the likes of Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka” (142). Thus, taking into account the definitions described above, these writings fall into the category of memoirs. Grace, again paraphrasing Jelinek, states that

The memoir, focused on a relatively short period in one’s life and more open to stories about others than autobiography (Jelinek 4), is a fitting form for narratives about Beat women’s associations with particular men or participation in the Beat historical moment. The memoir may also

serve more effectively to achieve the implicit directive that life writing be introspective and intimate, that life writers explore their inner or emotional life, thus distinguishing the form from mere historical documentation (Jelinek 10). The memoir, focused on a slice of one's life rather than the full sweep, provides a manageable temporal space within which to reflect (142)

Even though some of what Grace says is mere repetition of other critics' views, I think her points are worth noting for at least one reason. She accepts memoir as a legitimate form and argues that it contributed to the recognition and acknowledgment of women Beats as "legitimate artists from the historical Beat record" (143). Beat poet Anne Waldman, in the Foreword to *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of the Revolution*, calls the memoir "the strongest literary genre by the women of so-called Beat generation. For, in a sense, the women were often present as the most observant and sober witnesses" (5). That two prominent Beat scholars recognize memoirs as a positive and strong form when it comes to women Beat writing is telling in itself.

However, from reading some of these memoirs one does sense that the majority of women Beat writers were only observers. Ann Charters, in *Beat Down to your Soul: What was the Beat Generation?*, asks, "Were the women caught in the orbit of Beat writers in the 1950s forced into the role of minor characters as the hapless victims of male chauvinism?" (611). Turning back to what Jelinek says about women being other, the Beat women writers can be labeled as "others among others." Namely, as I mentioned earlier, the male Beat writers themselves were "the outcasts and the other" in the eyes of

the mainstream society of their time. And even though they were “exposing the social hypocrisy rampant in the 1950s ... by target[ing] their society’s discriminatory treatment of homosexuals and African Americans[,] ... the empowerment of women ...[wasn’t] a burning issue” (611). Most of the time, women Beat writers were treated as others amongst a group of “the others.” This other otherness came to light in their life writing. They accepted some of its general principles, but resisted “the dominant ethos and form both of autobiography and of the Beat community, both of which stipulate that the ‘boy gang’ allow in women as long as they remain mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, virgins, whores, demons, or angels” (Grace 143). In the Beat community, women writers were, thus, serving all the traditional roles, even while they were otherwise standing in the first lines of the battles against conventional gender roles.

Whatever style they took as their own, the fact that Beat women chose to write (some of them even chose to write Beat) and that, in recent years, their writing is starting to get the acknowledgment it deserves, is important. As Grace puts it,

Life writing also takes on political and artistic import for women writers in its connection to self-validation, self expression, and authority, a conceptual link assuming heightened importance for women writers effectively erased as legitimate artists from the historical Beat record. For instance, when a woman sits down to write her version of her life, claiming the first person pronoun ‘I’ in conjunction to her given name—therefore identifying hero, narrator, and author with the same signifier—she gestures that her story is one lodged as closely as possible to her lived experiences, directing one toward both a material reality and the author’s

distinctive perception of self. . . Thus, for both the reader and the Beat woman author, life writing may affirm individual female agency and action in ways that fiction, poetry, and other literary forms do not. (142-143)

Memoir writing is, thus, a tool that effectively helps women to find and claim their position in all areas of life. It helps them enter the historical process because they are no longer silent. Not accepting the silence forced upon them and speaking up proves that they exist.

* * * *

Before I move on to introducing particular memoirs, I would like to take a short trip back in time because I believe that briefly discussing some social and historical contexts will help us to better understand where women Beat writers are coming from. Perhaps it will also help explain and more thoroughly explore some of the choices they made, and help us understand their writing better. To the reader interested in gender issues during the 1950s, I warmly recommend Wini Breines's book *Young, White, and Miserable Growing Up Female in the Fifties*. What follows here is just a brief overview of the most important issues Breines brings up in the chapter dedicated to "The Other Fifties: Beats, Bad Girls, and Rock and Roll."

In this chapter, Breines starts the discussion by mentioning Paul Goodman's book *Growing Up Absurd The Problems of Youth in the Organized Society*, which was published in 1956. What is important for my discussion is that in his study Goodman

focuses mainly on groups of boys. He calls them “Angry and Beat” and “Juvenile Delinquents” (qtd. in Breines 127). Girls are excluded from his study because they are not expected to make anything of themselves (128). Their only expected roles are to grow up and become wives and mothers (128). Is it then surprising that Beat women writers were so often (and are still) ignored? Breines writes, “Whether considering family, gender, or youth, the focus was male, and often excluded, ignored, misinterpreted, or blamed females. ‘Deviants’ such as Beats, hipsters, juvenile delinquents, homosexuals, even communists, were almost always male (psychologically damaged by ‘bad’ mothers) in the scholarly and public mind” (128). Even though the “girls” were ignored, or perhaps because of that, there existed, even though “barely visible[,] cultural rebellion of some white, middle-class, girls and young women in the 1950s ... who actually lived or flirted with a bohemian life” (128). These girls were defiant, but their defiance was invisible. Moreover, Breines writes that there were no female role models for them to emulate.

Because Beat and delinquent subcultures were composed almost exclusively of males, often working-class males, and were masculine in conventional and chauvinist ways, girls’ processes of identification were complex. Middle-class white girls who rejected dominant values had no choice but to utilize and adapt male versions of rebellion and disaffection (130)

In *The Beat Generation* video, Anne Waldman reveals the selfish ways in which male Beat writers were operating. She says that artistic creativity was about sharing and experiencing, but the male writers were not passing on their information to women.

“There was a kind of secret, oral, whispered teaching that was coming through men,” says Waldman, “and the women were cut off, unless they were really tough and had a lot of confidence; you know, demand it in a way, demand that information and demand to be taken seriously” (*The Beat*). Waldman concludes by saying that “there were a lot of very talented women who didn’t survive [artistically]” (*The Beat*). However negatively perceived the invisibility of female existence in those years could be, it is exactly those memoirs I will discuss (and many others, of course) that prove females did exist and were, in fact, inspired by males “whether as movie cowboys, delinquents, oddballs, or rebels” (Breines 130).

As said before, there were girls and women (the Beat writers I will be focusing on belong to this category) who did not want to accept the “life plan” set out for them (136). They “felt trapped in the grip of feminine mystique” (136), which to me seems to be a modern makeover of the Victorian cult of true womanhood. These girls, Breines notes rebelled against the bourgeois respectability and timidity of middle-class conventions that included domestic gender expectations. The banality of middle-class value was an important Beat theme that found female adherents despite the sexism of the vision. Girls imagined themselves as free as Beat men, domesticity (and the women they were supposed to become) left behind. (136)

However, their imagined freedom proved to be not much different amongst the group of Beat men to which many of these girls felt drawn. As I noted earlier, the roles women Beats served in the Beat community were the same traditional roles they were supposed to be accepting anyway. Escaping from one subordinating environment, these females

entered another. In her foreword to Brenda Knight's anthology *Women of Beat Generation*, Anne Waldman sums up the situation of females very well:

I knew interesting creative women who became junkies for their boyfriends, who stole for their boyfriends, who concealed their poetry and artistic aspirations, who slept around to be popular, who had serious eating disorders, who concealed their unwanted pregnancies raising money for abortions on their own or who put their child up for adoption. Who never felt they owned or could appreciate their own bodies. I knew women living secret or double lives because love and sexual desire for another woman was anathema. I knew women in daily therapy because their fathers had abused them, or women who got sent away to mental hospitals or special schools because they'd taken a black lover. Some ran away from home. Some committed suicide. There were casualties among the men as well, but not, in my experience, as a legion. (X)

This is exactly the kind of environment out of which women Beat writers created their art. Many of their experiences are explored in their memoirs because, unlike some other women, Beat women writers refused to stay silent

CHAPTER 2

AND SHE LIVED “HAPPILY” EVER AFTER: CAROLYN CASSADY’S *OFF THE ROAD*

Even though I have expressed my annoyance with women’s writing being measured against men’s standards before, when talking about Beat women’s writing I cannot avoid bringing Beat men writers to the discussion; especially because the men’s treatment of the females in their life and work provides an insight that helps us better understand the writing, especially life writing, of Beat women. In the introductory essay to *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers*, Ronna C. Johnson illustrates my point by saying that the

literature produced by canonical male Beat writers has always assumed the presence of women Beats by the refusal to recognize them. They have not been absent, but elided, and their denied presence has left immutable traces in Beat discourse and literature—the silent “girls” in black—that remain to be excavated. That is, women Beats have been fundamental to and inextricable from the literary and cultural discourses, communities and narratives which male Beat writers fronted, but they have been Beat constituents by the paradox of their manifest elision. (5)

Reflecting this elision, Beat men often took advantage of Beat women writers. In her interview with Jack Foley, Ann Charters describes why Alene Lee (upon whom the

character Mardou Fox is based) is angry with Jack Kerouac after the publication of *The Subterraneans*. Charters says, “One of the things she’s angry about is that he takes some writing she’s done about her own life and puts it into his book without making it clear that she actually wrote this section... This is really a dangerous thing to do” (Foley) It is not only dangerous, it is also showing how much respect—if his use can be called respect—Kerouac had for Alene Lee’s writing, or better, for Alene Lee herself. Her writing was not good enough to be acknowledged by him, but it was good enough to steal and use in his book claiming it as his own. Thus, female Beats were present in and at the same time absent from the Beat community. In the February 1958 edition of *Playboy*, an article entitled “The Beat Mystique” was published. Under the title and a few introductory remarks about the Beats, there is a picture which could be looked at as a symbolic portrayal of women amongst the Beats. A hip young man dominates the space in the picture. A woman is also in the picture, but one has to look very carefully to notice her. She is, of course, in the background, smaller, barely visible; it almost looks as if she is a part of the artwork on the wall. (Gold 20) Thus, she is there, but only as décor or, perhaps, as a muse. It is exactly this double form of existence that may explain why so many of female Beats choose to write what critics call memoirs and not autobiographies. Choosing to tell their stories through the stories of important male Beat figures is proof of their double existence. On the other hand, it is an opportunity for them to tell their stories in whatever form they choose and thus to speak up, prove their existence and take a more visible position in the Beat realm. It is important to note that some critics may argue that the Beat women are using the Beat male’s fame to sell their

stories. While this may be true for Carolyn Cassady, the accusation is certainly false in Diane di Prima's case.

Amongst women who decided to take their position in the realm of the Beat, the ones I discuss in this thesis—Cassady, Jones, Johnson, and di Prima—belong to what Ronna Johnson calls “[s]econd-generation women Beats” (13). They are “protofeminist writers, artists whose anticipations of sixties feminism clarify the liminal interval in the twentieth century between first- and second-wave women’s movements” (13-14). As are other Beat women writers, they “are innovators and practitioners of the experimental techniques that distinguish Beat writing” (19). Again, they write from the position of non-presence, “showing ways in which male-authored Beat literature deliberately and inaccurately restricted women to ‘everyday practices,’ and the way the women writers parlayed these gendered restrictions into a Beat art of their own” (19). Thus, they adopt the very form of male Beat writing; they take their approach from the men by whom they are “colonized” but make the form their own.

This is not an unusual approach of the oppressed. Women have been known to take the tools that were symbols for their oppression and use them to subvert the roles assigned to them. They also use them to empower themselves. One particular example from literature in which such an empowerment takes place is Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. In it, writes Catherine Lewis, because the female characters are restricted “by the lack of free expression and by men and the male institution ... much of the [females’] creativity takes place in domestic situations” (237). By taking the needle “into their own hands,” “women relate to one another, find individual and group strength, and turn skills from those roles [assigned to them by men] into avenues for independence”

(237). In *The Color Purple*, Celie, with the help of Shug, finds her way to financial freedom by sewing pants, and by quilting with other women she makes a place for herself in the patriarchal society.

Not all of the writers I will discuss in this thesis, however, have adopted the Beat style of writing in such a way to serve their own purpose, at least not for their memoirs. Out of four writers of memoirs whose works I choose to explore, Diane di Prima's texts come closest to not merely telling the story of the Beat, but also telling it in Beat style.

Although I've so far written about memoirs in general, I would like to offer just a few more words about Beat women's memoirs as a genre in particular before I truly move on to discuss the memoirs themselves. Ronna C. Johnson suggests that memoirs written by women Beat writers are so numerous that they "constitute a subgenre of Beat literature" (33). This is an important statement, as it recognizes Beat women's writing to be powerful and plentiful enough for not only proving the presence of many female Beat writers, but even to create a special subgenre of the male-focused Beat literary period. Ronna Johnson says that Beat "memoir women writers have been able to crystallize and transform extra-literary prohibitions against women to invent an alternative, woman-centered discourse of Beat generation dissent" (33). In their memoirs, women Beat writers are able to tell their side of the story their way. However, "using a genre that is an amalgam of generic forms, Beat's female memoirists (re)tell Beat generation life in a narrative discourse in which they are the memoirs' Beat subject and yet still women colonized by the norms of Beat culture" (33). That is just what some definitions that distinguish memoirs from autobiography suggest. Namely, in memoirs women are telling their story, but they still remain what Ronna Johnson calls "subjects" because the

telling of their story does not change their position in Beat society; they are still telling their stories through the “more interesting” stories of male counterparts. Because I feel that in this sense the memoirs of Diane di Prima distinguish themselves from other Beat women’s memoirs, I will first introduce three memoirs that follow the above-discussed definitions almost to the word. Carolyn Cassady’s *Off the Road*, Hettie Jones’s *How I Became Hettie Jones*, and Joyce Johnson’s *Minor Characters*.

* * * *

Off the Road My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg was published in 1990. Considering the fame of Kerouac’s *On the Road* and knowing that Carolyn Cassady was a wife of Neal Cassady, who was immortalized in Kerouac’s book as the notorious Dean Moriarty, readers naturally will expect to find out about Neal Cassady from this text. However, they might not expect to find out so little about Carolyn Cassady herself. Indeed, in her book she does describe some twenty years of her life, but she focuses mainly on her relationship with Neal. Thus, she meets both of the main definitions of memoir: she focuses on a certain part of her life and does not tell her whole life-story, and she tells her story through Neal’s; she focuses more on someone else’s life to define or explore her own. Her memoir starts on the day she met Neal Cassady for the first time and ends some sixty chapters later with his death. Looking back at Margo Cully’s three main observations about women’s autobiographies, Cassady’s belongs to the category of the “famous-man-I-have known-and/or married boast” (5), and thus can be, as I suggest earlier, labeled as memoir. Even though it does not use “the gendered

name on the title page” (6), the subtitle *My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* reconfirms the previous point and also suggests that “my years” are actually going to be more about “their years.”

The most positive words about *Off the Road* can be found in the *Women of the Beat Generation* anthology (where one can also find a short summary of Cassady’s memoir). There, Brenda Knight assigns Cassady a place in “The Muses” section. Though Knight stresses Carolyn Cassady’s importance, even in the criticism written about female Beat writers, she assigns Cassady the role of an observer, the collector of memories and stories, and not the one creating them. Indeed, the other two sections of Knight’s anthology are “The Writers” and “The Artists.” Cassady is described as a “[w]ife, mother, writer, painter, breadwinner, and muse ... [who] spent fourteen years on and off with the legendary Neal Cassady .. [and] provided him the steady presence he needed when the party, inevitably, was over” (Knight 57). For example, after many turbulent years of marriage and after Neal’s many affairs with other women, one of his lovers, Natalie Jackson, commits suicide. Neal calls Carolyn, and she tells him, “I saw the paper, Neal. I’m so sorry Do you want to come home for a while?” (274) Neal asks her if he really could and Carolyn answers, ““Of course, Neal This is your home still, like it or not”” (274). Carolyn accepts Neal in her home whenever he needs her; indeed, she was a steady presence in his life, probably the only one he has ever had. Carolyn Cassady serves many roles in Neal Cassady’s life, and most of these are roles that were traditionally assigned to women. Even Knight’s placement of Carolyn into “The Muses” section diminishes her role as an artist. She may be Neal Cassady’s muse, but she is mostly his Wife—and she accepts this role without much objection.

Because of the way Cassady chose to lead her life, she and her memoir do not belong to the group of “rebellious” Beat women who were breaking the “rule of cool” by living their lives as they saw fit. Even though Knight suggests that it only seems as if Cassady “was the closest to the fifties’ ideal of a devoted wife and mother” and that she “doesn’t fit in such convenient mold” (57), I disagree. Although Cassady is an artist, she belongs to a group of so-called shadow artists. She sacrifices almost two decades of her life (and her art) to a man who probably is not deserving of such a sacrifice. For Carolyn, it seems, just being present in the life or lives of the “great minds” such as Neal Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg was enough. She perfectly fulfils the role of mother and housewife. It is ironic how little she needs to feel a part of the men’s circle. During the times she was having an affair with Jack Kerouac (with Neal’s “approval”), she seems to be perfectly satisfied with her role.

While I performed my chores, they’d [Jack and Neal] read each other excerpts from their writings-in-progress or bring out Spengler, Proust, Céline or Shakespeare to read aloud, interrupted by energetic discussions and analyses. Frequently they would digress and discuss a musician, or a riff or an interesting arrangement emanating from the radio. *I was happy listening to them and filling their cups.* Yet, I never felt left out any more. *They’d address remarks to me and include me with smiles and pats, or request my view.* (168, emphasis mine)

Not surprisingly, Carolyn Cassady wrote what critics would consider a memoir, and not an autobiography. She was satisfied in the role of cup-filler and listener; she did not participate in a men’s debate; she felt included because men smiled at her and patted her

every now and then. Of all female Beat writers I discuss in my thesis, I would suggest that Carolyn Cassady *was* the closest to the accepted image of the ideal woman in the fifties. What follows are some of the examples that support my view.

Carolyn Cassady “stands by her man” even after she realizes that he will never be able to sexually satisfy her, but still hopes that one day this will change. This is how she describes her and Neal’s first sexual intercourse, which took place while Allen Ginsberg was sleeping on a couch in the same room:

The instant my knees were raised, my nerves electrified every muscle to attention in a futile attempt to resist the pain, and a cry escaped me like an uncaged bird. Where was the tenderness he’d shown before? Who was this animal raging in lust? Crushed and bewildered I could only brace myself against the onslaught, fighting back tears and the threatening scream. How could he not help but notice my stiff frigidity? Even after he’d collapsed beside me, I felt chiseled from stone, except for the still-searing pain. (19)

Undeniably, the experience is anything but pleasurable for Carolyn, but she decides firmly that “[n]ext time would be better” because she would be “in the mood and ready” (20). It doesn’t get better, though. A few pages later, after yet another painful intercourse, described as “the sudden thrust and violent pounding and virtually no body-to-body contact,” Carolyn admits that her “hopes for an ideal sex life shattered in bits around [her]” (26). Yet, she accepts Neal’s marriage proposal, even though, at that time, he is still married to his first wife LuAnn. Her marriage and sexual life, again, separate her from other Beat women writers. In times when Beat women were breaking sexual

and other boundaries, Carolyn Cassady submits to the role of accepting wife. Where other Beat women, especially Diane di Prima, accept and celebrate their sexuality, Carolyn Cassady succumbs to the role of a wife whose priority is to satisfy her husband. Her story, then, is not heroic. Her story is about how the male “heroes” of the era treated her, but she is only a minor character. In contrast to other Beat women writers, she doesn’t do much to change the role assigned to her. Consequently, her text is merely a memoir in the pejorative way that term is used by critics, and it is not deserving of the adjective “Beat.”

Even the title of Carolyn Cassady’s book immediately removes her from the main Beat arena. During the pregnancy with their child, Neal couldn’t find any other job, so he decides to leave Carolyn and go to sea. Carolyn—pregnant and broke, living on peanut butter, lettuce, and milk, making maternity clothes out of old curtains, selling their entire record collection, dragging her fur coat “in the blazing sun” of San Francisco only to sell it for 25 cents—was nevertheless “proud to be enduring for ‘us’” (68). Neal is present when their first child is born, but a couple of months later, he uses all their savings to buy a new car, and in pretence of taking his friend Al and his new wife Helen on their honeymoon, goes on a road trip because he says he deserves a vacation after he has worked “so damn hard” (76). Carolyn tells him not to ever come back again, but, of course, she takes him back after his road trip, as she will take him back on several other occasions as well. While she stays at home, taking care of their child, Neal lives his adventures “on the road.” Thus, she fulfills her role of a domestic housewife perfectly. She, as the title of the books suggests, lives her life off the road. This does not make her different from many other Beat women who felt left out because they couldn’t join men

on their road adventures. What makes her different from them, though, is her acceptance of staying on the sideway and waiting for her man to take the turn to her house whenever he pleases.

Perfect wife that Carolyn is, she takes Neal back even after, awaiting their divorce to become final, he gets married to another woman. “My deep belief that Neal was the only man for me had still not changed, try as I might to deny it, and I found it all too easy to slip back into a married feeling with him,” says Carolyn only after a few lines in which she explains that Neal told his other wife, Diana, that he would live for a few months with each of them and then decide which one is the better wife (126). Carolyn also knew about other women in Neal’s life. There is, for example, the before-mentioned Natalie, about whom Carolyn finds out from reading “an interview in a *Holiday* magazine” that Natalie was Neal’s “only true love” (263). Carolyn was sticking with the man who publicly admits that his lover, not his wife, is the only woman he has ever loved. But there were also men, at least one man Carolyn could be sure that Neal had an affair with—Allen Ginsberg. She describes her finding out about it with these words, “Neal and Allen had been in the latter’s room for some time. I had a question to ask Neal, so I tapped on the door as a matter of courtesy, and, not waiting for an answer, opened it and walked in. The question stuck in my throat at what I saw before me. The force of the shock nearly knocked my head off, or so I felt” (246). What she saw was Allen and Neal in bed together. When she confronts Neal and asks him how he could do this, she admits, “It was my standard response, and the question that never received an answer. The only possible answer was the one I didn’t want to face” (246-47). Hurt one more time, the perfect wife Carolyn, “[f]eeling stupid and miserable” continues to “go on with [her]

duties” (247). She sticks with her man through better and worse, and in her case, there is more of the worse than better. This is yet another example of her submissiveness. If, as stated before, Beat women’s memoirs are important because with them Beat women prove their existence in the Beat sphere, Cassady is failing. With her text she does show that she existed, but only as a shadow to other prominent Beat characters. By accepting her shadow position as viable, she accordingly cannot be put into the same place with other Beat women memoir writers who at least tried, some of them more successfully than the others, to step out of the shadow and start throwing their own. They can write about their liberation in a Beat way; Carolyn Cassady denies herself that possibility.

Home, another symbol of what a perfect wife in the fifties should care about the most is a prevalent metaphor in Beat women’s memoirs. The idea of having a home is important to Carolyn. When Neal gets arrested and is serving time in San Francisco jail, she finally stands up for herself and for something that is significant to her. She refuses to take a mortgage on the house to pay the bail for Neal’s release. She writes, “When I told Neal I couldn’t bring myself to risk losing the house, he wouldn’t believe it. At first he just repeated his requests, mildly ridiculing my objections. When he realized I was earnest, he became frantic, and his only pitiful means of persuasion lay in writing” (308). When he couldn’t convince her with letters either, saying that he would never forgive her, he stopped all means of communication. Keeping the home for herself and her children was one little victory Carolyn achieved over Neal. However, home is a traditional symbol of women and domesticity, and fighting for it does not take off Cassady the label of ideal fifties woman. As will be discussed later in my thesis, other women Beat writers of memoirs, especially Hettie Jones and Diane di Prima, deliberately take the idea of

home and appropriate it to make it a tool of empowerment. Cassady, on the other hand, bends to the idea prevalent in the 1950s: home is the center of everything and woman has to take care of the home. She, then, is writing her memoir from the position of the ideal mainstream woman. Moreover, she is striving to be in that position. Her writing is not innovative in any way and is, thus, not Beat. She is not writing consciously as an artist, but is merely reporting a series of events. For this and other reasons discussed above, Brenda Knight's statement that Cassady only *seems* to be "the closest to the fifties' ideal of a devoted wife and mother" (57) can be refuted.

However, Cassady is not necessarily happy with the way her life is lived, but she is content to be able to fulfill the roles that other Beat women so eagerly wanted to reject. Even after Neal's death, Carolyn doesn't give up her hope of a perfect life in the suburbs. One time, after talking on the phone to Jack Kerouac, she exclaims, "Damn it, I still wanted to live happily ever after!" (423). Her idea of living happily ever after is different from, for example, Diane di Prima's, which I will discuss later. Cassady's "happily ever after" necessarily includes a man in her life—another reason that her autobiography is actually a memoir or, if you will, a biography of a part of Neal Cassady's life. Still, however traditional Cassady is, she cannot be blamed for choosing to live her life a certain way. She simply is the woman she is. It would be unreasonable to judge her because she was acting like so many other women in her time. She just isn't like other Beat women, no matter how much the writer of this thesis would want her to be. Yes, her memoir is, as the definition requests, a testimony of a certain time, but the above reasons and many more are the proof that, compared to other Beat women's memoirs, Carolyn's text is the least Beat of them all.

Looking through some of the reviews of *Off the Road*, it is ironic that reviewers write more about Neal Cassady and his relationship with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac than about Carolyn or, indeed, even her relationship with Neal. However, the text is more about Neal Cassady than it is about Carolyn (or at least it is about his enormous impact on her life). It comes as no surprise, then, that *Off the Road* is labeled and sold as memoir. I have rejected the idea that female life writing should be distinguished as memoir just because it lacks some of the attributes autobiographies are supposed to have, but in this case, I dare to suggest that the text is not of great literary value. Thus, if the idea of memoirs as a separate genre is accepted, *Off the Road* is an example of a memoir, but it is an example of a bad memoir. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, for example, in his review for *The Nation* openly admits that “Cassady’s book is not great literature. It is purgative confession, it is fiction only in the sense that we all make up our own interpretation of our lives and ourselves, dream up the worlds we live in” (652). While I agree with Ferlinghetti that *Off the Road* does not have great literary value, I question his desire to proclaim it fiction in any other sense than it being an interpretation of the Cassadys’ (more so Neal’s than Carolyn’s) lives. After all, the book is a memoir and thus not supposed to be fictitious, at least not in its entirety. Ferlinghetti also blames Cassady for not including “a single reference ... to what was happening in the crucible of postwar America, to what was going on down in the outside world. Wars, revolutions, assassinations. You’d never know it” (256). This criticism is actually valid because autobiographical writing is supposed to tell the story of its author, but also the events that influence the author’s life. As we learned from Jelinek in chapter one, “It should be representative of its times, a mirror of the predominant zeitgeist” (4). Is it possible that

Carolyn was so absorbed in her relationship with Neal that she didn't care what was going on in the world and was not affected at all by the political tension of those times? I find this doubtful, particularly because Cassady is an educated woman. Ferlinghetti apologizes for her, though, saying that "she had a hard enough time keeping up with her turned-on men, let alone the rest of the universe.... This was before the women's movement and Cassady had been brought up to know that man was her all" (256). While this "apology" could be accepted if we consider that a "stand by your man no matter what" attitude was instilled into Cassady from her parents, it becomes unacceptable if we look at it from another relevant perspective. Namely, it is not true that there was no women's movement in the time Cassady lives her life with Neal. Also, there were other women on the scene at the same time who were raised in similar circumstances and were successful in breaking out of the mold society had created for them. It makes Cassady's omissions even more surprising that some of them were the very women I will discuss later in my thesis, and Carolyn Cassady knew them. All of them were a part of the Beat group in one way or another. Their lives revolved around the same men. But, as was said before, Carolyn accepted a much different path in life than, for example, Diane di Prima, Joyce Johnson, or even Hettie Jones. Ferlinghetti is clearly fascinated by Neal's life. He devotes much of this review after the points discussed above to Neal Cassady and his influence on the Beat generation. At the end of his review Ferlinghetti writes, "Frontier heroes cannot just fade away; they must die in their prime, but live on ever-young in our mind, as Neal does in mine" (257). As for Carolyn, she was the observer of this "hero's" life. She, as anybody else, could not keep up with Neal's speed and was "awed by his running discourse 'on three levels at once'" (257). If nothing else, her book

gives us yet another glance at the life of one of the most interesting Beat “characters.”

However, this is really the only thing that her book gives us. Because her story is more those characters’ story, her memoir does not give us anything new or exciting; it gives us nothing to convince us that it could be placed in the same group of women’s memoirs I believe the other texts I choose to write about in this thesis can be placed.

In another review, published in *New Statesman & Society*, attention is again devoted to Neal Cassady and his life. The article is entitled “Passionate Friendship,” which suggests that the discussion is going to revolve around Neal Cassady and his friendship with other Beats such as Kerouac and Ginsberg. Mary Flanagan begins her piece by mentioning Neal, calling him “the angel of the beat generation,” Allen Ginsberg his “soul brother,” and Jack Kerouac “the other member of the trinity” (39). Even so, this review, more than Ferlinghetti’s, focuses on Carolyn, but again, it does not say much about her writing per se or the literary value of her work. It does, however, almost pity her situation, her unfortunate marriage with Neal, calling her willingness to remain in the relationship with him “a confirmation of female masochism” (39). Flanagan calls Carolyn a symbol “of the home they [the Cassady, Kerouac, Ginsberg triumvirate] dreamed of but never made” (39). Here, again, Carolyn Cassady is presented as a typical “good girl”—a domestic woman-figure playing the role other Beat women were trying to subvert and which they were even resenting. “Carolyn never failed to put home and children first,” writes Flanagan (39). True. I cannot help but think of Edna Pontellier, the main character of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, which was published in 1899, who loved her children dearly, but still said at one point in the novel that she would give up everything for her children, except for herself. And here is Carolyn Cassady, more than

fifty years later, giving herself and more for the sake of her ungrateful husband and their children. I am not trying to suggest this is a bad thing for a mother and wife to do; however, one would expect that male Beats would show more respect to a woman who acts a bit more revolutionary and puts herself first sometimes. More importantly, one would expect Beat males to value women who also rejected the traditions of a society they found suspect. Flanagan suggests that Carolyn's "inflexibility in matters of principle won [Neal's] respect if not his fidelity" (39). She is referring to the above-discussed example when Carolyn refuses to bail Neal out of jail. I am not sure, however, that he really respected her. Perhaps his calling her "a real lady," as Flanagan writes, does not really show respect, but suggests Carolyn's "sneaking fondness for the middle-class background she was never able to overcome" (39). Again, therefore, Carolyn's story is really not her story. It is, however, representative of women's writing as defined by Jelinek. Namely, it does not "project a 'unique' or 'special' self-image", Cassady also doesn't "write in heroic tones" nor does she "outline the progress of [her] soul; she does not "write metaphorically," and does not see herself as a symbol or mirror of the era (Jelinek 187). Her writing does not characterize what Misch would call the "representative" nature of autobiography" (Jelinek 8). It does however, capture a projection of Neal's and Jack Kerouac's unique "images" and the friendship between them that is "encouraging self-revelation, intense communication and emotional risk" (Flanagan 39). In a sense, Cassady is their biographer, not her own.

Closest to my own view of Cassady's text is the review written by Francine Prose, published in *The Women's Review of Books*. Though Prose seems to be a bit harsh, she brings up valid points, some of them worth repeating. She calls *Off the Road* a memoir,

but also states that it “belongs to that growing subgenre. books that might be, and in fact often are, titled or subtitled *My Life with the Great* (or at least *Famous* or *Notorious*)” (10). In her title, Cassady gives us not one but three names of the “Great” whom we could as well call “Famous” and “Notorious.” Prose then continues with the claim that works such as Cassady’s are only “apparent memoirs”; in reality they should be called “shadow biographies” (10). “It’s sobering to read such books,” Prose says, “—to observe the skewed, often predictable balance between Me and Him, My story and His—and to ask the inevitable question. whose life was it anyway?” (10) This question is, indeed, relevant for Cassady’s text. Knowing how much she has to give up and how much she has put up with just to live her life near “Him,” can her life really be considered her own? Because the answer to this is negative, her text is, then, consequently not about her either. In Prose’s words, “Regrettably, if unsurprisingly, *Off the Road* is almost all Him” (10). Since her Him, Neal Cassady, was anything but a perfect husband for any woman’s desire, it really is puzzling why Carolyn stuck in this relationship for so many years. One possible answer can be found in Prose’s assertion that Carolyn

seems to lack of the most rudimentary personal or political awareness. The habits of life without self-reflection are clearly hard ones to break, and feminism seems to be among the (many) things Carolyn appears never to have heard of It is weirdly atavistic to read, in a book published in 1990, a woman recalling without irony her special joy in her third child’s birth: “I had given Neal a boy ” (11)

A good autobiographical text is supposed to give a reader a sense of its author’s self-reflection. As Prose says at the end of her review, “All we are offered is plot, incident,

event, it's up to us to extract the meaning" (11). Or, as Nancy M. Grace puts it in her essay,

Despite Cassady's efforts [to create a different kind of memoir] she, as have many others, falls back upon the conventional paradigm, creating an "I" that explicitly projects a unified and omniscient truth teller standing far removed from what it reports. Cassady's memoir moves progressively, the reporting "I" structuring reality as a flat continuum, a plan across which she marches to a pint of self-resolution. Ultimately, *Off the Road* emerges as history unconscious of itself as art. (143)

It is because of this linearity and the author's self-removal that I agree with Ferlinghetti when he says that this text is not "great literature" (652). Thus, it also cannot be a representative of a good (female Beat) memoir

Hence, *Off the Road*, put in the broader concept of the theory I introduced in the first chapter, follows the definitions of life writing that distinguish memoirs from autobiographies. Grace, who, as was mentioned before, accepts memoir as a genre of its own, puts Cassady's text on the list of important female memoirs from the Beat period. However, I would argue that Cassady's text is different from the other Beat women memoirs on Grace's list and does not deserve to be placed in the same group. Looking back on Ronna C. Johnson's quotation at the beginning of this chapter, I assert that Cassady, even though she eventually decides to tell her story, belongs more to the category of "silent 'girls' in black" (5). She, in opposition to some other female Beat writers, especially Diane di Prima, is not a practitioner or innovator "of the experimental techniques that distinguish Beat writing" (13). Cassady's memoir is not a text of great

literary value, nor is it an example of a good (Beat) memoir. In fact, I dare to go as far as to suggest that it is an example of a female Beat memoir “gone bad.” As Prose says in her review, “So little information is given about Neal or Carolyn’s background or habit of mind that we’re denied even the sneaky, extra-literary pleasures that these memoirs can often provide—that is, the chance to second-guess the subject and play amateur psychologist” (11). However, *Off the Road*, despite its weaknesses, has a value in being readable and, moreover, in telling yet another story about great Beat characters from a perspective different than the usual. Unfortunately, this is one of its rare, if not only, values.

CHAPTER 3

THEY WERE GOOD ENOUGH AFTER ALL: HETTIE JONES'S *HOW I BECAME HETTIE JONES*

At first glance, Hettie Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones* distinguishes itself from Cassady's *Off the Road*. The cover of Cassady's book comprises not one but five prints of Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac's photograph, and only one photograph of Carolyn Cassady in the upper right corner. Clearly, it is not Carolyn Cassady selling the book. The cover of *How I Became Hettie Jones*, on the other hand, is all about Hettie Jones. Moreover, the two photos of Hettie Jones are suggestive of the title of the book—they show transformation. Namely, in one photo, the one in the upper-left corner, Hettie Jones looks like a “proper” young woman from the fifties. Her hair, though short, is neatly combed and shiny; she is probably wearing an evening gown, her make-up is perfect; her pearl-necklace and earrings suggest that she belongs to the middle class. In the bottom-right corner appears a different Hettie Jones. Her hair is longer and messier. It is not dirty, but it looks freer to fall in any place it wants to. She is wearing big, dark sunglasses. No necklace, no visible earrings, probably no make-up either. The attire is casual. Even though Hettie looks directly into the camera in the first picture and she is almost smiling, she seems not only happier, but more “genuine” in the other one. When Nancy Grace interviewed Hettie Jones in June of 1994 and asked her how the group of women from the Beat era contributed to the women's movement, Hettie's reply

immediately conveys the person in the second picture on the cover of her memoir. She talks about how she got rid of the high-heeled shoes and how she traded clothes that were proper for ones that were comfortable ("Drive" 160-61). It is obvious that the idea of freedom is an important goal in Hettie Jones's life. Symbolically, Hettie sought freedom with clothes first. Because the second photo clearly shows the freer, more-comfortable-in-her-skin, Hettie, one can suspect that the first photo was taken before Hettie Jones became *Hettie Jones*, it was taken when her search for the real Hettie Jones began. Throughout her book, Hettie Jones describes her journey to the discovery of herself, her artistic talents, and her roles in her life and the lives of others.

Using the most common definition of memoir when it is compared to autobiography, the one that describes memoir as writing which portrays only a certain period of an author's life and focuses the story on other people rather than the author herself, Hettie Jones's book could not be labeled memoir as easily as Carolyn Cassady's. Since I deny the derogatory labeling of women's life writing as memoir, and accept memoir as a genre on its own, I dare to suggest that Hettie Jones's memoir, especially in comparison to *Off the Road*, is a memoir deserving of the name "autobiography" through the lens of those critics who still consider memoirs to be works not good enough to be autobiographies. Namely, Hettie Jones does describe the part of her life that was closely connected to her husband of seven years: Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones). However, as Shulman writes in a review of Jones's book, "unlike so many other memoirs by the lovers of the famous, which are dedicated to illuminating the lives of important men, at the core of this book is a searching question about women" (425). And, I would add, above all, about Hettie Jones herself. Even though the events and details Jones

describes in her book are intimately connected to her husband LeRoi Jones, as Barrett Watten notes in her article “What I See in *How I Became Hettie Jones*,” “the book’s overarching question [is], Who is Hettie Jones?” (98).

Self-creation and self-discovery, as was suggested in the first chapter of this thesis, are important features of autobiography. Where we saw almost no self-reflection in Cassady’s book, there is plenty to be found in Hettie Jones’s. Remembering Smith’s idea that “autobiography is understood to be a process through which the autobiographer struggles to shape an ‘identity’ out of amorphous subjectivity” (5), one can see that Jones’s work does just that. Jones skillfully makes her name a medium through which she begins her journey of self-discovery. That *nomen* is indeed *omen* becomes clearer by turning every page. “Meet Hettie Cohen,” is the first sentence of Jones’s text (1). This same Hettie Cohen becomes Hettie Jones after marrying black poet LeRoi Jones. When, after their wedding, Frank O’Hara calls Hettie by her maiden name, LeRoi jumps in to explain that, “Her name is Jones now” (65). Even so, in the very next paragraph, Hettie writes, “Despite the shared name, there were different transformations awaiting us. He would remain, like any man of any race, exactly as he was, augmented. Whereas I, like few other women at that time, would first lose my past to share his, and then, with that eventually lost too, would become the person who speaks to you now” (65). With this quotation, Jones stresses the importance of names in her transformation. She also connects her life with LeRoi’s and pre-shadows the unhappy ending of their marriage, which is also indirectly connected with name changing (LeRoi’s this time). As Watten writes, “[W]hile change of name is a central concern for both authors, very different cultural logics are inscribed in their names. Hettie Cohen is only Hettie Jones after

writing her autobiography (and not simply after marrying Jones)” (100). Indeed, Hettie becomes Hettie Jones only at the end of her book. In the beginning of the book, we meet Hettie Cohen; when she marries LeRoi, she writes that she “traded Hettie Cohen for Hettie Jones” (62); after their separation, Hettie finds out that changing her name would cost fifty dollars, but she also believes keeping the same last name as her children will make their lives easier. She accepts her “new, third, self, Mrs. Hettie Jones” (232). Taking care of the telephone-bill business, she says to the operator, “‘C-care of .. *Mrs* Hettie Jones.’ ... Then, suddenly hearing it, a veil lifts, I realized I’ve married ... *myself*” (232). Even so, when in the end she says that she is still Hettie, “[b]y all means” (239), she is not the same Hettie she was when we met her on the first page. Through self-reflection and transformation, Hettie Jones discovers her real self by writing her story. Thus, as we will see with Joyce Johnson in the next chapter, she challenges the main memoir definition that limits the memoir to being a story about others, not the writer herself.

Claiming the position of the author, narrator, and the hero of the memoir, Hettie Jones also stresses the importance of her gender. Because the search for herself is the main theme of her text and because she uses her name as a symbol of change, putting her name into the title of her memoir, has a special meaning for Jones. While it does prove Cully’s observation that putting the name into the titles of books is a common practice among women writers of autobiographies, it also confirms my suggestion that gender is perhaps the most important factor when writing (or discussing) women’s life writing. Stating the obvious, Hettie Jones is a woman. Moreover, she is a woman in a certain period of American history that was especially restrictive and controlling over women’s

lives. Even more, Hettie Jones is one of the women who refused to accept the roles society set for them. She was born into a middle-class Jewish family. After getting a college degree, she decides to act upon her wish to become “someone,” and chooses a path unusual for young women of those times. She, by herself, moves to Greenwich Village, the center of New York’s “happening” at that time. Her moving out was so unconventional that her parents, “[t]o avoid alerting the neighbors, I guess, ... drove me to Manhattan at night” (15). She gets a job, another uncommon thing for women in the fifties, through which she meets her future husband. LeRoi and Hettie break several social boundaries by getting married—Hettie Jones is white and Jewish, LeRoi is a black; they get married when Hettie is already pregnant; the place of their wedding is a Buddhist temple. After the wedding, Hettie’s parents renounce her, and as Shulman notes, Hettie “found everything changing rapidly” (425). Only one of these changes was the change of her name. If, as Cully suggests, female life writers use their names in the titles to “reinscribe” their gender, Hettie Jones does it also to reinscribe herself. Moreover, Hettie Jones successfully “claim[s] the first person pronoun ‘I’ in conjunction to her given name [and] therefore identif[ies] hero, narrator, and author with the same signifier” as Grace suggests women life writers do to claim and validate their “female agency” (143). Also, when Jones talks about herself, it becomes clear that she has accepted the last version of Hettie Jones, about whom she talks in the first person. Usually, when talking about herself as Hettie Cohen, she uses the third. When Jones retells how she lied to the debt-collector that Miss Cohen no longer worked at that office, she says, “Poor discarded Hettie Cohen with all her grand ambition, all she’d ever ‘become’ was Hettie Jones. I felt I owed her” (115). Using the third person for the former Hettie Cohen and the first for

Hettie Jones as she is “now,” proves that Hettie’s journey of self-discovery was successful. When, in the end, Hettie Cohen accepts herself as Hettie Jones, she does not only change her name, but by starting to write about herself in the first person, she claims her agency and thus accepts her current self.

Hettie Jones is not only the author of her memoir, but also, unlike Carolyn Cassady, she is a writer. However—and here her position as a woman in a patriarchal (Beat) society becomes more clear, “Hettie, like most of the other women around the Beats, kept her own writing a secret” (Shulman 425). The artistic roles were reserved for males and, to rephrase Waldman’s quotation from the previous chapter, male (Beat) artists worked in a closed, selfish circle and were unwilling to share their secrets unless women were strong enough to, though uninvited, force themselves in. Even some of those women, however, were adopting the attitude that Diane di Prima in *The Beat Generation* video describes as “I’ll type your poem before I type my poem, dear.” In a way, Hettie assumes this very attitude, as she puts her writing career aside and “willingly plays the role of a helpmate to help further [LeRoi] Jones’s career” (Watten 100). However, before I address this issue, I would like to take a look at how Hettie Jones the writer appears in her text.

As mentioned above, her writing was not something that she discussed with anyone, not even with her good friend Joyce Johnson. Jones tells Grace, “We women did not talk about our own work with each other” (“Drive” 172). Shulman observes that “to understand this silence and overcome it is part of the burden of her [Jones’s] memoir” (425). What Shulman calls silence, Watten labels as lack and says that “a subsequent writing *about* lack ... is one of her memoir’s accomplishments” (112). Because, as

Watten explains, Hettie could not claim her position as a poet, “she claims her recognition ... in the form of her autobiographical prose, in its poetics of lack” (112). To connect this point to my broader issue of female life writing and especially women Beat writing, Hettie Jones acknowledges her “writer’s block” and turns the search for her creative ability into the symbolic search for the real Hettie Jones. We first hear about Hettie’s writing when she is in her early twenties and tells us that she has “just read William Carlos Williams, concluding that [her] own poems were not only bad, but worthless” (24). She believes that her writing is not good, but, at this point, she still tries to write. She says, “I wrote small impressions, likes and dislikes, about wanting to live unencumbered by things” (25). She humorously adds, “I made a list of the men I’d slept with, to see if I could shock myself (I couldn’t)” (25). When a bit later we get to see a glimpse of her attitude to her writing again, the conclusion can be made that Hettie Jones, as far as her writing is concerned, falls into the category of Beat women who were, unwillingly most times, muses and observers. Too shy and self-conscious to share her writing with others, she says,

Beside my desk at *Partisan* I kept a big green metal waste can, where most of my lunchtime attempts to write got filed. I was too ashamed to show them. I didn’t like my tone of voice, the twist of my tongue. At the open readings where anyone could stand up, I remained in the cheering audience. Roi was so much better; everyone else was much better (48)

This quotation confirms Watten’s assertion that Hettie Jones could not claim her position as a poet. Not surprisingly, however, she does not feel “down for the count” (48). As we will later see with Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones also considers herself to be lucky to be

able to observe from such a close distance “a stir of reaction, a gearing-up of generations” (48) Her silence and lack of ability to write, or at least to write well enough for the standards she sets for herself, become more conflicting when she becomes aware that LeRoi expects to hear more from her. “Mainly, he’d wanted the world to hear from me and it hadn’t, at least not in the terms of the going (male) intellectual positions. He liked my inventive clothes, but where was my tongue? This has been part of his expectations. This was important to him” (85-86). Even though LeRoi expressed liberal ideas, his actions spoke otherwise. When he has to choose between his art and his wife, he chooses art. Hettie does give a reason for her silence, for her writer’s block, some pages later when she writes,

That night—reconvinced—I started a book for children I figured I’d just go back to where I left off before the kids, Totem, *Yugen*, Roi...
Inevitably, we all write for our children or end up talking to ourselves, but the book I began remained unfinished.... [M]y feelings—with never anything literary to them and all I ever wanted to write about—were left tangled for the lack of time, like the long hair I grew but then twisted up carelessly There are different reasons for silences, but the Russian poet Marina Tsvetayeva, describing her own, came closest to mine: “It’s precisely for feeling that one needs time, and not for thought.” (149)

In addition to her own anxieties, Hettie is aware of her position as a woman, and this position bears upon her abilities to pursue a writing life. She, as is seen in the previous quotations, cannot afford to be a full-time writer—she writes during lunchtime on her job, and it is precisely the lack of time that is a main reason for her silence. Her

first role is being a wife to LeRoi and a mother to their children. She gets recognized as an artist years later, as she writes near the end of her memoir, “It was a while before I dragged the old poems out of their box and wrote new ones, and read them in public along with my stories, and began to think of myself as the writer whose name is on this book” (238). Throughout her memoir, then, Hettie Jones is trying to overcome her silence—her memoir, in fact, is the proof that she has succeeded. She successfully claims her voice as author and thus corresponds to at least one of Grace’s characteristics of Beat women’s life writing that calls for claiming of the women’s voice.

By putting this search for self-identity (as a woman and as a writer) before other issues in her text, she claims her “I” successfully and pushes the definition of the memoir a bit further. She does use her text to claim her position in society (which Grace cites as an important feature of women Beat memoirs). She does also tell LeRoi’s story; but unlike Carolyn Cassady, who disappears among the men about whom she writes, Hettie focuses on herself more. By doing this, she challenges what Jelinek calls the most basic definition of memoir—that it is life writing that focuses more on others than the author herself. In this regard, the influence of Joyce Johnson on Hettie Jones’s writing is visible—an influence Jones acknowledges at the beginning of her book. I believe that Johnson’s influence can be most visibly seen in the way Jones describes her relationship with Johnson and other women in her life. Again, she is telling her story, but, as is Johnson, is aware of the influence other women have had on her life. She can recognize herself in some of these other women, especially in Joyce Johnson.

Jones first met Johnson when Jones was passing out flyers for her husband’s poetry reading. As Johnson approached the spot where Jones was standing, Hettie writes

that “a certain familiar carelessness showed in the mess of her flyaway blond hair” (80)

A bit later, when Joyce tells her that they should get away from the cold, Hettie says, “And since I’d met few women my age who seemed at least as determined as I, I took her at once for a kindred spirit” (80) This was the beginning of their life-long friendship, and Joyce Johnson also writes about it in her memoir “I liked Joyce,” writes Hettie, “because like me she took her independence for granted Both of us were paying the rent. Neither of us has ever considered wanting a man to support us. And having sex hadn’t made us *bad*” (81). Jones and Johnson fit perfectly into the context of Beat women discussed in the first and second chapters They are rebels in a sense that they take their lives into their own hands and are reject the roles society reserves for them. In Jones’s words, “We shared what was most important to us: common assumptions of our uncommon lives. We lived outside, as if. As if we were men? As if we were newer, freer versions of ourselves? There have always been women like us Poverty, and self-support, is enough dominion” (81). Their lives were, indeed, uncommon, but, on the other hand, Jones generally still played the conventional role of a wife and mother in her marriage with LeRoi. When, for example, she and LeRoi had to make a decision about which one of them would get a job, Hettie volunteers because she thinks that his writing is more significant than hers. More importantly, her having a job gives her an opportunity for the independence she and Johnson were proud of having. She writes, “To one of us a job is a slave, to the other it’s a guarantee of freedom” (123). Still, even though Jones and Johnson share many similarities, there is one major difference between them. Johnson is “writing a novel—already under contract” (Jones 81), while Jones is still searching for her voice and gathering courage to recognize herself as a writer.

Johnson is, thus, more on the “men side” than Hettie because writing is her profession. Hettie’s struggle for her artistic voice, however, is tied to her journey of self-discovery. Indeed, she is intertwining her and LeRoi’s stories in her memoir, but she never suggests that LeRoi’s is more important than hers, by which she again challenges the most common definition of memoir writing

Another woman Hettie Jones brings to our attention in several places in her memoir is Diane di Prima. Most interestingly, she mentions di Prima for the first time in the section she dedicates to the Beats (45-47). di Prima is the only woman Jones mentions with other Beat poets and artists. A few pages later, when Jones is describing her job at the *Partisan*, she writes, “Sometimes I hired Diane Di Prima, who had become a friend, to stuff envelopes and keep me company” (49). The friendship between Diane and Hettie is different from the friendship between Hettie and Joyce, though. And although Johnson writes and Hettie wants to write, Joyce, in return, thinks Hettie is lucky because she has LeRoi. di Prima, on the other hand, seems to have it all. She is also, as Hettie says she wasn’t surprised to find out, LeRoi’s lover. Jones is aware that “Diane was everything [she] wasn’t” and she explains how:

To begin she was single, and single women know, as the blues say, when to raise their window high. I liked her because she was smart and quick to laugh, and enjoyed her bisexual life (although she tended to wear lovers like chevrons). Unmarried, she was raising a daughter. Unusual, her family hadn’t turned on her, she took me to Brooklyn once to meet her grandmother. I never knew how she lived, working only occasional jobs. But Diane’s life was her lit. (98)

Diane di Prima, in a word, was her own woman. She lived the kind of life that most of the Beat women probably expected to live when they left their old lives behind them, but I will talk more about di Prima's way of life in her own chapter. However, di Prima is an important part of Jones's life. LeRoi and she not only had an affair, but also had a child. Even so, Hettie Jones, it seems, never loses her respect for di Prima. She writes, "I admired Diane—why not? She wrote. Her self-directed life included a lot of good work" (190). Here Jones connects the relationship with another woman to the main theme of her memoir—the search for the artist inside her. As before she mentions that Johnson was a writer, she now stresses the importance of di Prima's writing. Again, she, like Johnson in her memoir, brings the attention to other women in her life, but their stories are intertwined. Being on a self-searching journey, Jones cannot leave other women out. They help shape Jones's life story and it is through them that she also get to question and evaluate her life. Because her final resolutions are successful—she claims her voice as an artist—her memoir can, with no doubt, be placed amongst the better ones in the category of Beat women life writing.

Nancy M. Grace brings up another interesting point connected to Hettie Jones's writing: Jones considers life writing as an opportunity for self-knowledge (157). As Jones herself says in the interview with Grace when asked about what the process of writing the memoir was like, "And of course any exploration into the self is going to be self-discovery" ("Drive" 161). In this statement she concurs with Grace's idea of memoir being exploration of the author's "inner and emotional life" (142). In Jones's case, it is also the exploration as her as an artist, as

she uses memoir to pick at the question of whether she is a writer and, if

so, what kind. She claims not to have written, to have failed in some way to engage fully the Beat and bohemian call to dedicate life to art. But the memoir speaks differently, the very material with which she constructs the book implying a hesitant but unavoidable self-reflexivity with regard to literary creation. (Grace 157)

Jones proves this by including in her book four of her poems and a short story dedicated to Charles Olson. This shows that even though she felt that she “could never write like [the poets she admired] did” (148), she still was writing. Her self-doubt in her artistic ability, however, is also shown when she explains that “I never showed Roi this poem, or any of the others I began and saved. Most weren’t good enough” (209). That Hettie Jones—the Hettie Jones she is at the time she is writing the memoir—decides to include her poetry and a short story in her memoir shows that she found an answer to the question whether or not she is a writer. Her memoir is only one of her many literary creations. With it and her other works she definitely claims her position—as a woman and as a writer.

However, before she can claim this position, Hettie Jones—as did many women in the Beat generation who were in relationship with important male Beat figures—undertook a lot of important work that was not obvious on the surface. To repeat what I already suggested before, many women sacrificed their literary career to help advance their men’s. Hettie Jones was one of these women. In a review, Shulman writes that “at the core of [Jones’s] book is a searching question about women that provides a dramatic subtext: Why did the wives of the writers and artists of the new consciousness so readily

subvert their ambitions and subordinate their lives to those of their men?" (425) Shulman explains that it was

virtually impossible for Jones, like most bohemian wives, to overcome the pervasive sexism of the 1950s and find the confidence and time to pursue her own ambitions amidst the proliferating responsibilities of wage earner, publisher, mother of two, homemaker, seamstress, hostess, secretary to her husband, wife. "In retrospect there's some terrible shame—how *could* we?" asks Jones, scrupulously assuming responsibility, as if women's liberation might have been accomplished absent a movement, by will alone (425)

Again, double existence comes to mind. As Jones writes, "We thought of ourselves as free because of the risks we'd taken, though we weren't free at all" (193) Even though the Beat women left the life in which many of their freedoms were oppressed, they still could only play certain roles as a part of a male-oriented Beat culture. However, while fulfilling all the roles enumerated above, Hettie was also working with her husband in editing the literary magazine *Yugen* and Totem Press. Hettie's "behind-the-scenes labor" (Wattan 109) and her job at the *Partisan Review* make her feel like she is the part of something bigger. Unlike Cassady, who felt content only to be able to listen to the males and serve them drinks, Hettie is an active participant. She has one thing in common with Cassady, though. She is pleased to be the part of men's creative lives. While revealing that she "could already see a stir of reaction, a gearing-up of the generations" (poems by Corso and Ginsberg were being considered for publication at the *Partisan Review*), she "felt happy to have landed—by remarkable, marvelous chance—in the middle" (49).

She was pleased to work on something as important as she felt *Yugen* was. She writes, “Our magazine—*Yugen, a new consciousness in arts and letters*—was Roi’s idea, but, as he’s written, I ‘went for it’ I think I threw myself at it, actually” (53). Jones is aware of the importance of her work. When asked by Grace what her position with *Yugen* was, Jones describes herself and other women as “facilitators”: “This is not to say that Roi couldn’t have gotten *Yugen* together by himself, maybe. I don’t put a lot of things on me that he could have done. But, you know, I did all the real physical work. ... So, yes, my role was very important. I may not have written the poetry, but I sure did type it! And I sure did lay it out” (“Drive” 164-65). None of her poetry was ever published in *Yugen*, but she did put in many hours of work as the “new consciousness” was being made on her *kitchen table*. I am stressing the importance of kitchen table because, as I said before, many Beat women expected their roles to change once they left their old lives behind. What they ended up being left with, however, were the same roles but played in a different, Beat, circle. It is also important to note that Hettie emphasizes the idea that most of her behind-the-scenes work took place in a home.

Home is an essential aspect of Jones’s writing. *How I Became Hettie Jones* is divided into sections, each of which is entitled with the name of the street (or square) where Hettie lived during the time she is describing in that particular section. That she stresses the importance of home is significant. Home for Hettie is not important to her in the same way that Cassady feels the need to have one. Jones is “aware of domesticity as a cliché when associated with women’s autobiographies and memoirs” (Grace 155). She is creating her story with association to place, as she says, because she “wanted this to be a woman’s book. I thought men would not focus on their homes” (“Drive” 162).

Because she claims this cliché and manipulates it, “she manages to avoid vacuity, the domestic sphere becomes the analogue for time and an ironic, gendered twist on the Beat belief in home as something from which to escape” (Grace 155). This puts Jones in the midst of what I was discussing at the beginning of chapter 2. Specifically, she takes a symbol of oppression (home as the symbol of domesticity and the only place where women are allowed to be) and, by appropriating it in her own writing, uses it to empower herself and subvert the role which has been assigned to her. It is interesting how she mentions kitchen as a central part of the household in different contexts. In the previous paragraph we learned that the whole *Yugen* magazine was put together on her kitchen table. In another place in her book, she describes how a big Italian meal was prepared for a number of guests,

The mysterious kitchen has been more or less revealed. I own a seasoned iron pot and a wooden salad bowl I rub with garlic, and I’ve mastered the rudiments, mostly of other people’s ethnic dishes—though I’ve yet to shape a matzoh ball, I can make gumbo with okra and also spaghetti for a hundred. That’s what we’re having tonight. All the Italians are over the sauce. Both sexes—each one a poverty gourmet. (75)

In this quotation, Hettie puts both men and women in the kitchen. Also, she creates a domestic scene—the preparing of dinner, but ends her description with a line from a poem by Gilbert Sorrentino, which she notes was published in *Yugen* 4, ““With a knife in the kitchen / I cut / a tomato”” (76). By putting men and women in the kitchen together and citing a poem about cutting a tomato in the kitchen, Jones brings together almost every aspect of her writing—gender relations, home as a central metaphor, poetry as

something she wishes to create, but cannot also because she has to run the kitchen. Even when talking about abandoning her own art, she says, “Abandoned is not the word, though; there’s an old kitchen way to say what [I] did: you bury your talent under a napkin” (130). By using a kitchen metaphor, she again stresses the idea that Beat women writers were not as free as they imagined they might be—their place is still in the kitchen. It is also interesting that among the very few poems she chooses to include in her memoir, one of them “captures the tenor of her household life” (Grace 156):

My dearest darling

will you take out

the garbage, the fish heads

the cats

wouldn’t eat

the children are sleeping

I cannot hear them breathing

Will you be my friend

and protector from all evil

the dead fish

take them away

please (209)

This is also a poem of which Jones writes that—as opposed to all the others—was good enough for her to share with LeRoi, but she still doesn't. Was the poem perhaps her answer to Emerson's call for women "to write 'the meaning of a household life'" (182)? It might be an answer to the question she poses in the following quotation, "I didn't *mind* my household life, I just couldn't do a damn thing with it. How did it translate to words, this pattern of call and response, clean and dirty, sick, well, asleep, awake. It's only allure was need, and need was just a swamp behind the hothouse of desire—how could you want what you had to have?" (182) Again, a household life is what she, and other women, hoped to escape; and it is in the middle of the household life, though of different kind than the stereotype portrays, that she once more finds herself. By addressing this issue in her memoir and in her other writing, and by appropriating home as a central metaphor in her memoir, she creates a tool for her empowerment and thus is, again, able to claim a central position in her life and in her writing.

At the end of her memoir, Hettie Jones finds her true self. From the way she chooses to include other women in her story, we can conclude that her search was successful also because of them. When she writes that both her father and husband "first loved [her] for [herself], and then discarded [her] when that self no longer fit their daughter/wife image" (216), we can sense her disappointment with the men in her life. However, she writes, "If I hadn't been myself all along I might have been left next to nothing" (216). With this statement, and the one at the end of her memoir when she concurs that she is "still Hettie" (239), she suggests that the real Hettie Jones, the one she searches for throughout her memoir, has always been there. She just had to bring her out, and managed to do so with the help of the women who surrounded her. Her artistic

abilities were encouraged by one particular friend, about whom she writes, “I owe it to Dear Helene, my fellow tailor (and eventual sculptor), that I ever left Singer and took up a pen” (131). She owes it to di Prima for an example of what a woman can do. And she owes it to Johnson, whose memoir provided an encouragement for her own. For all these reasons and more, I can agree with Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose note on *How I Became Hettie Jones* is included amongst other critics’ snippets at the beginning of the book. He says, “A feminist scrutiny such as this is just what those last decades needed, as the beats themselves needed it.” As Johnson did with *Minor Characters*, in her memoir Hettie put women artists such as herself in the spotlight. She successfully claims her and other women’s position in the realm of Beat by sending a straightforward message that her artwork, and thus also theirs, is good enough after all.

CHAPTER 4

MERELY BEING THERE IS *NOT* ENOUGH. JOYCE JOHNSON'S *MINOR CHARACTERS*

Eminent Beat scholars—Ann Charters, Nancy Grace, Ronna Johnson, Ann Douglas, Anne Waldman, and others—all assert it was Joyce Johnson's book *Minor Characters* that brought women of the Beat generation broader recognition, and that it is the first book by a Beat woman about Beat women. Nancy Grace, for example, writes in her essay that "*Minor Characters* [is] the memoir that first brought national attention to the women of the Beat movement" (145), and Brenda Knight in her anthology points out that Johnson's memoir was "the first book to focus specifically upon Beat women." Being slightly suspicious about these two lines of praise, but not seeking to diminish the value of Johnson's memoir, I'd remind readers and scholars that Diane di Prima published her *Dinners and Nightmares* in 1961 and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* a few years later. These two books are mostly about di Prima, and she is considered by many to be the epitome of a female Beat artist. Consequently, her books are by a Beat woman about a Beat woman (and other Beats). Since they were written some twenty years before *Minor Characters*, di Prima's texts deserve to be put in the place of honor critics describe for Johnson's memoir. Still, since I will be writing more about di Prima in my next chapter, let me return to Joyce Johnson (nee Glassman) and her *Minor Characters*. Even though Johnson's book is not the first one to focus on Beat women, it was, at the time of

its publication, definitely the most skillfully written book of its kind. Because of its critical acclaim, it did bring the spotlight to the minor characters of the Beat era.

In her introduction to the two interviews with Joyce Johnson in *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, Grace describes the importance of Johnson's memoir with the following words:

"With the 1983 publication of Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*, a memoir of her experience as a young writer coming up in the nascent Beat scene in New York City, women associated with the movement became visible" (Johnson, "Night Café" 181).

This quotation summarizes some of the points about (Beat) women's memoirs that I've made in previous chapters. One states that life writing is an effective tool that helps women claim their position; in this case, it helps them claim their position in the Beat circle. The position of Johnson and other women she describes in her memoir, if looked at from the dominant, male point of view, was indeed that of minor characters. However, Johnson is trying to show that these women were also artists, and not only quiet muses as was predominantly assumed and expected from them by their male counterparts.

Johnson writes in the foreword to her memoir, "As for art—decorative young women had their place as muses and appreciators" (xxxii). We have seen this kind of attitude being either adopted or talked about by the two women artists I have so far discussed in my thesis. Carolyn Cassady, for example, feels quite content with the role of the observer, while Hettie Jones tries to break away from it and is successful in the end. In my last chapter, about Diane di Prima, we will see that she absolutely denies the limiting position of the muse and observer, and breaks from this mold successfully with her art as well.

Johnson's memoir deals with the issues of women artists in the Beat era, and by writing

their stories and hers, she successfully portrays them in a way that challenges their roles as minor characters

Another applicable life writing characteristic, as states Grace in one of the previous quotations, is the declaration of “individual female agency and action” (143) If we take into consideration what the critics have to say about *Minor Characters*, Johnson recognized and affirmed “individual female agency.” As I will later discuss in more detail, Johnson decides early what kind of life she wants to live, and tries to do anything possible to live up to her expectations. For example, she moves away from home, gets a job, and is, in every way, a self-supportive young woman. Additionally, in her memoir, she writes about her life as an artist and the artistic lives of other women, thus describing their agency and action. Also, of all the memoirs I choose to discuss in this thesis, Johnson’s received the most positive critical acknowledgment. In 1983, it won a National Book Critics Circle Award in the Biography/Autobiography category. This kind of critical recognition is what helped put women Beat writers back on “the scene ” And I say “back” because I believe that they were always there—their non-existence was only an apparent one, because they were not acknowledged by the society or by the male artists who mostly used them to advance their own art

Closer to the main subject of my thesis, Johnson contributed to the expansion of memoir as a genre. In her introduction to the 1999 edition of *Minor Characters*, Ann Douglas assigns Joyce Johnson and her book “a pioneering role” in the writing of memoir—“a major American form, the most popular literary genre of the late twentieth century” (xxix). If, as stressed many times before, one of the main characteristics of a memoir is that the author focuses more on the life-stories of others than her own, it is

almost ironic that Johnson, eleven years after her memoir was first published, explains how she decided to write the stories of the main and minor characters she knew. This is what she says at the end of her foreword, “As I said, I was jetlagged. My mind free-floated, making funny connections. I thought of the years I’d known Kerouac, the extraordinary men and women who had been part of my revolution—those who had survived and those who hadn’t. *But I could only tell their story by telling my own*” (xxxv, emphasis mine). With this quotation in mind, one could argue that Joyce Johnson somehow subverts one of the central definitions of memoir. Namely, she does want to tell a story about the important people who surrounded her in a specific time of her life. She is, however, aware that their lives were inseparably intertwined, and she, thus, has to tell their story through her own.

Attempting to prove that Johnson’s text is not merely a recollection of the memories of her life with Jack Kerouac, let us take a closer look at James Atlas’s review of *Minor Characters*. In the first chapter, when discussing Margo Cully’s thoughts on women’s autobiographies, I posed the question whether what she calls “the famous-man-I-have-known and/or married boasts” (5) would be labeled as autobiography or memoir by critics. Atlas seems to provide an answer. He starts his article by explaining that “The great can never count on how they’ll be remembered” because “[s]heer chance determines the nature of one’s memorial” (100). He then mentions how biographers may be either “the famous” or “unimaginative scholars, whose thick, unreadable biographies clutter the shelves” (100). However, there are also acquaintances who write about “their association with genius” (100). This kind of writing, Atlas claims, only serves “to publicize its author” (100) and could, I believe, be placed in Margo Cully’s category of

texts that deal only with boasting about famous men in women's lives. However, Atlas writes that exceptions can be found in this category, as well. Namely, some of these memoirs are written "by students, neighbors, servants, lovers, and hangers-on—the informal retinue of the great", and amongst them, every now and then, appears a memoir "so vivid that it acquires independent life" (100). He calls these texts "marginal memoirs." By naming Joyce Johnson's book a marginal memoir, he implies that her book was written solely with the intention of portraying the genius of Jack Kerouac. This is not a surprising assumption. In the introduction to Johnson's memoir, Ann Douglas writes of Johnson that, "until recently, if she was considered a Beat at all, it was only by association, as Kerouac's former girlfriend and present-day chronicler" (xiv). I strongly disagree with labeling Joyce Johnson only as Kerouac's follower, and will try to prove my point a bit later. It is ironic, however, that by diminishing Johnson's role in her memoir to the one in which she is merely Kerouac's chronicler, Atlas contradicts himself on the same page of his review. He first puts Johnson's book into his self-invented category of marginal memoirs, only later to say that *Minor Characters* is "[m]ore autobiography than memoir [because] it supplies a context for events reported elsewhere without elaboration" (100-101). These contradictory remarks are important for two reasons. First, they suggest that James Atlas is among those critics who distinguish memoirs from autobiographies based on some of the characteristics discussed in the previous chapters. Second, his remarks show how inconsistent and confusing life writing theory still is. Joyce Johnson's memoir does not help make theory more clear, on the contrary, her crafted work blurs the boundaries between memoir and autobiography (if we accept them as two separate categories) even further.

Indeed, Johnson does write about other people's stories in her memoir, and we have already established that *Minor Characters* is an ironic title. In her book, Johnson does write about women (Beat) artists such as herself, Hettie Jones, Elise Cowen, and others, who were considered to be minor characters in the lives of the great men of the Beat generation. It is not necessary to repeat how female artists were treated in the Beat clique; let us just say that being an artist was not the role they were supposed to play. Thus, many women hid their artistic abilities and were willing to sacrifice their talents in order to help promote the art of their men. Even Joyce Johnson, describing events after the publication of *On the Road*, admits that, "When he was absent, I'd use the time to work hard on my novel. Somehow I could never manage to write anything when Jack was with me" (243). She states that she "always wanted to be with him more than [she] wanted to be at the typewriter" (243). This is not to say that Johnson felt her writing was less important to her than Jack. However, he, as a man, spent a lot of time on the road so she had little opportunity to spend time with him and had to take advantage of it when she could. As she says herself, "I wondered if this would change if we spent more time living together" (243). She never finds out, but she does finish the book she was working on at the time. That book was her first novel, *Come and Join the Dance*, a semi-autobiographical text about a young woman who breaks the rules of proper behavior expected from her in the fifties. Johnson does not deny her love for Jack Kerouac, but at the same time she is the major character in her revolution as a fifties' woman not willing to conform to the roles assigned to her by a misogynistic society. Claiming this position is evident in her writing.

The closer analysis of the text and Johnson as an artist takes us back to the broader focus of my thesis. If it was established that a memoir is a work concerned more with someone else and not so much with the author, Joyce Johnson's text would not necessarily fall into this genre. She is aware of the possibility that Jack's story could have overshadowed her own, and she doesn't want this to happen. As she says in the interview with Grace,

...I remember one of the problems I was concerned about when I started writing the memoir was that I knew I had to tell the reader about Jack's life, so that it wouldn't interrupt the memoir. Then I hit upon the device of following myself and following him as two separate streams, that then converge ... then diverge in the end. That was the form of that memoir.

("Night Café" 230)

Thus, Johnson knows she needs to tell Jack's story, but she does not feel his story is the main one. She is, then, positioning Kerouac in the role of a minor character or, at least, one equal to herself. He is an important enough part of her life to deserve a space in her memoir, but, as she states, he should not interrupt it with his presence. In effect, she asserts for her memoir that it will focus significantly on the life of its author. She finds a form that helps her avoid this interruption. In the memoir, she describes many events that, unaware of one another, took place at the same time. "Simultaneities" (8), she calls them, and thus also gives a name to the device she chooses for portrayal of her and Jack's stories. None is more important than the other, even though Jack does enter the book only near the middle of it. Their stories lie parallel on the continuum of time. Because writing prevents Johnson from literally telling both of the stories at the same time, she

uses what Grace calls “ironic, point-counterpoint copula” with which she connects different events that are otherwise not connected at all (148). As Grace writes, “This technique underscores both the difficult, sometimes life-threatening, obstacles faced by women in the early fifties and the way in which women associated with Beat struggled to define themselves as human agents and artists” (148)

One of the examples Grace gives to support her assertion is Johnson’s juxtaposition of her “journey to have an abortion” with Jack’s solitary stay at Desolation Peak a month later that same year. Joyce and Jack have not met each other yet, but perhaps Joyce decides to contrast these two events to show “the gulf of inequality confronting women like [her]” (Grace 150). Even so, she refuses to submit to this position of inequality—even though it can be used to valorize women. Ann Douglas claims that the juxtaposition Grace discusses “is not altogether an ironic one” because “Johnson is not interested in exalting the uniqueness of feminine experience” (xviii). Johnson, notes Douglas, is aware of the differences between “the adventures of men and women” and she also knows that the cost of their adventures is different (xviii). She says of Johnson,

Horrifying as she finds Kerouac’s repudiation of his daughter Jan, she thinks of the unwanted “child scraped out off me,” and she asks, “Could I blame Jack more than I blamed myself? ... For me, too, freedom and life seemed equivalent.” Kerouac’s refusal to know his own child was, however monstrous, a masculine version of the abortion procedure she herself elected. (xviii)

By having an abortion, Johnson is definitely going against the norm of the 1950s when unmarried women are not supposed to have sex anyway. The way she describes this experience demonstrates her artistic skills as a writer. Joyce is terrified—and how could she not be. “‘Leave on the shoes!’ he barked as I climbed up on his table fully clothed. Was I expected to make a run for it if the police rang his doorbell in the middle of the operations?” (110). By using the word “bark” and wondering whether she will have to run before the police, Johnson manages to set the tone of fear and insecurity. The confusion and unpleasantness of experience reach its peak when she joins several sentences into one in the next quotation, “He yelled at me to do this and do that, and it sent him into a rage that my legs were shaking so how could he do what he had to do?” (110). She then breaks this rhythm by using short sentences with simple structure: “But if I didn’t want him to do it, that was all right with him. I said I wanted him to do it. I was crying” (110). Later, at the end of this section, she uses one simple sentence which could as well be a motto of all Beat women she knew, “I said I’d get there by myself” (111). Because Beat women choose doing things for themselves, they are seen as outcasts—“bad girls,” by the mainstream society. That Johnson dared to describe her abortion in times when the public opinion about this issue is still very conservative is daring in itself. It is also a very intimate thing which she decides to reveal in her text and thus fitting for the memoir genre. The abortion episode described above is definitely a uniquely female experience. By putting it parallel to Jack’s solitary stay at Desolation Peak, Johnson proves Douglas’s premise that she is aware of the differences between men’s and women’s journeys and their consequences.

Contrary to Carolyn Cassady, who seemed to accept the role of fifties' housewife and mother, Joyce Johnson refused to live an ordinary life from the beginning. In her memoir, she describes the urges to live what she calls "Real Life" (29). She describes it as, "not the life my parents lived but one that was dramatic, unpredictable, possibly dangerous. Therefore *real*, infinitely more worth having" (29-30). She starts her real life when she moves to her first apartment. Despite the fact that a "girl was expected to stay under her parents' roof until she married, even if she worked for a year or so as a secretary, got a little taste of the world that way, but not much" (xxxii), she decides to leave "on Independence Day, 1955, a date I'd chosen not for its symbolism but because it was the first day of a long weekend" (101). Since Johnson, by moving out of her parents' place, is headed toward the life of self-reliance, the date of her move, as well as her denial of its significance as a symbol, connects her directly to an earlier American experimenter in independence: Thoreau, who in *Walden* sets out for his life in the woods on the same July day and also claims that it was a mere coincidence (1067).

I will discuss more the idea of young women moving into what were known as "pads," the Bohemian places where everything was happening, when I write about Diane di Prima. It is important to note, though, that with the freedom these places provided for young women also comes the stigma of being a "bad girl." In Johnson's words, "Everyone knew in the 1950s why a girl from a nice family left home. The meaning of her theft of herself from her parents was clear to all—as well as what she'd be up to in that room of her own" (102). She talks about the superintendent of her first apartment, who spreads the rumor that "the Glassmans' daughter was 'bad'"; he even writes to her parents that she was pregnant (102). Johnson describes this incident in a section that

precedes the recounting of her abortion. Sex in the 1950s, especially premarital sex, was not something one should do, much less talk about. Johnson explains, “The crime of sex was like guilt by association—not visible to the eye of the outsider, but an act that could be rather easily conjectured. Consequences would make it manifest” (102). Her pregnancy would make her sin visible. Because she is living on her own, it is assumed that she is having sex when she shouldn’t. Home, then, instead of representing freedom, bears a negative connotation. As we have seen earlier, both Carolyn Cassady and Hettie Jones, though in different ways, stress the importance of home. For Johnson, however, home means something else. For her, it means freedom, freedom to start a real life, freedom to create art—a room of one’s own, in Virginia Woolf’s sense. It is interesting that Johnson invokes Woolf’s famous essay (102) because in it Woolf addresses women’s independence as the most important prerequisite for women’s writing. She also discusses the question whether women are capable of writing literature of such a great artistic value as Shakespeare, for example. Several decades later, at the time portrayed in Johnson’s memoir, women Beat writers still have to deal with some of the same issues. However, some of them do live in rooms of their own and live their lives as they choose. Joyce Johnson, like Diane di Prima, was, for example, living a Beat life even before she met Jack Kerouac or any other famous Beatniks.

Joyce Johnson was not just living a life in Beat style, she was also writing about it. Similarly to Hettie Jones’s search for the artistic voice in her memoir, when analyzing Johnson’s text we can also see where she as a writer is coming from. What distinguishes Johnson from Jones (and Cassady), though, is that she, along with Diane di Prima, was

one of the few women writers who were writing in Beat style “before any of the major Beat works were published” (Douglas xvi) In Johnson’s words,

As a writer, I would live life to the hilt as my unacceptable self, just as Jack and Allen had done I would make it my business to write about young women quite different than the ones portrayed weekly in the pages of *The New Yorker* I would write about furnished rooms and sex Sex had to be approached critically, I thought. I would not succumb to the ladylike stratagem of shimmering my way toward discreet fadeouts. I decided this even before meeting Jack or reading *Howl* The writing itself seemed to lead me into it. Sometimes I’d stop and feel scared and think “Can I really say this?”; then I’d think “Yes I can” and go on. (148)

As Douglas states, “A year before she met Kerouac, Johnson began her first novel, *Come and Join the Dance* (1962), itself, as the critic Ronna Johnson has demonstrated, a ‘Beat’ narrative” (xvi). Joyce was a writer, and openly so In her memoir, she skillfully includes different anecdotes connected to her writing that show her progress as a writer and also her difference from the other women (and men) around her. For example, she talks about her teacher, Miss Kirschenbaum, who “has particular scorn . . . for sentence fragments, which she says ‘can *only* be used for effect.... Effect is something we girls have no right to” (35) Joyce adds that maybe they will earn this right after years of writing regular sentences. In her comically ironic tone, present throughout the memoir, she adds (with a sentence fragment!), “Perhaps not even then” (35) This is the kind of environment (Beat) women came from. It is even of a greater significance that some of them (Johnson, di Prima, even Jones), dared to break the rules of writing instilled into

them from the very beginning. By rejecting the rules and creating their own (Beat) style, they are doing what Beat men were doing. Johnson offers the reader her own early attempts at Beat style in the fifth chapter, in which she includes “an exercise of description” she wrote for her sophomore writing class (62). She describes her friend Elise’s room, which had “cigarette butts on the floor” and was “[s]ordid, shabby, mirroring disgust and disinterest of the owner” (62). Joyce writes, “The teacher was a storybook professor with a hyphenated name followed by a Roman numeral who wore tweeds of a remarkable pinkish grey, set off by velvet silver-buttoned vests. He wrote in the margin: “‘Don’t you get any joy out of life? Think you are a little existentialist or something?’” (62-63). How could this old, boring man in tweeds understand the young, passionate writer Joyce Johnson was becoming? Some pages later, she describes a creative writing class at Barnard. All fifteen girls in the class raise their hands when a professor asks how many of them want to be writers. “Professor X,” as Johnson calls him, “knows his course is required of all creative-writing majors” (80), yet this is what he has to say to the girls in the room: “‘Well, I’m sorry to see this ... [v]ery sorry Because’—there’s a steel glint in his cold eye—‘first of all, if you were going to be writers, you wouldn’t be enrolled in this class. You couldn’t even be enrolled in school. You’d be hopping freight trains, riding through America’” (80-81). Does here, in Professor X’s quotation, lie an answer to why women’s life writing (especially from the Beat era) is so different from men’s? Perhaps. While men were allowed to “hop freight trains, riding through America,” their female counterparts were supposed to stay at home. It is not surprising then, that they write about different experiences. What is important, though, is that many of them, Joyce among them, choose to write at all. And some of

them, Joyce again included, choose to write about different women—the ones who wanted to break the rules, break the mold, and go on the road themselves.

Even though Johnson was aware that by leaving home and leading her life in a fashion she chose for herself, she “had done something brave, practically historic” (xxxiii), and even though, as she states, by ending up “accidentally with Kerouac [she found herself] in the center of the action,” she always felt herself “on the periphery” and “much more of an observer than [she] wanted to be” (xxxiv). However, contrary to Cassady, who was satisfied with a few pats on a back, Johnson accepts her role, but also takes advantage of it. As Ann Douglas notes, “While Johnson laments the silence imposed on the Beat women, never for a moment does she suggest that any other cultural site could have offered her as much stimulation, or that silence precluded a different kind of participation” (xv). Johnson admits she has learned much about life, more than in her “ten years of education,” by simply hanging out “around the edges of the crowded tables, listening, looking, not really participating” (39). At those tables, “[i]deas flashed by like silver freight trains that wouldn’t stop at your station to unload but had to push on to a vanishing point in the distance” (39). It is important to note that, in describing her position in the Beat circle, Johnson uses the metaphor of freight trains. Is this, perhaps, her answer to Professor X? It could be argued that by using this particular metaphor she is trying to say that hanging around men’s tables was women’s way of “hopping the freight trains.” She perfectly describes the position of almost every Beat woman when she states that she “acquire[d] the habit of hanging around and back at the same time” (41). This quotation brings us back to the beginning of this thesis, when I was discussing the position of Beat women as that of a double existence. They are present (as muses and

observers) and absent at the same time. If I said earlier that this form of double existence explains why some of the women choose to write memoirs instead of autobiographies (again, if we look at them as two separate genres), Johnson's memoir stands out because, even though she accepts her role of observer, in her book she is also now the one whose life is observed—she refuses to be a minor character.

Perhaps Johnson's strength comes from the fact that she herself is a writer even before she meets Jack Kerouac. Unlike Hettie Jones, who keeps her writing a secret throughout her marriage with LeRoi Jones because she feels her poems aren't good enough, Johnson very early sees writing as her profession. She does have to work in various other jobs to support herself, but she still takes her writing seriously. Also, at least so it seems, does Jack Kerouac. Joyce says in the interview with Grace that Kerouac took the fact that she was writing very seriously, "And I think to him the fact that I was also a writer was an important, special part of our relationship. And somehow, even when our interpersonal stuff wasn't going so well, we could always have a dialogue about writing.... He kept trying, exhorting me to take more chances.... ("Night Café" 197). One of the examples where Kerouac encourages Johnson is when she writes a poem for Elise in what she calls "my own adaptation of Beat style" (200). Johnson writes about Jack's reaction, "Very shyly I sent [the poem] off to Jack, who was more enthusiastic about it than about anything I'd shown him, and even urged me to send it to a new jazz magazine in New Orleans. But somehow I felt embarrassed and never did" (201). She also did not follow Jack's advice that she should never revise her writing. On the night when Johnson and Kerouac met on a blind date arranged by Allen Ginsberg, Jack explained his writing philosophy to Joyce. He tells her, "[y]ou should never revise,

never change anything, not even a word” (129). Also, he was willing to look at her work, but, as Joyce writes, “When we got to the door, he didn’t ask to see my manuscript. He pulled me against him and kissed me before I even turned on the light” (130). After he leaves Mexico just when Johnson decides to visit him there, he writes her a letter saying that San Francisco is much better and that she can write “a big book” there (178). After all, as Joyce explains, he “even thought Mexico might very well have removed me so much from the concerns of my present novel as to have demoralized me altogether” (179). Is, then, Jack’s concern and respect for her writing genuine? Kerouac feels that in order for Johnson to be a good writer, she should experience life on the road—“Well, then finish your book, travel with Elise” (154)—(not much different from what Professor X told her), but he never takes her on the road with him. Johnson wonders, “Could he ever include a woman in his journeys? I didn’t altogether see why not” (136). She explains her naiveté in the foreword to *Minor Characters*, “Naturally we fell in love with men who were rebels. We fell very quickly, believing that they would take us along on their journeys and adventures. . . . [W]e did not count on loneliness” (xxxiii). But, many of them were lonely, waiting at home, while their husbands and lovers were living their adventures on the road. Ann Douglas quotes Johnson in her introduction to her memoir, there, Johnson explains that many Beat women “never got a chance to literally go on the road. Our road instead became the strange lives we were leading. We had actually *chosen* those lives” (xiii). Johnson stands out from other Beat women because not only she has chosen to live her own life, she has also decided to write about it. With her writing and with the way she lives her life, she claims presence in the moment of time, even though her presence was off the road.

Johnson was not alone in her off-the-road experiences. There were other women such as Hettie Jones, whom she befriended on a cold winter afternoon when Hettie was passing out flyers for LeRoi's poetry reading. Both Jones and Johnson write about this meeting. Johnson writes, "I'm walking east in a winter twilight some twenty-five years ago, about to pass Cooper Union, where I'll run into a young woman I'll someday think of as my oldest friend" (212). Hettie Jones is one of the minor characters Johnson puts into the spotlight with her memoir. She is a writer as well, but as we found out in the previous chapter, she puts her husband's artistic career before her own (as many Beat women did). In Johnson's words, "Her husband is one of the poets and she's a woman in love. For him she would stand on the innumerable freezing corners. She writes poetry herself, but has never stood up with it at a reading of her own—makes no particular mention of it, in fact—telling herself it isn't good enough ('Some of it *was* good enough,' she'll admit fiercely, years later)" (212-213). Johnson also writes about other women who were missing from the snapshots that record the history of the Beat era, such as Edie Parker, Joan Vollmer, Elise Cowen. She does not, however, mention Diane di Prima, which I found particularly interesting since even the critics usually pair them together as two "women who were working in the 'Beat' directions" (Douglas xvi). However, she does mention di Prima in *Door Wide Open*, the collection of letters she and Jack Kerouac wrote to each other. This is what she says about her,

During one of my downtown excursions, I was surprised to run into an acquaintance from Hunter High School—Diane di Prima, who had edited Hunter's literary magazine and was now living in a tenement on Houston Street with her baby daughter and writing fiercely funny poems as

sexually frank as the ones written by men. None of the other women I met seemed to be writing, or at least they didn't talk about it. At the coffee-shops poetry readings I began going to, all the avant-garde readers, with the exception of Diane, were men. (*Door* 68)

There are many possible reasons why Johnson does not mention di Prima in her text. Perhaps she does not feel that di Prima belongs into the category of minor characters. Or, perhaps, their ways part because the two of them are so different. It may be that Johnson envies di Prima's abilities to write openly "as men do" and become the writer Johnson only strives to be. di Prima did, after all, manage to find her way into the male circle as a participator, not only an observer. But more about di Prima in the next chapter.

Johnson's memoir is like a photo-album. She takes us through its pages, describing events connected to the photographs. Some of them are real, some are just "snapshots" in her memory. She starts her narrative with the description of a photograph of "four young men on the Columbia campus on a day in 1945" (1): Hal Chase, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs. Johnson claims that there are "people missing from this group portrait" (2). Among them are the women who were often ignored, but had a huge impact on the lives and art of their Beat male counterparts. There is Edie Parker, Kerouac's first wife; and Joan Vollmer, William Burroughs's wife. Johnson also devotes a large part of her book to Elise Cowen, Ginsberg's short-time lover who killed herself and whose poems were published only posthumously. Then there is Hettie Jones. And, of course, Joyce Johnson herself. Todd Giltin writes in his review for *The Nation*,

The beauty of Johnson's book is that all the characters are for real. No one is either sentimentalized or brutalized by caricature. The female Rosencrantzes and Guildensterns—Elise Cowan [sic], Hettie Cohen, Edie Parker—long mythologized (often self-mythologized too) as attendants and spoilsports in their famous boyfriends' courts, come into their own as women who stayed in the shadows of their men's freedom partly because they wanted their own but had no language for the desire. Fitfully coming to self-consciousness, they prefigured feminism. (635)

With her memoir, Joyce Johnson turns the female artists into the main characters. Aware of the fact that, to borrow T. S. Eliot's metaphor, they are no Prince Hamlets, she still thinks they play an important role in the Beat era. As Ronna Johnson suggests many Beat female memoirists do, Joyce Johnson tells the women's side of the story. By refusing to stay silent, she is claiming her positions, and the positions of other women she writes about, in the "male-only" Beat realm. By writing her memoir, she ends the forced silence, as she says she wishes to do at the end of her text. Again, she uses a photograph. This time there are no men, but she sees in it "Joyce Glassman, twenty-two, with her hair hanging down below her shoulders, all in black like Masha in *The Seagull*—black stockings, black skirt, black sweater—but, unlike Masha, she is not mourning for her life" (262). The grown-up Joyce Johnson has no regrets. She is aware that she had "her seat at the table in the exact center of the universe, that midnight place where so much is converging, the only place in America that's alive" (262). She also knows that her place at the table was only the one of an observer, that

[a]s a female, she is not quite part of this convergence. A fact she ignores,

sitting by in her excitement as the voices of the men, always the men,
 passionately rise and fall and their beer glasses collect and the smoke of
 their cigarettes rises toward the ceiling and the dead culture is surely being
 wakened. Merely being here, she tells herself, is enough. (262)

Looking at the photo of the woman she once was, she is content. There is one thing she wishes to change about the woman in the picture, though: "It's only her silence that I wish finally to give up—and Elise's silence / Under the dismal onion / Blind dreams in a green room / posthumously attesting to the lessons of Pound in stolen books, and the poems Hettie kept mute in boxes for too many years..." (262). With her memoir, she does break the silence—not only her silence, but the silence of many women like herself. If Carolyn Cassady's book was an example of a bad (Beat) memoir, Johnson's can be, without much reservation, considered to be one of the best. Skillfully and artistically she weaves the web of her story and intermingles it with the stories of others like her. When Ronna Johnson says that Beat "memoir women writers have been able to crystallize and transform extra-literary prohibitions against women to invent an alternative, woman-centered discourse of Beat generation dissent" (33), Joyce Johnson was probably the first on her mind. With her women-centered discourse, Johnson creates a text which she openly places as a commentary upon women and sexism in a certain time, rather than a mere remembrance of great male lives. With this, she clearly distinguishes herself from Carolyn Cassady, and, as I established in the previous chapter, sets an example for Hettie Jones.

CHAPTER 5

“FUCK YOU, I’M DOING MY THING, AND WHAT THAT IS YOU CAN’T EVEN GUESS”: DIANE DI PRIMA’S *MEMOIRS OF A BEATNIK*

I cannot begin my discussion of Diane di Prima and her *Memoirs of a Beatnik* without first expressing my surprise at how little scholarship one can find about her work. I can perhaps understand scholars and critics not paying much attention to some of the female Beat writers I’ve examined, because they simply haven’t written that much; however, this same explanation does not serve for di Prima’s considerable literary career. As Roseanne Giannini Quinn writes in her “‘The Willingness to Speak’. Diane di Prima and Italian American Feminist Body Politics,” di Prima “has produced as impressive a body of works as any of her male counterparts, including Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac” (175). In the same article, Giannini Quinn asks an important question, “How is it possible that this writer of more than 30 books, contributor to more than 300 literary magazines and newspapers, and 70 anthologies, whose works have been translated into at least 13 languages (Knight 345), does not have a book of literary and/or socio-political criticism devoted to her contribution to American letters?” (175-6) Since I first learned about Diane di Prima’s work, I have been asking myself this same question. Giannini Quinn offers a possible answer by saying that, “it is commonplace in academics for women writers to receive less attention than men even if they are equally involved in the same or similar literary movements and milieus” (176). That brings us to what I

discussed in chapters one and two regarding the position of a female Beat (artist) in the Beat circle. Diane di Prima broke the mold that was created for her (and other young women in the fifties). Unlike other women I have discussed in my thesis (with the exception of Joyce Johnson), di Prima was a writer from the beginning. It is also important to note that, of female Beat artists, Diane di Prima was the one who managed to force herself into the closed circle of male writers. In the previous chapters I quoted Hettie Jones and Joyce Johnson saying of di Prima that, to paraphrase their words, she was the only one who wrote freely and openly, *like men*, and that in public readings by the poets, di Prima was the only woman amongst the men. She, then, managed to break into the literary circle, but, as far as critical acclaim, her work was still being ignored “by the literary critics entranced by the male Beats” (Giannini Quinn 176). Discovering why there is such ignorance on the part of scholars may call for a more thorough discussion that extends beyond the boundaries of my thesis. The most concise answer I can provide is that it must be her gender standing in a way of a critical exploration of her work.

Diane di Prima is, first and foremost in both her life and work, her own woman. Although she is mainly known as a poet—Brenda Knight notes in her anthology that di Prima wrote “over thirty books and thousands of poems in addition to her epic, ‘Loba’” (128), she has also written prose, including two important memoirs. In addition to *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, she published *Recollections of My Life as a Woman The New York Years* in 2001. Since I believe that a part of the reason for her to write this recent memoir was to “set the record straight,” I will be using some of the examples from this text when discussing *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. There is one other work from di Prima, *Dinners and Nightmares*, which, even though it has not been written overtly as a memoir,

has some characteristics of life writing. However, to stay within reasonable limits for this thesis, I choose to direct my main focus to *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. This text is most different from the memoirs of Cassady, Jones, and Johnson; and by analyzing it as memoir, I will try to prove some of the assertions I have made about Diane di Prima throughout this thesis—mainly, how she was not only living but also writing in a Beat style even before she met any other important Beat figures; and how, by refusing to accept the roles assigned to her by the society and male Beats themselves, she manages to create the art she wants to create. Diane di Prima is a woman who refuses to accept the limitations prescribed by gender roles and lives her own life. Fellow poet Robert Creeley perfectly sums up her self-sufficiency and infinite search for the new in a foreword to *Dinners and Nightmares*. “Growing up in the fifties, you had to figure it out for yourself—and she [di Prima] did, and stayed open—as a woman, uninterested in any possibility of static investment or solution” (7). That Creeley also mentions di Prima’s gender when he talks about her independence is important because, as will be seen throughout this chapter, many things that Diane di Prima did were even more exceptional because of her gender.

I don’t think I would be going too far to state that Diane di Prima’s writing, especially the writing in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, is revolutionary. That a woman in 1969 published a book in which she openly talks about the bohemian life she led in her “pads,” and graphically describes sexual acts (with men and women) in which she participated willingly and often, definitely puts Diane di Prima in a writer’s arena far removed from other women writers of that era. In Giannini Quinn’s words, “That she was a young, Italian American woman, in 1969, having sex at all and outside of marriage, and writing

about it is what remains so remarkable even today” (178). It is true that Giannini Quinn’s article focuses on Diane di Prima as an Italian American female writer, but nonetheless, even if we look at her without regard for her ethnic origin, only as a woman, the same conclusion can be made about di Prima’s text. Closer to the focus of my thesis, Giannini Quinn asserts that aside from breaking other conventions, “di Prima’s greatest transgression may be that she dares to write about herself in the first place” (178). It is the way she writes about herself and the time in which she writes that set her apart from Cassady, Jones, and Johnson. It is true that Johnson was working on her first novel at approximately the same time di Prima composed *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, but Johnson did need several decades to pass before she actually wrote her memoir. Indeed, one can note that *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* was published in 2001, almost twenty years later than Johnson’s memoir, but, as I have mentioned before, di Prima wrote at least two other books that could be considered memoirs before this most recent one—*Memoirs of a Beatnik*, which I will discuss at more length in this chapter; and *Dinners and Nightmares*, which is technically a collection of short prose and poems, but the subject matter could arguably place it into the autobiographical category—and thus she deserves to be honored as the first Beat woman to write with such openness and fearlessness about her life. That is why I believe *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, even though often simply seen by readers as merely a book she wrote for hire, is one of the most important texts to come out of the Beat era, although the lack of scholarship about this book could make one think otherwise.

One of the few critics who does discuss *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is Nancy M. Grace. When she talks about this text, she states that it does not “make a coherent history of

[Diane di Prima] as author or the Beat literary movement” (160). Though this is a valid criticism, it is important to note that di Prima most likely had a reason for the lack of coherence. Considering the fact that she was a Beat writer, the reason behind her aesthetics, as even Grace admits later in her article, was to consciously test and mock the limits of the very genre she writes in, she is, for example purposefully misleading a reader and making it harder for him to decide what, if anything, is the truth in her writing. While I do agree that di Prima’s text does not offer a *coherent* history of her life as a writer or the Beat literary movement, there still are passages in the text that talk particularly about di Prima’s writing and, even more so, about the historical events in the time di Prima is portraying. Considering the definition of the memoir from the very beginning of my thesis, which states that memoir distinguishes itself from autobiography because it “subordinates the author’s personal life to the public events in which he or she has participated” (“Memoir” 191), I would dare to argue that di Prima’s text follows this definition. Her personal “experience,” indeed, takes up a large amount of the text, but the reader still finds out about the time in which di Prima and her friends and lovers were living. For example, in the “Some Ways to Make a Living” chapter, di Prima describes an episode in which she earned some money by acting as a man’s mistress. His wife and he staged the whole scene so that the husband could get caught with di Prima by the wife and some friends. He tells Diane, “I can’t tell you how much my wife and I appreciate this, Miss di—uh—Diane. The divorce laws in this state are so stringent” (84). In the end of the chapter di Prima writes, “Everyone piled out of the room again, and I got up and started to get dressed, tucking the crisp hundred-dollar bill deep in my pocket, and wondering at the ways of the Law” (85). While this scene is not necessarily a public

event *per se*, it definitely is a social commentary about the strict divorce laws of that time—about government control over the personal lives of its citizens—and, thus, I believe, also satisfies Quin’s criteria (“Memoir” 191-92). The same could be said about di Prima’s comment on contraception policies, of which she states that she “got a diaphragm at the Sanger Clinic, with much trepidation and lying about being married” (104). Neither of these two comments is directly stating her views on the subjects, but the way she writes them allows a close reader to discern the social commentary underlying the words. Near the end of her text, in a very few words, di Prima more explicitly sums up the political situation in the “outside world” and how she and her friends respond to it. She writes,

We lived through the horror of the 1956 election as we had lived through the horror of the Rosenberg executions and the Hungarian revolution: paranoid, glued to the radio, and talking endlessly of where we could possibly go into exile... The affluent post-Korean-war society was settling down to a grimmer, more long-term ugliness. At that moment there really seemed to be no way out. (175)

Even if occasions such as this one—when we get direct political commentary—are rare, they cannot be overlooked, especially in comparison to Cassady’s text, where there were none at all. Thus, even though we might not get a “coherent” account of the history in di Prima’s book (and, as I suggested, her intention was not to give us one), we do get enough information about the time and place, the public events, so we can say that *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is, indeed, a memoir.

While di Prima's memoir gives us an idea of place and time she was living in, it also describes the place and time in relation to the Beat culture on the rise. Her text is set in the pre-Beat times, and she herself was a Beat writer even before the term "Beat" was coined. In her article, Grace claims that di Prima's text slips "from history into fiction, from novel into memoir—in effect, performing the Beat rather than reporting on Beat—and in this respect stands as aesthetically more closely aligned with Beat poetics than do Johnson's and Jones's memoirs, foregrounding an aesthetic that claims a literary tradition while simultaneously subverting it" (160). My response to the first part of Grace's quotation is, again, not to agree completely. Namely, di Prima may not be reporting the Beat, but how could she? She is writing about "pre-Beat" times, and she points out several times in her text that "[n]o one in those days had heard of beatniks or hippies" (137). I would also argue that di Prima does successfully report the pre-Beat West Village scene in New York, and, to complicate things even further, this pre-Beat scene might have actually been Beat, but the term "Beat" has not been invented yet. di Prima talks about "Rienzi's, a new coffee shop [that had opened] specifically for the 'young Bohemian crowd' ... [which] sat there in the long afternoons, reading and making each other's acquaintance, nursing twenty-five cent cups of espresso for hours, and drawing pictures on the paper napkins" (90). A bit later, she again mentions "'new Bohemians'" and adds that "the word 'beatnik' had not yet been coined" (118). She describes these "boys and girls of the new Village" as "men who wore sandals, or went barefoot, and sometimes wore jewelry, girls who favored heavy eye make-up and lived with a variety of men, outright faggots, and—worst crime of all to the Italian slum mind—racially mixed couples" (119). Again, she is bringing up the broader social issues as well as the

more particular issues of the Beats. With all these examples in mind, I cannot agree with Grace that di Prima is not reporting on Beat. Granted, her “report” might not be as straightforward, or coherent, if you will, as in some of the others’ memoirs I discussed earlier, but that again is most likely di Prima’s artistic choice. In any way, she does write about a certain place in a certain time—a central aspect of memoir writing. As Zavatsky says of di Prima, she gives us a “rare opportunity to view the Beat generation ... through a woman’s eyes” (232).

However, I do agree with Grace that di Prima’s poetics is Beat. When Grace asserts that di Prima claims a life writing tradition and then subverts it, she enumerates some male Beat writers’ life writing examples with which she feels di Prima has a lot in common: “Kerouac’s construction of his ambiguous fictive/autobiographical Duluoz Legend; Ginsberg’s fusion of poetics and serial life writing in poems such as ‘Howl,’ ‘Kaddish,’” and others; and Ginsberg’s and Burroughs’s literary play of fiction and personal correspondence in *The Yage Letters*” (160). In all these cases, it is possible to see the blurring of the fictitious and the real. It is exactly Grace’s point that di Prima is telling two stories—one is Beat (the real) and one is the story of the Beatnik (fantasy). I will address the issues of truthfulness in writing a bit later. It needs to be said, however, that if one assumes (however dangerous this assumption may be) that life writing, or any kind of writing for that matter, is or has to be truthful, then di Prima again separates herself from Cassady, Johnson, and Jones. Based on the assumption of an absolute truth in life writing, one could say that the other three writers are more “true” in their accounts; however, that would be the wrong thing to conclude. In addition to her argument that Diane di Prima is telling two stories—one truthful and one fictional, Grace also argues

that di Prima “uses tropes of Beat to tell a story, but unlike Johnson and Jones, she remains fundamentally uninterested in accounting for any particular historical period or social movement and is thus free to be more fictive, inventive, and playful—to depart from the fidelity that is requisite for the author/reader contract implicit in life writing” (161). Again, Grace may be partially right. While I do agree that the fictitious sections of di Prima’s text allow her to be more experimental, I would argue that claiming di Prima reveals a complete lack of interest for what was going on in the world around her is taking the argument too far. I agree with Grace that the true snippets in di Prima’s text are almost marginal notes to her fabricated erotica, but they are there. Also, there is no doubt that both elements of the story are “told from a female perspective and verge on overt didacticism, establishing a narrative whole that breaks formalist constraints to confound reader expectations of personal history” (161). A perfect example of her female and Beat viewpoint can be found at the end of her text when she is describing an orgy with Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and others. Her female limitations show when she writes that the orgy was “warm and friendly and very unsexy—like being in a bathtub with four other people. To make matters worse, I had my period, and was acutely aware of the little white string of a tampon sticking out of my cunt” (182). Her period, then, is preventing her from participating fully in an orgy she is describing. However, the Beat side soon wins over when “Allen embarked on a long speech on the joys of making it while menstruating: the extra lubrication, the extra excitement due to a change of hormones, animals in the heat bleed slightly, etc.” (182). Her Beat idea of the freedom to do what she wants and enjoys wins out over her female limitations when “Finally, to the cheer of the whole gang, I pulled out the bloody talisman and flung it across the room”

(182). This is why I believe this book is so important, especially considering the time in which it was written and when compared to other Beat women's recollections of their lives. That di Prima—a woman—wrote a book such as *Memoirs of a Beatnik* tells us about how truly unique and exceptional she was. True, adding to her personal experience the elements of fiction might actually provide argument against her text being a memoir, but there are other elements that show otherwise. And she had a reason for the fictional additions.

The question of truthfulness in life writing has not been much addressed in my thesis, mainly because the subject itself would lead one to believe that autobiographical writing of any kind is necessarily truthful or, in Grace's words, that there is "the author/reader contract implicit in life writing" (161). I cannot avoid addressing the issue of the truth in di Prima's text, however. The question that needs to be asked first is if any kind of writing can be accepted as true. In "Historiographic Metafiction: 'The Pasttime of Past Time'" chapter of her book *Poetics of Postmodernism History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon addresses the issue of "historiographic metafiction," by which she suggests "a distinction between 'events' and 'facts'" (122). "It is this very difference," Hutcheon writes, "between the events (which have no meaning in themselves) and facts (which are given meaning) that postmodernism obsessively foregrounds" (122). Hutcheon, offering examples from postmodernist writing, argues that in writing both history and fiction, "there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths" (109). Hutcheon also states that claiming the Truth in narrative goes back to at least the beginning of the 18th century, when it was "safer, in legal and ethical terms," to claim that the work "is not *made*, but that it simply

exists' (Josipovici 1971, 148)" (107). Thus, if we take into the account that the postmodern perspective reminds us that the fact is not of paramount importance, but what you call this fact or how you describe it gives the fact its meaning, and that anybody's description of this fact is truthful, then we can also argue that Diane di Prima's memoir is "true." By playing with this very idea of what is true and not in her text, di Prima is, I believe (as do Kerouac and other writers from Beat era) testing the sorts of boundaries of life writing as a genre. The notion of writing "truthfully" while at the same time hiding behind a mask is a central concern of Beat writing. One could argue that her mask was the role she needed to play in order to meet the demands of her publisher. But let us apply Hutcheon's assertions to specific examples from *Memoirs of a Beatnik*.

As Grace writes, the title "clearly suggests reflective life writing" (161), but the book was commissioned by Olympia Press, a publishing house famous for its books of erotica (but also the one to publish Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*). di Prima, if she wanted the book to be published, had to listen to the demands of the editor. And this is where the fictitious parts came in. In 1987, eighteen years after the book was published, she wrote an afterword for a new edition—"Writing Memoirs." In it, she recollects on the time she was writing the text. She states that while she wrote, "tiny perfect memories of long-forgotten rooms, and scenes, and folks would take me over.... I'm really glad I wrote the book.... [R]eading it now, there's much that I don't remember, that I read like someone else's story" (193). I believe we could say that a memoir is a genre of remembering, recollecting events from the past and writing them down. If di Prima herself admits that after that many years, some of the events don't feel real to her, what does it say about the possibility of truthfulness in her memoir? Is she talking about the events that the reader

could assume to be “real”? Interestingly, in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, she decides to include an author’s note at the beginning of the book. It reads, “Close as I can, this is how I remember it. I could be wrong about some things. Most everybody is.”

This sort of apology, though, could only be used for the events which di Prima believes were true. In the afterword to *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, she admits that the sex scenes were not—amusingly enough, these were the parts that the publisher asked for; the sex scenes were the ones earning her money. She discloses,

Gobs of words would go off to New York whenever the rent was due, come back with “MORE SEX” scrawled across the top page in Maurice’s inimitable hand, and I would dream up odd angles of bodies or weird combinations of humans and cram them in and send it off again.

Sometimes I’d wander the house looking for folks to check things out with: “Lie down,” I’d say, “I want to see if this is possible.” And they would, clothed, and we would find out, in a friendly disinterested way, if a particular contortion was viable, and stand up again, completely not turned on, and go about our business. (193)

Two things, I believe, could be concluded from this confession. First, the book she really wanted to write was the one about her (pre)Beat years in New York, but she had to comply with the editor’s demands if she wanted the book to be published and thus earn her money to pay the rent. Second, by admitting that the sex scenes in the book were actually a construction her friends helped her create in a completely non-sexual way, di Prima renders the text ironic, and at least slightly amusing. Is di Prima still in charge of

her writing if she has to write by demand? I believe so, and I also believe that she is even making a statement in her book that proves her control.

Even the title, which converts the usually singular “memoir” into plural “memoirs,” is suggestive that there is more than one story going on in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. We have already established that some of the stories are “true” and now we also have the author’s testimony that some of them are not. The title, then, I believe, might be an example of di Prima’s making a statement about her text as I suggested in the previous paragraph. Again, she is more than aware she is selling herself to the publishers, but this very awareness and the fact that she *can* give them what they ask is what empowers her. I believe it’s ironic that episodes such as the group sex scene between di Prima and her female friends (*Memoirs* 60-3), for example, which is described with so much detail, were actually crafted with the help of di Prima and her fully-clothed and empathic friends. di Prima plays with this artificial creation in her text, and doesn’t forget to remind the readers that what she is doing is creating the sex scenes which they demand. Towards the end of her text, for example, she inserts two sections in which she directly confronts the reader with the realities of her book. The first section, “A NIGHT BY THE FIRE: WHAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO HEAR,” starts with,

Maybe I would feel a hand in my cunt, and turn towards its owner, and in doing so I would brush against whomever was sleeping on the other side of me, and feel a hard-on against my hip in passing, and wriggle closer, opening my thighs and closing them around a prick, Leslie’s I figure, and put my hand down between my legs to touch its tip with my fingers. (148)

What follows is an account of an orgy among the people sharing a pad to keep them warm on a cold night. Immediately after this, di Prima opens the second version of this same evening, “A NIGHT BY THE FIRE. WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED,” with, “Or maybe not” (150). What really happened on that night was something else. As Grace states, “[T]he reality for the Beats on that autumn night in an inner-city pad is indifference, boredom, cold noses, a cheap phonograph playing a Stan Getz record, and di Prima wearing a sweat suit to keep warm” (167). It is first by creating a fictional account and then admitting it is fictional that di Prima subverts the most important expectation of a life writing text—that the accounts the writer puts on the pages of her text really happened to her. When in chapter seven, “Some Ways to Make a Living,” she describes her work as a model for “Duncan Sinclair, photographer and part-time pornographer” (*Memoirs* 74), it comes pretty close to the way she describes how she and her friends create the sex scenes for the book. She depicts her work with these words, “There had followed the series of these ultra-polite sessions. Most of the porn was faked, and what little was not was performed with a combination of courtesy and know-how that left me curious as to what the follow-up would be like” (79). Thus, there were no feelings involved in the work she was doing for Duncan, just as she and her friends some years later—Duncan, di Prima and other models—would create fantasies for someone else to relish in. These mixings of fantasy and reality present throughout the book do somewhat complicate our discussion of the memoir genre, especially when considering what Hutcheon suggests in “Historiographic Metafiction.” Namely, if there are as many truths as there are writers of the truth, how can we completely trust di Prima that the accounts she tells us are real really are? Aware of the conventions of “truths” and Truth

and of the limitations of life writing, she is “misleading” the reader while expecting that the reader will assume truthfulness from her if she states “this is what really happened.” However, if there are no false accounts, as Hutcheon asserts, “what you would like to hear” becomes as valid as “what actually happened.” di Prima, then, I believe, foreshadows the postmodern cynicism about judging what is true in the text and the complexity of this issue.

Even in her latest memoir, for example, already in the title she states that she will tell her “truth” as a woman. She tells her readers near the beginning of the text, “I write this book to try to understand what message I got about being a woman. What that is. How to do it. Or get through it. Or bear it. Or sparkle like ice underfoot” (*Recollections* 26-7). Even so, by focusing on telling her truth *as a woman*, she is limiting her truth to one aspect and we could again doubt the “universality” of her truthfulness. Similar concerns can be raised about *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. She uses in her title the term “beatnik,” which the mainstream society of the time used to insult people like her. Being a beatnik meant that you were good-for-nothing: wore black, did drugs, drank, and had promiscuous sex—you also described all these “bad” things in your “art.” The contemporary reader of the time when the text was first published would then read di Prima’s book, considering that it had both “memoirs” and “beatnik” in its title, and di Prima sitting on the edge of a bed on the cover, as a truthful account of a female “beatnik.” Most likely, this was what di Prima was aware of, which adds to her consciousness as a writer writing a “fictional memoir.” On the other hand, the readers and scholars who take Beat literature seriously (I include myself into this category) can interpret the use of the term “beatnik” as a sign of her writing creatively about history.

Naming herself “a beatnik”—the term others use to insult her—empowers di Prima because it takes the power away from those who wish to insult her. She then claims the term and the “truth” that comes with it. She is writing as a Beat about a Beatnik, but we cannot tell which story is “real.” Hutcheon would say that both of them are, and I would add that none of them is.

The above discussion about truthfulness and fiction in di Prima’s text shows how blurry the lines of definition regarding memoir, or even life writing in general, are. If we return to the characteristics of memoir to which I keep referring throughout my thesis—that a memoir is considered to be a work more about others than the author and that it deals only with a portion of an author’s life—again some troubles appear when we consider *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. I would, however, argue that di Prima’s text follows even this definition. Namely, she does write about a certain time in the 1950s, the nascence of the Beat scene. We also do find out quite a bit about her history, even though not as much as we do of the authors, for example, in Joyce’s and Johnson’s memoirs, but that is because *Beatnik* is a different kind of book. Indeed, today *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is sold as a novel. Penguin Publishing House categorizes it as fiction, which seems problematic especially if we consider again the postmodern idea of truth in writing. Should we read a work as a fiction only because the label tells us to? This again proves how complicated the theory of life writing is. A book cannot be accepted as “truthful” because it admittedly contains “fictional” accounts. However, the cover of the book still has the photograph of its author on it. I do believe that di Prima’s intention was to write her life and the life of others; knowing the reasons behind her fictitious additions, we cannot ignore the fact that the text is in its essence autobiographical. Also,

di Prima's body of work mainly draws from her personal experience. In the beginning of *Dinners and Nightmares*, there is a dedication, "To my three pads & the people who shared them with me," and in it there are many pieces of short prose and poems that could be tracked to the source—events that actually happened in di Prima's life. Even the publication of *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, and di Prima's last sentence in the afterword to this text ("Life in the West has been very good to me. Maybe I'll write about some of it sometime" (424).), could support my argument that di Prima wants to tell her story. And she does, even in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. She just tells it her way. If we can, at least for the sake of this argument, acknowledge her text to be a memoir, then we can also show how different her memoir is from the others I have discussed so far in this thesis.

The first thing one notices when comparing di Prima's book to the other memoirs in my thesis is that she is her own woman. Men dominate the covers of both Johnson's and Cassady's texts, but di Prima's covers are all about her. True, *How I Became Hettie Jones* has Jones's photographs on the cover, but they are small and appear in the corners. All three autobiographical books by di Prima I have mentioned so far offer Diane di Prima on the covers; she is bravely positioned at the very center of the page. On the covers of *Dinners and Nightmares* and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, she is presented in relation to poetry readings—she is a reader, an active participant on the scene, in contrast to other women of the Beat era, whose role was to be observers and stay in the audience. On the cover of *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, di Prima is sitting at the end of the not-made bed, perhaps to suggest the sexual overtone of the text. I don't mean to spend too much time in discussing the way di Prima's books look from the outside, but

the covers are an important part of the book, as they help to sell it. If Cassady and Johnson, for example, needed Kerouac and other important male Beat characters on the covers of their books, di Prima (and her publishers, we assume) is clearly confident enough and believes that she deserves the spot by herself. She did, after all, live her own life her way, and the photographs serve as symbols of this independent life.

Diane di Prima also separates her text from other memoirs discussed in this thesis by challenging the position of otherness. If we look back to some of the discussions about female Beat writers in chapters one and two, we can see that we cannot easily place di Prima in the definitions that are true for other women. What I established in the first chapter, for example—that women Beat writers being in the position of double otherness because they are other as women and other as Beat—is not the case with Diane di Prima. Her otherness may be that she is Beat, but the limitations put on women (either as women or as women artists) do not apply. She does not comply, for example, with the notion that she needs to get married and take care of her husband and their home; she is also brave enough to enter the male Beat circle of artists and establishes her position there. The way she writes *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is a proof of claiming her position (which is also one of the characteristics of female Beat memoirs), and she also muses on the relationship with other male writers in her latest memoir. She writes,

This thing I am constantly questioned about, as in: “How did you survive it? Where were the women”? There truly was this male cabal: self-satisfied, competitive, glorying in small acclaims. ... But I never saw it then.

I saw these guys, myself and the others, as artists simply. All the striving was for and of the Work, and I loved them for it. I loved them at their best and beyond their best as fellow companions of the Road. My choice: to overlook their one-upmanship, their eternal need to be *right*. Or I took it in stride as not important. A minor part of their Act. (107)

It is clear from this quotation that Diane di Prima lives for her Art. Willing to ignore some of the misogyny of the male Beats for the sake of her art might be naïve, but it does show her strong artistic drive. She not only entered their artistic circle, but declared the male Beats her “fellow companions of the Road,” showing that she, contrary to other women, did have a few of the road adventures herself. She does write about some of them in her latest memoir. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, however, she is still not ready to go, one of the reasons being her

total, unutterable fascination with lower Manhattan, a love affair with the city that I was in the midst of, caught up in, it turned out, for many years. An overwhelming love of the alleys and warehouses, of the strange cemetery downtown at Trinity Church, of Wall Street in the dead of night, Cathedral Parkway on Sunday afternoons, of the Chrysler building gleaming like fabled towers in the October sun, the incredible prana and energy in the air, stirring a creativity that seemed to spring from the fiery core of the planet and burst like a thousand boiling volcanoes in the music and painting, the dancing and the poetry of this magic city. (133)

Unlike other women who were more or less tied to staying home with their families, Diane di Prima could have left for the road, but she refuses to. As is clear from the above

beautifully written tribute to New York, she loves the city and it provides her with artistic inspiration. di Prima, then, clearly distinguishes herself from Cassady, but also from Johnson and Jones. She looks at the male Beat artists as her companions and ignores their “eternal need to be right.” And it is only by choice that she decides to stay in New York and not go on the road—for the time being.

By refusing to fill in the position of the victim, di Prima breaks another characterization of female Beat memoirs. Ronna C. Johnson’s assertion, that “Beat’s female memoirists (re)tell Beat generation life in a narrative discourse in which they are the memoirs’ Beat subject and yet still women colonized by the norms of Beat culture” (33), does not really apply to Diane di Prima. She neither sees herself as a victim, nor is portrayed as one. She is not, to again use Ronna Johnson’s term, a “subject” to males. When Grace says in her essay that women were allowed into the Beat circle only “as long as they remain mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, virgins, whores, demons, or angels” (143), di Prima again proves to be different from the other women memoirists discussed. If Cassady, Jones, and Johnson function as mothers, wives, and lovers, di Prima enters the Beat circle as an artist first. She might also be a lover, a demon, an angel, but her main role is that of an artist. The only places where I could argue that she might be a subject to males is in some of the sex scenes she describes, where, although still enjoying herself, her role is subordinated by the males. For instance, in the “Summer” chapter, while staying at a bookstore that she is running for a couple of friends on vacation, she engages in an affair with Luke. She describes one of their sexual encounters with these words,

There was a blindness to his passion that set up a momentary resistance in me. *I was being used as I had never been used, and I was not sure that I*

liked it, could rise to meet his demand; but the tremulous insistence of his hand in my cunt—through the wall of which, I knew, he could feel his cock pulsing and lunging in my ass—and *the blind force of his passion*, breaking through his flesh and tangling with his mouth in my hair, cut through the thought, and I hear myself crying out that he should never stop, and then crying again *in a wordless rage of pain* and pleasure that was hymn of praise the light of ecstasy exploding in us both. (128, emphasis mine)

Even though di Prima admits being used, she also admits having enjoyment even in this situation. It is obvious that di Prima is free and open to anything. Even when she seems to accept some of the norms of a sexist society, in this case a sexual encounter that could be read as rape, she appropriates these situations to fit her own needs. In the ninth chapter, when she spends time in the country with Billy, Big Bill, and Little John, she declares that, “Being a woman to three men was an interesting trip” (107); and, “Yes, it was good being a chick to three men, and each of them on his own trip, each wanting a different thing, so that the world filled out, and interplay, like a triple-exposed photo, made infinite space” (108). Anthony Libby states that her intent may be “to shock and humor, but di Prima here manages to turn the Beat chick into a sort of super-hausfrau” (56). I agree, but I also believe that this is an example of her appropriating what could be seen as her subordination and turning it to her advantage. If Cassady blindly and selflessly devotes her life to one man, di Prima takes care of three—and they also take care of her and her (yes, also sexual) needs. She writes, “We flourished on our Hudson farm, functioned for each other” (109). What also differentiates di Prima from Cassady

(and other women Beats) is that she chooses this kind of life, and she also leaves it when she feels it's time to return to the city. In di Prima's words, " . . . I knew it was time for me to be on my way. So I took my leave of Billy for the time being—he would be back in New York in the fall—gave him back his baggy Levis and donned my office skirt and blouse. Big Bill drove me to the bus station, and within an hour I was back in New York" (110-1). For di Prima, it was as simple as that. Even Libby accepts di Prima's "explanation of the desirability of her barnyard ménage" which is that such arrangements avoid the 'regular one-to-one relationship,' which di Prima describes as 'claustrophobic and deadening'" (56). So, even in examples such as the ones described above, about which, on the first glance, one might think that di Prima is indeed a "subject" to the males, on a closer look it becomes clear that she is actually doing what she wants to do and, importantly, doing it her way. With this, she is subverting the rules by which she is supposed to live and claiming her position—in her writing and by her writing. Thus, she might not offer the type of female Beat memoir that characterizes woman as a "subject," but this is yet another proof that she, even more successfully than other women I discuss in this thesis, claims her position in the society, the Beat circle, and her writing.

However, di Prima is not claiming her position only by subverting the roles she is supposed to be playing in the society, she is also subverting the symbol of home in her text. She does that even more forcefully and in a different way than other women Beat writers. For Cassady the idea of home was a perfect house in the suburbs. Jones used home deliberately as a symbol in her writing because she was familiar with the stereotypes in female writing connecting women with home. For Johnson, home is a place for freedom, and in her memoir her sense of place comes closest to Diane di

Prima's "pads." di Prima, as do Jones and Johnson, moves out of her parents' home and thus breaks the conventions of how proper (especially Italian American) women should behave. But first, here is how di Prima describes her origins:

I came from Brooklyn, from a block that just avoided being a slum....
 My parents were first-generation Italian Americans, my grandparents Italian, and our backyard was full of grapevines and tomato plants.... My grandparents could not read or write; my parents have put themselves through college and become "professional people." They were never on debt, and bought nothing "on time." They were noisy and unpretentious: the cupboard was always full and the liquor cabinet (if there was one) was usually empty except for homemade wine. To like to drink hard liquor was considered a misfortune. (48)

It is this simple, unpretentious life that di Prima wanted to get away from, and she writes in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, "When I flew out of my parents' world like a bat out of hell, it was to prove I could make it on my own. No reaching out could reach me where I landed" (72). She did, indeed, make it on her own, and what she describes in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is a life quite different from the lives other women at that time were living.

Diane di Prima's use of the (in)famous pads in her writing and the kind of life she leads in these pads is what further distinguishes her from Cassady, Johnson, and Jones. To help illustrate what the "pads" in which Diane di Prima lives represented, let me return for a second to Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*. When Johnson talks about Joan Vollmer, she describes her apartment as "an early prototype of what a later

generation called a pad—a psychic way station between the Village and Times Square, or between Morningside Heights and the Lower Depths, in the mental geography of those who came together there, lived there sporadically, made love, wrote, suffered, experimented with drugs” (3) This is exactly the kind of life di Prima was living in her pads. Even more successfully than Jones, she subverts the idea of home as a perfect woman-kept place. As does Jones, she uses many details to describe the apartments she is renting. The one she moves into after her stay in the bookstore, for example, “had high-ceilings and a fireplace in the large front room, two middle rooms of fair size, and a real hole of a kitchen with the bathtub next to the sink—the tub had a cover you used to drain the dishes—an antique stove decorated in green enamel with a high oven and three burners, and a small greasy window looking out on an airshaft” (135) Descriptions such as this are not far from the ones Hettie Jones offers in her memoir. The life Diane di Prima lives in the places she describes, however, is very different. For one, she is a single woman living on her own; or, as a matter of fact, with other single people like her because, as she says,

My pad gradually filled up, as pads generally do. A collection of oddments—souls with no home and no particular merits—about whom the most I could say was that they were not boring, slept on the floor, or in the big double bed with me. The bed would hold up to four of us comfortably, and out of this grew nuances of relationship most delicate in their shading (*Memoirs* 87)

These relationships were also sexual. After the above quotation, for example, di Prima describes the various people who moved in and out of the pad, noting that she had sex

with many of them. Jack, for example, was a “good fuck and liked to fuck a lot” (88), Henry, when high on cocaine, could “literally fuck for hours, past orgasm and the possibility of orgasm, to the point of madness” (89-90). With as much detail as she uses to describe the homes she is living in, she also describes the sexual acts between her and her friends and acquaintances throughout the text. In “Organs and Orgasms: An Appreciation,” she finds herself “sole occupant of Number Six, Amsterdam Avenue, and it was then and there,” she writes, “that [she] instituted the custom of giving keys to all [her] lovers” (159). She tells us that there were “six or seven of them,” and offers little erotic vignettes describing all of them and what they were best at doing or liked having done. Antoine, a French guy, for example, “liked to go down on [her], and had a good repertoire of rhythms and twirls. He also liked for [her] to suck him off” (164). Granted, as we established di Prima herself admits, some of those sex scenes were purely her invention; but some of them, for all we know, may also be real (and, in a postmodern sense, as “real” as any others). In any case, that a woman in those times not only has such sexual freedom, but also openly writes about it is exceptional. Home for di Prima is a place where she can live out her sexual desires in any way she pleases and with as many lovers of whatever sex she wants to. By joining home with the freedom of her sexuality, she subverts the image of home on two different levels. Home is not a place she keeps and cleans for her man and children; her sexuality is not repressed—she is as much of an initiator of sexual acts as a participator in them, and she does not feel any shame or “bad girl” stigma because of that. She, indeed, does differ from other (Beat) women in her era. In the first chapter I quoted Jelinek, who wrote “that in most women autobiographies one can find “a sense of feeling of *other*, of being *different* from the rest of the society, even

from other women” (187). Diane di Prima is exactly that other. However, she accepts that otherness and celebrates it, being different, or more appropriately, not the same as others (ordinary people like her parents or suppressed women of the fifties, for example) is exactly what she wants to be. She lives and celebrates her life in her pads; she also writes about it—her way.

di Prima’s otherness also reveals itself in her wanting to be an artist and at the same time wanting to be a mother. More importantly, as we can see from her later works, she does not let being a mother stop her from being an artist. I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter how rich di Prima’s literary career is; on top of being such a prolific artist, she also has raised five children. Actually, it is her pregnancy with which she ends her memoir. Before that, she gives the reader her views on contraception in “FUCK THE PILL: A DIGRESSION,” in which she writes,

The pill, the pill, the pill! I am so tired hearing about the pill, hearing the praises of the pill! Let me tell you about the pill. It makes you fat, the pill does. It makes you hungry. Gives you sore breasts, slight morning sickness, condemns you, who have avoided pregnancy, to live in a perpetual state of early pregnancy: woozy, nauseous, and likely to burst into tears. And—crowning irony—it makes you, who have finally achieved full freedom to fuck, much less likely to want to fuck, cuts down on the sex drive. So much for the pill. (105)

She is, as can be read from the rest of her little rant, a supporter of pregnancy. Libby writes that having babies was in itself a “rebellious act ... in the quant term of the repressive fifties, when respectable single motherhood was not yet an option” (50). Thus,

by actively getting pregnant, di Prima rebels and again sets herself apart from the other females of the time. While for them birth control meant the ultimate freedom, di Prima sees it as another form of oppression, and thus rebels not only through her art, but also through her motherhood. When most women could not even think about having a child on their own, di Prima writes in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, “I went about the business of looking for a father. Someone who would like to have a kid of his kicking about in the world, but wouldn’t bother me too much. Wouldn’t as I put it, ‘get in the way’” (157-8). She wanted to raise a child by herself because, again, she wanted to do things her way. When by the end of the final chapter of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* she realizes that she is pregnant, she “began to put books in boxes, and pack up the odds and ends of my life, for a whole new adventure was starting, and I had no idea where it would land me” (187). With this final sentence, she hints at the possibility of the journey, of going on the road. As Grace writes, “In effect, di Prima describes a re-visioning of the male Beat road story; it is now a pregnant woman who on her own willingly and eagerly leaves home to seek adventure” (165-66). To conclude this paragraph, Butterick’s quotation about di Prima seems most appropriate: “Among other things it is she who reminded us that the generation spent as much time in urban ‘pads’ as it did ‘on the road,’ and that one can travel as far by human relationships as by thumb” (151).

What can be read from Butterick’s quotation is that di Prima, with her life and writing, helped define the Beat, and this takes us back to the definition of memoir that demands life writing focus on external events. I did mention in the introduction to this chapter that Diane di Prima was living and writing Beat before the term was defined and before she even knew that there was such thing as Beat. Near the end of her memoir, she

realizes that “the new era had begun” (177). She recollects the evening when she first read Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl.” Reading it, she discovers that “someone was speaking for us all” (177). This sudden realization also tells her that she and some of her friends are not alone in “writing what they spoke, what they heard, living, however obscurely and shamefully, what they knew” (176). “For I sensed,” she writes, “that Allen was only, could only be, the vanguard of a much larger thing” (176). Her prophecy proves to be correct. It is obvious, however, that she was already living and writing what she recognized in Ginsberg’s poem. By incorporating into her memoir her personal experience of reading one of the defining literary works of the Beat generation, she places this personal moment into the context of social as well as literary history. Thus, she gives me one more reason to argue in favor of her text being a memoir. After all, a memoir calls for the retelling of a personal experience, but also for the placement of this experience into a larger, public frame.

If this chapter proves one thing, it proves how complicated the theory of life writing is and that its boundaries are blurring more with every text I set out to discuss. In Prima’s text, I believe I have proven, is the most complex one from all the works this thesis discusses. With *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (and her other texts) she proves some of the definitions I have tested to be true, and extends or denies others. Her work does cover a certain aspect of her life; she does tell us not only about herself, but also about the world around her. Because she successfully claims her position in the Beat circle and refuses to confirm to any expectations brought upon her because of her gender, she distinguishes herself from other women writers even further, and does not fit into the description of female Beat life writers still being “subjects” in their own works of art. Even though

Memoirs of a Beatnik was written primarily for money, I do believe it also shows that di Prima's artistic skills are the most developed of all the writers I discussed. She is a Writer, and with *Memoirs of a Beatnik* she successfully tests the possibilities of how far she can push the boundaries of the genre. By exploring postmodern ideas of truth in fiction and fiction in truth, di Prima is ahead of her time, walking shoulder to shoulder with male Beat writers who in their experimental techniques gave voice to the postmodernist era. Most importantly, in her life and while writing her life, Diane di Prima never loses the awareness of her gender. She acknowledges her femaleness and takes advantage of it as a writer. As she says in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*,

I was a poet, I had work to do. And that work included an old resolve that I had expressed to Dean Cobb at Swarthmore, and that she had given me back as a Latin proverb. *I am a human, therefore nothing is foreign to me.* It came to me still as a resolve, a vow: There was nothing that I could possibly experience, *as a human in a female body*, that I would not experience. Nothing I would try to avoid. No part of human life I would turn my back on. To me this was obviously just part of the job, part of what *one as a writer* set out to do (161, second emphasis mine)

Can you get more Beat than this?

CHAPTER 6

IF A TREE FALLS IN A FOREST, AND THERE IS NO ONE THERE TO HEAR IT,
DOES IT STILL MAKE A SOUND?

Joyce Johnson writes at the end of her most recent memoir, *Missing Men*, “I still sometime succumb to the panic of nonbeing. *Did you exist if there was no witness?*” (261, emphasis mine). This fear of non-existence is also what *The New York Times* critic William Grimes addresses in his article from March 25, 2005: “We All Have a Life. Must We All Write About It?” Grimes calls memoir a “sprawling category” (B25). “Everyone has a life, and therefore a story that should be told and, if possible, published” (B25), he writes ironically. My question is, why do people feel such a need to share their life-stories with others? Grimes offers a simple answer, “No story, no identity” (B31). That is, I believe, what connects his assertions to what Joyce Johnson says in her quotation and to women Beat writers’ works in general. If there is no one to tell your story, did it really happen? If there is no one to tell your story, should you tell it yourself to prove that it did happen? If the women Beat writers shared Johnson’s fear, it is by their memoirs that they guaranteed their existence is recognized.

When I set out to write this thesis, it was my purpose to recover works that have not been examined much by scholars and critics. If these works are discussed at all, it is usually not as works of literary value, but rather as social documents that help readers better understand the lives of the great males in the Beat era. Thus, female Beats were,

even by scholars and critics, put in a position of observers—which wouldn't be so bad if that weren't the only role they were given. What I hope I managed to show is that their memoirs deserve to be considered equally with male works from the Beat era

Since I decided to focus on these works as representatives of life writing, there is still much about them to be examined—many other avenues I could have traveled had I more time and space. There is still much to be said about Diane di Prima's poetics in her other works such as *Dinners and Nightmares* and her latest memoir *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. Too, there are Hettie Jones's poems, which one might explore in connection with what she offers in her memoir. It might be interesting to see to what extent Joyce Johnson's *Come and Join the Dance* relates to her life, and how her treatment of fictitious and real is different from or the same as di Prima's in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. Last, but not least, there are other Hettie Joneses out there, and it is time for them and us to bring out their dusty boxes and let their words be read

One can sense that interest in the Beats is again on the rise; and that, especially in the last decade, there was increased interest in female Beats. Books dealing specifically with female Beats are being published, such as Brenda Knight's *Women of the Beat Generation*, Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson's collection of interviews with women Beats, *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, and an anthology of scholarly essays edited by the same authors *Girls Who Wore Black*. There is definitely room for more

To end with optimism, I note that only a few months ago, in December of 2004, The Beat Studies Association was founded, and its inaugural panel ("Border-Crossing Beats: Genre and Gender") will be held on May 28th of this year at the annual conference of the American Literature Association, in Boston, Massachusetts. Interestingly, the

founding members of the BSA's executive board are also the very scholars of Beat women writers whom I have cited often in my thesis: Ann Charters, Nancy Grace, and Ronna Johnson. This gives me hope that there are more critics out there willing to (re)discover women Beats, whose roles finally need to change from being mere witnesses to the ones who are being witnessed.

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