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Mislabeled Muses:

A look at a few of the Women of the Beat Generation

The Beatnik era produced, not only iconic literature but influential writers, artists, and educators as well. 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. Some women threw themselves into the ideology of the Beats, participating in the chaos to the point of death. While others found their place on the sidelines, observing the enlightened madness, giving the scene it's desired audience. This rebellious societal movement, though in literature is both romanticized and exaggerated, can be found illustrated in the misogynistic undertones of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* but more accurately in the lives of the women of the Beat generation.

Kerouac's *On the Road* is an iconic story, narrated in the male perspective and centered around the Beatnik society. Through his unforgettable and manic characters, Kerouac takes his audience to the core of the Beat movement, a societal rebellion. The word rebellion is chosen specifically because this movement of misguided individualism and search for freedom is often mislabeled as countercultural. Understanding culture as an ideology, or more specifically, the stories a group of people tell themselves about themselves, the ideology of the counterculture society would be the opposite. Though the idea behind the Beat movement, of complete societal rejection in search to for greater personal understanding, is countercultural in thought, it was not in practice. For instance, if sharing stories is how culture is passed from one generation to the next, a countercultural movement would not produce artifacts of their experiences. There would be no art, or prose, left behind to perpetuate the stories of the Beatnik generation. Given the intense number of stories, poetry, memoirs, and intimate letters written during this time, the beat movement though recalcitrant, is not actually countercultural.

Manuel Luis Martinez describes the beat movement as a "rehashing of American "rugged individualism" (16) but not as a movement that is countercultural in definition. This is evident, not only in the fictional characters of Kerouac's *On the Road*, but also in the memoirs and poetry created by the woman of the time. Though the men were free to explore their limitations and push their boundaries on their search for individualism, the women were not, adding a layer of intersectionality within supposedly progressive societal revolution.

Understanding intersectionality as the societal categories that perpetuate discrimination and disadvantage for people of different races and genders, the stories of repression as well as self-discovery, told by women such as Carolyn Cassidy, Diane Di Prima and many more reveal a brand-new level to the movement entirely. Though the men writers and artists of the time are

“enlightened” in their own madness, the real rhythm to the heart of the movement can be found in the words and lives of the women.

Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* introduces the world to the icons of the Beat Generation. Some of the characters and their real-life inspirations are: Jack Kerouac as the struggling writer Sal Paradise, Neal Cassady as the rambunctious Dean Moriarty, Carl Marx as the elusive Allen Ginsberg and most importantly MaryLou as LuAnn Henderson Cassady—Neal Cassady’s first wife—Camille as Carolyn Cassady—Neal’s second wife and mother to three of his children. Although, *On the Road* is written through the male perspective, the role the women were forced into—often by marriage—is depicted clearly. If examined thoroughly, even the male produced literature sheds a clear light on an under-appreciated and undiscussed experience of the Beat era: the women’s experience.

In Brenda Knight’s *Women of the Beat Generation*, an excerpt from Stephen Scobies account of the Naropa Institute’s tribute to Ginsberg states: “There were women, they were there...their families put them in institutions, they were given electric shock. In the ‘50s if you were male you could be a rebel, if you were a female, your families had you locked up” (141). Even the successful women of the time, such as Diane Di Prima, had a difficult time creating space for her voice to be heard. In a “Spotlight on Diane Di Prima” in the Paterson Literary Review, Diane is quoted stating her difficulties emerging from a “gentleman’s life.” When reflecting on the obstacles she faced while trying to establish her presence in the Beat literary movement she states: “It was painfully clear at those moments that I was *not* one of the boys, and it worked against me. It still does” (352). Throughout her entire career, though highly successful, she struggled to be taken seriously as a female writer, particularly one to spawn from the Beatnik scene.

In the academic discussions surrounding this literary cannon, the women are still mentioned cautiously, if at all, in respect to overall artistic contribution. Through a brief analysis of the very different lives of Carolyn Cassidy, Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs, and Diane Di Prima, a new side to the Beatnik experience becomes exposed. Revealing what it was like to be an enlightened woman during this time, the heart of the Beat generation screams through the words and lives of these women.

Carolyn Cassidy's *Off the Road*, is a trip down memory lane for her readers. She recalls her youth, most importantly her time spent with Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and her eventual husband, Neal Cassidy, and what it was like to be at the center of such a time of change. Both Carolyn and Neal are known to the Beat legend for their roles within the literature composed by their close friends and not for their own compositions. In an article titled "Women of the Beat Generation" by David S Wills, Joyce Johnson a woman writer of the Beat Movement is quoted,

The whole Beat scene had very little to do with the participation of women as artists themselves. The real communication was going on between the men, and the women were there as onlookers... You kept your mouth shut, and if you were intelligent and interested in things you might pick up what you could. It was a very masculine aesthetic. (3)

This is exactly what gives Carolyn Cassidy her exclusively riveting perspective in her memoir *Off the Road*.

Unlike Neal, 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. *Off the Road*

displays Cassady's intelligent and romantic nature, from the words she uses to express her feelings about Neal and Jack, to how she feels looking back years later, knowing the truth behind her relationship with Neal. She provides insight on how she was able to discover who she was as a woman, a mother and an artist while living in a state of constant chaos. She was active enough within the Beats, to secure her role in history, but detached enough that she was never ostracized from the rest of society. 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 judgement-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 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.

Before Carolyn Cassady finished and published her memoir, *Heart Beat* was released without her permission. A small piece of her memoir focused on the ménage-a-trois between herself, Jack and Neal, only to be turned into a historically inaccurate, b-grade movie. Ironically, taken from a story written by Cassady herself, the focus of the movie on Jack and Neal and the way their love for Carolyn shaped their experiences. Carolyn, played by Sissy Spacek, narrates the movie, but her character plays a minor role. In a way, mirroring Carolyn's suggested role on the sidelines of Beat movement. Carolyn rose above the madness, had a successful career and made a good life for her and her children. Though embedded in the legend of Beat generation, labeled a muse for some, most importantly she is a voice for the many women who endured the life of a Beatnik wife.

“Where there was a strong writer who could hold her own, like Diane Di Prima, we would certainly work with her and recognize her. She was a genius” said by William S Burroughs (Wills, 4). Diane Di Prima is one of the most respected writers and educators to emerge from the Beat generation. She was studying physics at Swarthmore College when she moved to the Lower East Side, long before any “scene” had been established. She worked on her writing and made friends with a group referred to as the “new bohemians.” This was a group of people very similar to those of the Beats. Intellectuals that held lively debates and discussions, and often slept together. From this time in her life, after meeting Ginsberg and Kerouac, she wrote her first book; *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (Knight, 123).

Di Prima was known to go out of her way to learn from writers she admired, and she spent her life pursuing her creative interests. She is remembered as a strong-willed genius who, unlike the other women of this time, actively participated with the men of this generation. Allowing her to become a valued contributor not only to the movement but to American literature. “more than any other woman of the Beat, Di Prima has taken her place alongside the men as the epitome of Beat brilliance” (Knight 128).

In an excerpt from *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, entitled “Rant,” she captures a reflection of the culture freshly free from war. Jumping from the page are the words “THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST THE IMAGINATION.” She states:

w/out imagination there is no memory

w/out imagination there is no sensation

w/out imagination there is no will, desire

Diane devoted her life to the arts. She is a true advocate for the way the art transcends time and place. Her words have meaning in the war the world fights against the arts even today, arguing to save creativity and imagination.

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).

Diane continued to use poetry as if it were magic, using language to expose and reflect her concerns for femininity. She fought from within the Beatnik society for her voice to be recognized and continued to fight for the rights of women long after the movement had ended. Diane Di Prima is the ideal feminist of the 1950's, because she fought to give the women of the Beat, a platform and a voice. She participated in a movement of self-discovery and individualism, and by sharing her writing, allowed society to gain a perspective into a literary revolution known mostly through the male gaze. Her poetry is descriptive and invigorating but most importantly, at its core, portrays the struggles faced by female artists, particularly women of the Beat.

Not everyone met a successful or even happy ending to their role in the Beat movement. One of the Beat generation's most tragic losses was the undeniably magnetic Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs. Joan, who did not live to see her 30th birthday is unforgettable and iconic

primarily because without her persistent pioneering, the Beat scene would not be what it is known as today. Brenda Knight begins her chapter on Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs by saying;

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)

Though raised comfortably and privileged, Joan refused to comply to social expectations of the 40's and 50's, and what it cost her was her life.

Though not an artist or writer herself, she inspired and encouraged those around her by providing a safe place for discussion and experimentation. Joan's roommate in New York was Edie Parker, who dated and was briefly married to Jack Kerouac. 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.

Burrough's transcended the projected expectations of a 1950's women, by treating men as objectively as they treated women, and relished in the defiant freedom. Her acceptance of this enlightened life-style allowed her to actively create a social space free of judgement and restriction. She participated in every aspect of the Beat scene intellectually, emotionally, and sexually. However, it was her substance experimenting that inevitably took control.

Joan became quickly and highly addicted to Benzedrine. After several psychotic episodes she was checked into Belluve Hospital for treatment. Though quoted in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, in 1949, three years after her release from the hospital saying, "anyone who doesn't blow his top once is no damn good," (Knight, 56) her addiction degenerated her mind slowly. Burrough's constant search for a way to excel to another level of intelligence and freedom was both brave and revolutionary, however misguided. Her constant inebriation caused her to appear disconnected from reality, she claimed it connected her intrinsically to husband-pivotal Beat writer William S. Burroughs. The couple was known to put on acts displaying their psychic connection at gatherings, putting their apparent insanity on display.

In Mexico City, Joan and Bill were at a party when they decided to put on an act known as the William Tell. Bill attempting to shoot a water glass off Joan's head from six feet away, missed and killed her instantly. Joan's death was ruled an accident, and Bill only spent 13 days in Jail, however he claims he was forever haunted by her ghost (Knight, 53).

Fearless and passionate, Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs embodied the ideology of the Beat Movement. William Burroughs maintained it was Joan's death that inspired his writing, and Allen Ginsberg's opus "Howl" was written after a dream he had of Joan, as well as several other writers of the time who keep Joan alive in the pages of their stories. Joan is correctly labeled a Muse for those of the Beat Generation due to her immortalization in the literature of that era.

There are many voices that emerged from the artistic movement known as the Beat. Carolyn Cassady's memoir is a realistic perspective into the life of a Beatnik wife, an educated woman's journey through the center of Beat era. Surviving the madness of marriage and motherhood surrounded by a society defiant of the social expectations of the time. Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs represents a woman chasing equality, fearlessly following adventure and living in chaos. Though she met a tragic end, as did most artists of the time, Joan's intellect and magnetic personality helped to jumpstart a movement of discovery and experimentation. Diane Di Prima, is a trailblazing feminist, giving a voice to the intelligent women of a time where the narrative was primarily male. Her determination and ultimate success as a writer and educator are inspiring. The art and literature created by the women of the Beat generation illustrate the realistic Beat scene experience, some tragic and some successful, but all vital to understanding the movement completely. When analyzing the lives of the Beatnik women, the heart of the movement beats loudly, exposing the truth behind the challenges and experiences they encountered. Ultimately changing the way, the women of the Beat generation are revered for their contributions and participation in the societal rebellion known as the Beat era.

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