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Mislabeled Muses

Deborah L. Dougherty
ddoug328@live.kutztown.edu

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Mislabeled Muses: A Look at the Women of the Beat Generation

Deborah Dougherty

Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs was seminal in the creating of the Beat revolution; indeed, the fires that stoked the Beat engine were started with Joan as patron and muse. Her apartment in New York was a nucleus that attracted many of the characters who played a vital role in the formation of the Beat;... Brilliant and well versed in philosophy and literature, Joan was the whetstone against which the main Beat writers, -Allen, Jack and Bill-sharpened their intellect. Widely considered one of the most perceptive people in the group, her strong mind and independent nature helped bulldoze the Beats toward a new sensibility. (49)

Through mutual acquaintances at Columbia University, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs were introduced to the scene, thus starting the relationships and the melding of minds that are so iconic to the Beat movement. The apartment in New York is recalled as being both “educational and chaotic-a non-stop salon with both discourse and dalliance” (Knight 51). Her education fueled her ability to contribute to and participate in philosophical debates, but her open-minded perspective encouraged her desire for exploration and experimentation, creating a nihilistic ideology to manifest in Burroughs at a very young age.

Both Photos of Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs courtesy of a Blog post : <https://www.jenniferberube.com/the-death-of-joan-vollmer-adams-burroughs/>



Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs



The Beat scene is littered with stories and art representative of a unique movement filled with tales of societal abandonment, sexual experimentation, and substance abuse. The recognizable and captivating narrative of this distinctive time in American history, is primarily male. The women, who were also writers, artists, and educators are mostly remembered for the roles they played as either muses to the men or for the fictional characters they inspired. They remain preserved in literature as beautiful creatures, both equally brilliant and mad.

Diane Di Prima



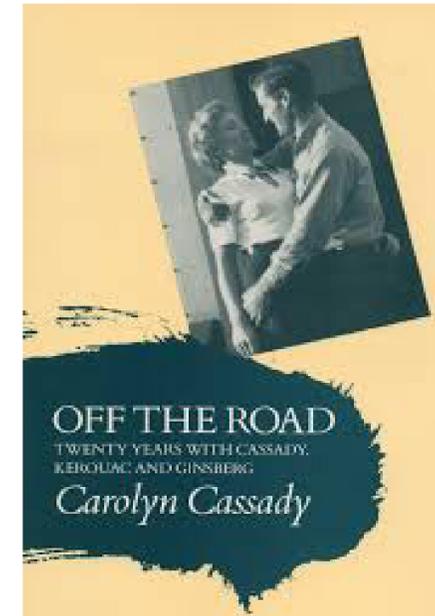
Photo of Diane Di Prima Courtesy of AnotherMag.com. <http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/7667/diane-di-prima-a-beat-to-remember>

What makes Diane Di Prima vital to the heart of the Beat movement was her continued fight for the female voice. One of her earliest poems, “The practice of Magical Evocation” was written in response to Gary Snyder’s poem, “Praise for Sick Women.” Di Prima’s poem reverses Snyder’s line “the female is fertile” and instead states, “The female is ductile.” The rest of the poem a subtle argument against the assumptions made about women, particularly their purpose being to bare children. By changing a single word, Di Prima calls out the positive and negative aspects of the feminine, the possibility and the passivity that exists within all women. (Patterson Literary Review, 312).



Carolyn Cassady

Photograph of book cover of Off The Road from Eight Miles Higher. <http://andrewdarlington.blogspot.com/2011/05/carolyn-cassady-interview.html>



Carolyn maintained steady employment and provided for her family. She was able to have one foot in the mayhem, and one foot out, making her both an active participator within the world of the Beats and a front row audience member.

By maintaining her societal views and her domestic values, Cassady provided an anchor to reality for the Beatnik’s, specifically Neal and John. Not only did Cassady create a judgment-free, safe space to return when reality caught up to the chaos. She was a woman full of forgiveness and acceptance for the people she loved, but she was also representative of the all the responsibilities the Beats ran from, such as parenthood and monogamy. Cassady perpetuated the ideology of the Beats by simultaneously participating in and welcoming the madness into her life, as well as by giving into the societal expectations typical of the 1950’s mother and career women.

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Photo of Carolyn and Neal Cassady courtesy of SF Gate Website. <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Muse-Carolyn-Cassady-beckoned-the-Beats-to-S-F-4854835.php>

