



UNIVERSIDAD DE MURCIA

FACULTAD DE LETRAS

Beat & Beyond: Memoir, Myth and Visual Arts in
Women of the Beat Generation

Más Allá del “Beat”: Memoria, Mito y Arte Visual en
las Mujeres de la Generación Beat

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RESUMEN

En junio del 2015, el programa de radio BBC 4 retransmitió un programa especial de 28 minutos dedicado, como su nombre indica, a “Las Mujeres de la Generación Beat”. Tras entrevistar brevemente a las novelistas Joyce Johnson y Hettie Jones, así como a la poeta Anne Waldman, la presentadora (Laura Barton), que ya había mostrado su preocupación por el modo en que estas escritoras habían internalizado en su obra y vida el machismo reinante en la América de los años 50, concluye el programa citando un pasaje de la memoria de Johnson, *Missing Men* (1983), donde la escritora se queja del machismo de Jack Kerouac: “Odio el resentimiento de Jack hacia las mujeres, lo odio, lo lamento, lo comprendo, y finalmente, lo perdono” (33). Del mismo modo en que Johnson supo perdonar el sexismo de Kerouac, Barton anima al oyente a “comprender, perdonar y, de una vez por todas, celebrar la obra de las mujeres ‘Beat’.” Aunque este comentario pueda verse como un alegato a favor de la literatura escrita por mujeres Beat, su efectividad se ve reducida por la manera en la que enfatiza la vida personal de las escritoras y poetas. De hecho, aunque Barton menciona de pasada la amplia obra de estas mujeres, una obra que con frecuencia se ve ensombrecida por sus relatos autobiográficos, el programa incide en este hecho al centrarse, casi en exclusividad, en las memorias. Del mismo modo, el discurso empleado por la presentadora gira en torno a elementos biográficos con más frecuencia que a los literarios. Un ejemplo de esto sucede cuando comenta, que desde la posición de una mujer moderna y liberada, “no acababa de entender por qué estas mujeres esperaban a tales hombres, hacían lo que ellos querían y apoyaban su carrera artística por encima de la suya.” La sensación con la que uno se queda tras escuchar el programa (especialmente después de que Regina Weinreich etiquete a estas mujeres como escritoras de diarios y memorias) es que la única razón por la que uno debe leer su obra es, bien por su conexión personal con los hombres de la Generación Beat o por su posición como “supervivientes” del machismo “Beat”.

Casi veinte años después de la publicación de *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996), la antología editada por Brenda Knight que abrió el campo sobre la participación femenina dentro de la Generación Beat y sirvió de carta de presentación a muchas de las mujeres asociadas con el movimiento, lo que inspiró otros estudios de

carácter casi arqueológico que sacaron a la luz la obra de algunas de estas escritoras, la posición secundaria de las mujeres dentro del canon “Beat” sigue siendo evidente. Dentro de los ámbitos educativo y académico, por mencionar dos ejemplos, las mujeres son continuamente relegadas a un segundo plano: rara vez se estudia su obra como parte del currículo y en conferencias académicas y literarias suelen ser agrupadas en paneles exclusivos dedicados a mujeres. Además, los medios de comunicación continúan produciendo una representación estereotipada de la “mujer Beat”, en la que se le reduce a un objeto sexual o un accesorio en la búsqueda masculina de aventuras. Igualmente negativo es el encasillamiento en el rol de la esposa fiel que apoya (y soporta) la carrera artística de su marido y su búsqueda de un estado de consciencia elevada. Todos estos factores han contribuido a oscurecer la verdadera carrera artística y literaria de estas mujeres y han puesto de manifiesto la necesidad, no de “perdonarlas” por su subordinación hacia el hombre, si no de fomentar diálogos a través de los cuales reevaluar su trabajo y denunciar los mecanismos utilizados para eclipsar su obra.

El objetivo de la presente tesis doctoral es reevaluar, tanto la posición de las escritoras de la Generación Beat, como su trabajo dentro de un discurso artístico y literario post(Beat) o más allá de lo “Beat.” Para llevar a cabo este objetivo, la tesis se divide en tres capítulos principales que se centran en tres temas distintos y, al mismo tiempo, en la obra de diferentes poetas y escritoras. El capítulo dos, en el que se analizan once memorias escritas por mujeres asociadas con dicha generación, se centra en el dilema entre lo personal y lo literario mostrado en la anécdota inicial. Englobando el trabajo de poetas y novelistas más establecidas junto con escritoras que tan sólo han producido una memoria, este capítulo usa de marco de referencia un periodo de tiempo que abarca desde 1969 a 2009 (los años que transcurren desde el año de publicación de la primera y la última memoria). Debido a la naturaleza autobiográfica de los textos estudiados en este capítulo, este sirve para delinear el contexto socio-político y artístico en el que las autoras vivieron y escribieron. A su vez, a través del análisis de temas comunes a las distintas memorias (tales como la escritura, los roles de género, y la conexión con el movimiento Beat), este capítulo sitúa a las escritoras en un contexto artístico que fue común a los escritores masculinos, pero que se ve a la vez ampliado a través del estudio de temas (más femeninos) como la maternidad, el aborto, la domesticidad o incluso la necesidad de mantener económicamente a la familia. En cualquier caso, el capítulo va más allá de la posición o experiencia personal de las

autoras para examinar el uso específico que hacen del género memoria. Usando como marco teórico y metodológico teorías de escritura autobiográfica y revaluaciones feministas del diálogo entre género literario y género biológico o social, el capítulo reexamina el valor artístico y literario de las memorias, que son con demasiada frecuencia tachadas de anti-literarias.

El tercer capítulo se centra en poesía, concretamente las colecciones *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965) de Joanne Kyger, *Loba* (1998) de Diane di Prima, y *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* (2011) de Anne Waldman, para ver de qué manera estas poetisas actualizan o reinterpretan discursos, temática y personajes de la mitología. Kyger, por ejemplo, trabaja directamente con *La Odisea* de Homero para dotar a Penélope de una visión más contemporánea y un lugar más apropiado para auto-expresarse, si bien la poeta opta por mantener al personaje mitológico “atrapado” dentro de la estructura provista por Homero. *Loba* de Diane di Prima, una colección escrita durante los años setenta, se ve influenciada de una manera más clara por discursos feministas sobre revisiones mitológicas, así como por el llamado Movimiento de la Diosa. El análisis de estos poemas sitúa a la diosa/loba de di Prima en un contexto político y estético feminista específico para investigar la manera en la que la poeta reconcilia su propia visión de la diosa (así como sus objetivos creativos y políticos) con estos discursos. La última parte de este capítulo explora la deconstrucción de los mitos del patriarcado que lleva a cabo Anne Waldman en su épica a través de la metáfora continuada de “todo está lleno de Jove”, que alude al omnipresente y todopoderoso Zeus. Además de analizar el mito como una construcción ficticia, estas tres colecciones de poesía revalúan de alguna manera la posición de la mujer dentro del género de la épica. Este tema es especialmente relevante en *Iovis*, que fue escrita como una épica feminista que rinde homenaje, a la vez que rechaza, el linaje literario de los grandes maestros de la épica modernista: Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson y Louis Zukofsky.

El último capítulo de la tesis tiene como objeto de estudio el arte visual, en primer lugar, como contrapunto a la representación visual (y estereotipada) de la mujer en la Generación Beat producida por los medios de comunicación populares. En segundo lugar, y no por ello menos importante, este capítulo sitúa la escritura de estas autoras en un contexto multi-mediático y multidisciplinar que las ubica en lo más alto de la vanguardia artística y la experimentación literaria de los años sesenta en adelante.

Para ello, el capítulo se divide en dos grandes secciones. La primera considera la involucración y participación de las poetas Joanne Kyger, Joanna McClure y Anne Waldman con el vídeo y la película como medios audiovisuales a través de los cuales expandir y ampliar su visión poética y artística. La última parte de este capítulo se centra en la poesía y el arte visual producido por Ruth Weiss desde dos perspectivas distintas. Por un lado, se estudia la influencia de arte visual como pintura, escultura y las proyecciones psicodélicas en su poesía y, por el otro lado, la expansión de la poesía a través de otros medios como el teatro, la pintura, o el cine. Al igual que en los dos primeros capítulos, las obras analizadas en esta última parte abarcan un periodo de tiempo extenso que va desde principios de los años sesenta hasta las primeras décadas del siglo XXI, lo que sitúa la obra de estas poetas más allá de la influencia temporal, temática y artística de la Generación Beat.

Al elegir estos tres objetos de estudio (memoria, mitología y arte visual) para reevaluar la posición de las mujeres dentro de la Generación Beat, esta tesis evita una estructuración basada en un catálogo de autoras individuales y su obra. Mientras que una desventaja inmediata del enfoque aplicado es que muchas poetas y escritoras se quedan necesariamente fuera del estudio, el objetivo principal es ofrecer análisis sustanciosos sobre temas que son considerados relevantes para estas escritoras como grupo y que apenas han sido tratados por académicos y críticos literarios. Asimismo, a pesar de que los temas tratados en cada capítulo requieren un enfoque metodológico distinto, los tres comparten un impulso revisionista a través del cual las autoras contrarrestan su propia posición (así como la de otras mujeres) dentro del patriarcado. Ya sea dentro del canon y la historia “Beat” o dentro de una construcción del género literario (como memoria o épica) dominada por el género social, las obras analizadas en esta tesis doctoral coinciden en la necesidad de reevaluar y transformar categorías para incluir la experiencia femenina.

Al mismo tiempo, al evitar una recapitulación tipo antológica de escritoras bajo la categoría “Mujer Beat”, este trabajo enfatiza la necesidad de desasociar y alejar la inmensa obra literaria de estas escritoras (que en algunos casos se extiende hasta el presente) de las limitaciones presentadas por la comparación con la obra de escritores Beat canónicos como Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg o William Burroughs. Aunque existen ciertas conexiones y puntos en común que son abordados en cada capítulo, en general la asociación con estos escritores se disuelve de manera orgánica a lo largo de la

tesis a medida que los temas tratados y el enfoque tomado van más allá de los puntos de interés de la literatura Beat o son tratados desde perspectivas distintas. Incluso el capítulo dos, que se centra de manera más clara en la relación de estas escritoras con la tradición masculina dominante, acaba por destacar la apropiación del género de la memoria como medio a través del cual reevaluar su propia literatura y poesía. Este enfoque ofrece un espacio más libre para analizar la literatura escrita por mujeres fuera de su posición de “víctimas de la Generación Beat”, a la vez que pone de manifiesto la autosuficiencia y el valor estético y temático de su obra. Para ello, se utiliza como marco metodológico los estudios culturales, así como las propuestas metodológicas provenientes de los estudios de género, el feminismo y los estudios de masculinidad. Del mismo modo, el análisis formal está informado por lecturas temático-formales de la representación literaria y visual del género y la sexualidad desarrollada por la crítica feminista y *queer* en los últimos años.

Por último, ya que el principal objetivo de esta tesis doctoral recae en la producción literaria y artística de las escritoras y poetas, el estudio se aleja de una crítica basada en “imágenes de la mujer” (tanto en la literatura escrita por hombres como en las representaciones producidas por los medios de comunicación), para centrarse en una investigación sobre el valor temático, estilístico, estético o político de las memorias, poesía y arte visual producido por estas mujeres. Esta distinción, que ya articuló Elaine Showalter en su artículo “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979), divide la crítica feminista en dos enfoques: la mujer como lectora (o la “crítica feminista”), y la mujer como escritora (o la “ginocrítica”). Aunque el enfoque empleado en esta tesis es más cercano a la “ginocrítica”, ya que el análisis se centra en la obra producida por mujeres, también se enfatiza la necesidad de incluir en el estudio un discurso social y literario a menudo marcado por una producción masculina. De esta manera se consigue que, más que un contexto femenino alternativo o, como lo expresó Myra Jehlen, “una especie de oasis apartado del universo de influencia masculina”¹ (123), el trabajo de estas mujeres se analice desde un enfoque intermedio que tenga en cuenta los factores socio-políticos y artísticos que influyeron en la creación de las distintas obras. De esta forma, se destacan las propiedades estilísticas y estéticas de poetas individuales o sus obras dentro del discurso conceptual, histórico e intelectual en que se enmarca su trabajo y que va

¹ “Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism” (1981), incluido en *Readings at the Edge of Literature* (2002).

más allá de una consideración limitadora de escritura “Beat”. En definitiva, el objetivo principal no es analizar la posición secundaria de estas escritoras dentro de la Generación Beat a través de sus historias de triunfo o fracaso, ni reorganizar el canon “Beat” para incluir voces femeninas, sino permitir, de una vez por todas, que sea su misma poesía y arte las que revelen posibles similitudes o puntos de partida con los Beat y otras tradiciones masculinas, descartando, si se considera oportuno, las limitaciones impuestas por la etiqueta “Beat”.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In June 2015, BBC Radio 4 broadcast a 28-minute special program dedicated to, as the title indicates, “The Beat Women.” After brief interviews with Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones and Anne Waldman, the presenter, Laura Barton, who had expressed her initial uneasiness towards the way in which these writers internalized in their works and lives the misogyny of 1950s America, concludes by quoting a passage from Johnson’s memoir, *Missing Men* (1983), where the author complains about Jack Kerouac’s chauvinism: “I hate Jack’s woman-hatred, hate it, mourn it, understand, and finally forgive.” (133) Just as Johnson understood where Kerouac’s misogyny came from, and finally forgave him for it, Barton urges the listener to “understand, and forgive, and, at long last, celebrate the work of beat women.” Although this remark seems to be a much-needed encouragement of Beat women’s literature, its effectiveness is marred by the emphasis on the personal lives of the writers and poets. Indeed, although Barton referred in passing to a vast body of work that is often overshadowed by their autobiographical accounts, the broadcast revolved fundamentally around the memoirs. In much the same way, Barton’s commentary seems to fall more comfortably in biographical than in literary categories: as a modern, liberated, woman, she “did not fully understand why [Beat women] waited for these men, why they did their bidding, supported their art ahead of their own.” The feeling one is left with after hearing the program – especially after the critic Regina Weinreich states that they were indeed mostly diarists and memoirists – is that these women should – if at all – be read because of their personal connection with the men or because of their status as “survivors” of the Beat chauvinism.

Certainly, almost twenty years after the publication of Brenda Knight’s *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996), a ground-breaking anthology that introduced many of the female writers and poets associated with the Beat Generation and paved the way for subsequent quasi-archeological studies which have brought to light individual authors and works, the secondary position of many of these writers within the Beat canon still prevails. They remain relegated to a subordinate position within academic and scholar discourses, hardly ever being part of academic curricula or pushed to “all-women” panels in literary conferences. Mainstream media, additionally, continue to produce

stereotyped representations of the “Beat women” in which they are reduced to sexual objects, accessories in the men’s search for “kicks” or adventures, or to the roles of faithful wives willing to support – and endure – their husbands’ artistic careers and search for a heightened consciousness. All of these factors have obscured the women’s actual artistic and literary achievements, and have drawn attention to the necessity of, not forgiving the women for their subordination – as the presenter urged us to – but of opening up dialogues from which to reevaluate their actual work and expose the mechanisms through which it continues to be belittled.

The aim of this dissertation is to reassess the position of women writers within the Beat Generation and re-evaluate their work within (post)Beat – and extra-Beat – literary and artistic discourses. To do so, the dissertation is divided into three main chapters which focus on different themes and, incidentally, on the work of different writers and poets. Chapter two delves right into the personal versus the literary dilemma advanced with the opening anecdote by analyzing eleven memoirs written by women associated with the Beat Generation. Encompassing the work of both productive novelists and poets, writers who have only produced one memoir, in a time span that goes from 1969 to 2009 – dates of publication of the earliest and latest memoirs – this chapter serves as an introduction to the position of these women within the Beat Generation, at the same time that it delineates the socio-political context in which they lived and wrote. By investigating common themes in the memoirs – namely, writing, gender roles, and connection with the Beat Generation – this chapter situates the women in a specific socio-political and artistic context that was common to the male Beat writers, but also expands the concerns found in the works of the male Beats by dealing with themes such as motherhood, abortion, domesticity or even the responsibility of economically supporting the family. Nevertheless, this chapter goes beyond the personal position or personal experience of these authors by studying the specific use they make of memoir as a genre. Bringing into the fore life-writing studies and feminist reevaluations of the dialogue between genre and gender, this chapter argues for a thoughtful reexamination of the literary and artistic value of the – too-often – discarded memoirs.

The third chapter moves on to poetry, specifically to Joanne Kyger’s *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965), Diane di Prima’s *Loba* (1998) and Anne Waldman’s *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* (2011), to examine the way in

which these poets revise or appropriate mythological themes, characters and discourses. Kyger, for instance, works directly with Homer's *The Odyssey* to endow Penelope with a more contemporaneous mindset and space to express herself, while simultaneously keeping her "trapped" within Homer's framework. Di Prima's *Loba* – written mostly in the mid seventies – resonates more clearly with feminist appropriation of mythological characters as well as with the specific Goddess Movement. The analysis of this collection situates di Prima's she-wolf goddess within specific feminist theoretical and aesthetic discourses to study the way in which she reconciles her own vision of the goddess – as well as her creative and political aims – with the dominant approaches of the epoch. The last part of the chapter explores Anne Waldman's deconstruction of the patriarchal myths through the ongoing metaphor of "all is full of Jove" – which alludes to the omnipresent and almighty patriarch, Zeus. In addition to the focus on mythology as a fictive construction, these three poetry collections reevaluate the position of women within the epic genre. This is most noticeable in the case of Waldman's *Iovis*, which is explicitly written as a feminist epic that both honors and rejects the lineage of the modernist epic masters – Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson and Louis Zukofsky.

The last chapter in this dissertation focuses on visual arts to counteract the visual representation of women in the Beat Generation generated by the mainstream media, and situates their writing in a multi- and trans-media context that places it at the forefront of 1960s artistic and literary experimentation. In order to do so, the chapter is divided in two main sections. The first one delineates the actual involvement of poets Joanne Kyger, Joanna McClure and Anne Waldman with film and video as, mainly, mediums from which to expand their poetry and artistic vision. The last part of this chapter focuses on the connection between Ruth Weiss's poetry and the visual art world in, primarily, two different ways: the influence of visual arts like painting, sculpture and lightshows on her poetry, and the actual expansion of her poetry into other media such as painting, theater and film. As in the first two chapters, the works analyzed in this chapter comprise a long period of time – extending from the early sixties to the twenty tens – which places the work of these poets well beyond the temporal or thematic influence of the Beat Generation.

In choosing these three subjects – memoir, mythology, and the visual arts – to reevaluate the position of women writers in the Beat Generation, this thesis turns away

from catalog-style approaches revolving around individual authors and their works. While an immediate downside to my approach is that many poets and writers are left out of the scope of the study, the objective is to provide substantial analyses of themes that are deemed relevant to these writers as a group, and that have not – if at all – been properly dealt with by scholars. In addition, while the three subjects covered in each chapter call for a specific methodology, they all share a revisionist impulse through which these authors counteract their own – or women’s – position within patriarchal structures. Whether it is within the Beat canon and history, or within the gendered construction of the literary autobiographical or epic genres, the works analyzed stress the necessity of reevaluating and transforming these categories to include female experience and agency.

Incidentally, by avoiding an anthological recapitulation of writers under the “Beat Women” label, this dissertation draws attention to the necessity of disassociating their vast body of work – which in some cases extends to the present day – from a limiting and reductionist comparison with the work of canonical Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg or William Burroughs. Though connections can be found, and are stressed in the individual chapters, in general the association with these writers organically dissolves in the course of the dissertation as the themes covered go beyond the main interests of Beat literature, or are explored from new perspectives. Even chapter two, the one that most centrally takes into consideration the relationship between these authors and the dominant masculine tradition, ultimately conveys women’s appropriation of the genre to highlight the value of their own literature and poetry. This allows for a much freer space from which to analyze their literature outside of the “victim of the Beat Generation” position, at the same time that it establishes the self-sufficiency and aesthetic and thematic relevance of their work.

Finally, since the main emphasis of the present study lies on the literary and artistic production of these writers and poets, the dissertation deviates from a criticism based on “images of women” – both in Beat literature written by men or in mainstream media representations – towards an investigation of the thematic, stylistic, aesthetic or political value of memoirs, poetry or visual art work produced by women. This distinction, which was articulated by Elaine Showalter in “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979), divides feminist criticism into two approaches: the woman as a reader – or “feminist critique” – and woman as writer – or “gynocritics”. Although the approach

used in this dissertation is closer to “gynocritics”, as far as the analyses revolve around works authored by women, it also takes into consideration the necessity of including the study of these authors within prevailing – mostly masculine – social and literary discourses. More than an alternative feminine context or, as Myra Jehlen complained “a sort of female enclave apart from the universe of masculinist assumptions”² (123), in this dissertation the work of these women is analyzed from an intermediate approach which acknowledges the socio-political and artistic factors that surround the creation of the works – as well as their position or function in the world – at the same time that it stresses the stylistic and aesthetic properties of individual works or authors and the intricate conceptual, historical, and intellectual networks in which they are inserted, above and beyond their consideration as writings by Beat women.³ In short, the aim is not analyze the secondary position of women within the Beat Generation through their stories of defeat or triumph, or even to reorganize the Beat canon to include women writers and poets; but to finally allow the poetry and art produced by women to take center stage and reveal the similarities and points of departure from the Beat and other masculine traditions and, if necessary, expose the limitations imposed by such labels.

² “Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism” (1981), included in *Readings at the Edge of Literature* (2002)

³ In *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985), Toril Moi advocates for this kind of intermediate approach: “If all readings are also in a some sense political, it will hardly do to maintain The New Critic’s binary opposition between reductive political readings on the one hand and rich aesthetics appraisal on the other. If aesthetics raises the question of whether (and how) the text works effectively with an audience, it obviously is bound up with the political: without a aesthetic effect there will be no political effect either.” (85)

CHAPTER II:

MEMOIR IN WOMEN OF THE BEAT GENERATION

II.1. Personal Experience and the Beat Generation

In 1955, Jack Kerouac wrote a letter to Arabelle Porter – editor of the *New World Writing* journal – in which he included a list of essentials for his spontaneous prose, a new writing method he was championing. Among the essentials Kerouac felt American prose needed, there was exaltation of personal experience and individuality. Similarly, he laid emphasis on the need to “[b]e in love with your life every detail of it,”⁴ (487) to write about “the unspeakable visions of the individual,” (487) and to feel “[n]o fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language & knowledge” (487). The seemingly all-inclusive call for personal experience was, therefore, given expression in the subject-matter of much of the work of the Beat Generation writers which, when not completely autobiographical, had many autobiographical elements. Nonetheless, the predominance of male authors inevitably led to the portrayal of almost exclusively male characters which resulted, consequently, in a narrow and stereotyped representation of women and female experience in their works.

The literary canon and criticism have traditionally favored this unbalance, often making explicit that the valorization of personal experience really stands for the valorization of male experience at the expense of female experience. Such male bias is epitomized, in the case of the Beats, in the triumvirate Kerouac-Ginsberg-Burroughs, which still dominates in the perception of this group in the academic world.⁵ As the last

⁴ Ann Charters, ed. *Selected Letters: Jack Kerouac 1940-1956* (1996). Further references to this work will be cited in the text and referred to as *Letters*.

⁵ The prevalence of the focus on the male core Beats is noticeable in the academic and scholar world. In the American Literature courses in which the Beat Generation manages to get into the syllabus, it is normally with the analysis of *On the Road*, “Howl” or “Kaddish” and *Naked Lunch*. In courses with a greater focus on the Beat Generation, Gregory Corso and Diane di Prima might jump into the spotlight, but they still leave behind many names, especially female writers. The scholar world is no exception to this rule, and although there has been recent and important studies devoted to the women of the Beat

decade of scholarly studies of the Beat Generation has drawn attention to, the work of female Beat writers has remained essentially ignored or undervalued for a long time.

Even though this eclipse did not only overshadow female names – poets Bob Kaufman and Jack Michelin are also often neglected in studies on the Beats – it seems as if the work of female Beats was particularly easy to avoid; leaving their personal experience as secondary or inconsequential to the Beat Generation’s ethos. An example of this is found in the early reception of the memoirs written by female Beats. In 1976, John Clellon Holmes – author of the proto-Beat novel *Go* – wrote an introduction to Carolyn Cassady’s *Heartbeat*, an excerpt and early draft of her memoir *Off the Road*. In the introduction, Holmes begins by exposing the male dominance in the Beat movement, stating that:

[...] the chronicles of the Beat Generation have been almost exclusively written by men. The restless search for those illuminations of the spirit via the senses that characterized the Beats has been mostly depicted from the vantage point of the young men of the 1940’s and 50’s. Now, with Carolyn Cassady’s book, we have the first account of those eruptive years as experienced by a woman. (i)

In this excerpt, Holmes seems to be drawing attention to the necessity of including female experience into the history of the Beat Generation. However, as one reads on, it becomes evident that the value of Carolyn’s experience lies solely in what she can add to the knowledge we already have about Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady. Given the right to speak as wife of Cassady and lover of Kerouac, her account is not important as the representation of an alternative female experience, but only because of its ability to shed some light on the relationship of two major figures of the movement. The rest of Holmes’s introduction, then, is dedicated to the men – Neal, Jack and Allen – with Carolyn serving a weak link between them. When Holmes finally gets to Carolyn again, at the end of the introduction, he does so to stress two qualities which he values the most in her memoir, her “reflectiveness” and her “quietness,” two

Generation, it was not until September 2013 when the University of Agder (Norway) organized the first conference exclusively dedicated to female Beats.

nouns which clearly compromise the expression of her personal experience and turn her account into a vehicle for the experience of her better known male compeers.⁶

The aim of this chapter is to offer a new space for the analysis of female experience in the Beat Generation. To do so, I am focusing on the autobiographical writing of female Beats who, in the last three decades, have produced numerous accounts. These accounts have been defined as memoirs deliberately by their authors or their publishers – as part of the title – or have been read or advertised as such by critics and the general public. The memoirs analyzed in this study are Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969)⁷ and *Recollections of my Life as a Woman* (2002),⁸ Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters* (1983)⁹ and *Missing Men* (2004),¹⁰ Carolyn Cassady's *Off the Road* (1990) and *Heartbeat* (1976), Hettie Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones* (1990),¹¹ Brenda Frazer's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* (1969),¹² Joan Haverty's *Nobody's Wife* (2000), Edie Parker's *You'll Be Okay* (2007) and Helen Weaver's *The Awakener: A Memoir of Kerouac and the Fifties* (2009).

Situating these memoirs in the context of life-writing studies and feminist revisions of history, this chapter argues that the memoir is used as a tool to re-tell the story and re-write the history of the Beat Generation to overcome the eclipse projected by their better known male writers and fellow-travelers. Far from using the memoirs as passive accounts of their relationship to male Beats – as shown in Holmes' reading of Carolyn's *Heartbeat* – some of these writers use this genre as a loophole to position themselves as subjects and participators in the movement and, more importantly, as writers.¹³

⁶ While Holmes' description of Cassady's account has some truth to it, he is not using it as a stylistic analysis of her prose – for instance, her self-contained narration – but rather as an enticement for those readers who might read her memoir as a historical document of the male Beat icons.

⁷ Further references to this book will be given in the text and referred to as *Memoirs* when necessary.

⁸ Further references to this book will be given in the text and referred to as *Recollections* when necessary.

⁹ Further references to this work will be given in the text and referred to as *Characters* when necessary.

¹⁰ Further references to this book will be given in the text and referred to as *Missing* when necessary.

¹¹ Further references to this work will be given in the text and referred to as *Became* when necessary.

¹² Further references to this work will be given in the text and referred to as *Troia* when necessary.

¹³ Back in 1994, in the landmark Beat conference organized by The NY University School of Education, Anne Waldman called for scholarly studies on memoir as a genre to empower women, to tell the back story of the canonical Beats. More than twenty years after this remark, and in light of the scarce attention memoirs have received, I hope this chapter can correct this omission.

The goal therefore, is twofold: firstly, to explore the particular function and conventions of the memoir as a genre in a specific context within feminist theories and acts of empowerment of silenced collectives. Secondly, to analyze stylistic and thematic characteristics present in the memoirs and place them in the socio-political context in which they were written or in which the stories took place.

Before beginning with the analysis of the memoirs, the study delves into a theoretical discussion of the differences between memoir and autobiography to try to shed some light into an issue which remains highly controversial. After this theoretical background, the literature review provides an overview of how Beat memoirs have been analyzed by critics, which situates the aim of this study within existent analysis of Beat literature. Following that, the specific way the memoir as a genre is employed by women Beat writers is considered, drawing from the theoretical background previously provided. The objective is to situate the memoir as a genre which is especially suitable for the expression of the feminine experience, especially that of the female writer. After this, the analysis of the memoirs is divided into three main subsections which correspond to themes recurrent in the texts: 1) the process of writing and the act of writing, 2) Gender roles and motherhood, and 3) the connection with the Beat Generation.

II.1.1. Memoir versus Autobiography

“A man’s face is his autobiography;
A woman’s face is a work of fiction”¹⁴

Oscar Wilde

Autobiography, memoir, life-writing, life-story, journal, autography, biomythography etc., are some of the words which circulate in academic studies used to describe written or oral accounts of one’s life. The profuse, and at times conflicting, definitions of these terms complicate the analysis of any autobiographical work. As Laura Marcus states, autobiography becomes troublesome:

because of its very instability in terms of the postulated opposites between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object. In an intellectual context in which these are seen as irreconcilably distinct,

¹⁴ To see this quote in the context of Wilde’s life and texts, see Oliver S. Buckton’s *Secret Selves: Confession and Same-sex Desire in Victorian Autobiography*.

autobiography will appear either as a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation. (“The Face of Autobiography” 14)

If autobiography per se is prone to creating confusion because of the different study fields and areas it touches upon, its analysis becomes further complicated when one tries to distinguish it from any of the before-mentioned related terms, especially from its first cousin – its evil twin to some – the memoir.¹⁵ While the aim of this chapter is not to produce a theoretical or terminological revision of autobiographical genres and subgenres, to the scope of this study it is important to show in which way the use of the word “autobiography” or “memoir” might affect the way a given work is constructed by the author, as well as how it is received by critics and the general public. Unfortunately, the distinction between autobiographies and memoirs is not as clear-cut as one could hope for – being used interchangeably on more than one occasion. For some critics, the difference has to do with the period of time the work covers – whole life for autobiographies and a shorter and more specific period of time for memoirs (Rainer; Zinsser). While for others, it is the subject focus what makes the work an autobiography or a memoir – autobiographies deal with the writing subject, and memoirs tend to be relational, narrating the life of others and shifting the focus away from the writing subject (Pascal; Larson; Yagoda).¹⁶

At the same time, as it has been pointed out, autobiography or autobiographical writing in general is difficult to define as a genre, as it touches upon different disciplines and is frequently, as Marcus notes, “on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary” (qtd. in Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield 160). Bearing all of this in mind, one could even argue whether the effort to differentiate autobiography from memoir, or any of the related words, is of any use at all. Nonetheless, the proliferation over the years – especially after the 1990s – of autobiographical accounts defined as memoirs by women associated with the Beat Generation makes it worthwhile to wonder whether the use of the term “memoir” in their works adds anything to their value or whether, on the

¹⁵ In “Are Memoirs Autobiography?: A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity”, Julie Rak shows the peculiar history of the word memoir, and describes how memoir, being coined and used before “autobiography” has come to be seen as a secondary, inferior form of autobiographical writing.

¹⁶ In his book Yagoda notes how the relational impulse of the 19th and 20th Centuries seems to have changed in the 21st Century, where we find memoirs written about oneself.

contrary, it hinders their inclusion in literary history and the Beat canon. In this chapter I argue that the labeling of their works as “memoir” is not coincidental,¹⁷ but actually serves a specific function in the texts. For the time being, this section focuses on the distinction between memoir and autobiography, paying special attention to the dyads reality versus fiction, historical facts versus personal remembrance, to see which definition can be better applied to the memoirs of the female Beats.

In *Palimpsest: A Memoir*, Gore Vidal narrates forty years of his life, and ventures to give a definition of the genre in relation to the veracity of that which is being told. With this in mind, he states that a memoir is “how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked” (5). According to Vidal, the memoir differs from autobiography in that the latter can be trusted, in theory, to stand for the truth. In this paradigm, the autobiographer becomes a historian, researching, looking for connections and double-checking everything so that the story is as reliable and objective as it can be. On the contrary, the memoir is described as personal remembrance; it is connected to, and according to Vidal’s words, solely based on, the inevitably subjective and slippery act of memory. Separated from the respectable and truth-holding History, the memoir is pushed against the realm of fiction, described as a remembrance and read almost as a fictional work disguised with autobiographical elements. Such distinctions have led some critics to undervalue the genre, establishing it as secondary literature, an idea which still prevails. As early as 1909, Anna Robeson Burr, for example, described the memoir, or the “spurious autobiography” as a dishonest genre she considered worse than fake autobiographical tales. As she noted, memoirs are:

more subtly dangerous than the frankly spurious class. The spurious autobiography is the refuge of both the sciolist and the literary charlatan. Once thrown upon life, difficult to avow, impossible to recall, it lurks about the decent society of books like some base-born adventurer, communicating

¹⁷ In this respect, it would be extremely useful to interview the authors to find out whether the decision to label their works “memoirs” was their choice, or if it was the publishing houses’. Similarly, it would be interesting to see, if they were consciously writing a memoir, whether they think that affected in any way the style, thematic interest, structure, etc. of their works, or if it had been different – or not – had they written autobiographies. Letters included in Hettie Jones Papers (Rare Books and Manuscripts, Columbia University) point towards a tension between her own stylistic or aesthetic approach to story-telling and the different publishing houses’ demands.

distrust...When the original circumstance of its writing is forgotten, it becomes listed under biography in the libraries. (156)

The danger, for Burr, lies in the fact that if memoirs are mistaken for autobiography, and one forgets their fictional nature, they can come to be seen as representative of the truth. One has to be careful, then, so as not to mistake a truthful autobiography, with a false, gossip-oriented, memoir. Burr argues that it is in the recognition of the autobiographical intention¹⁸ of the writer that the reader can analyze a given work as truthful or invented, but we are yet again left without a way of recognizing the autobiographical intention. To complicate matters, there is a recent and powerful move in autobiographical criticism that tends to undervalue the memoir by reiterating its position as an inferior form of writing. As part of this trend, critics have seen memoirs as platforms for non-writers, or people with little or no literary ambition to tell their stories. Although some of this criticism dates back to the 1970s, this movement has recently been fueled by the “Memoir Boom” – as it has been referred to by critics like Leigh Gilmore – experienced by the American literary marketplace. The success of easy-reading gossip tales, normally written by or on behalf of celebrities, has added to the already existent negative stereotype of the memoir, which now more than ever is seen as opportunistic and anti-literary.

In addition, even if it is quite complicated to prove the veracity of both autobiography and memoir, it seems the leap of faith or the “autobiographical pact” in Philippe Lejeune’s conceptualization,¹⁹ is more easily made when dealing with works labeled as autobiographies, especially so when the author is male, and even more so when the author belongs to a social group historically empowered in a given society. Consequently, the discourse about memoir/autobiography, fact/fiction, cannot be properly dealt with without noticing how gender politics have shaped most of the dilemma. In fact, if the boundary between fact and fiction is blurred in autobiographical works written by men, it seems the line is even harder to establish when dealing with autobiographies written by women. Power relations and the construction of the literary canon work hand in hand in the establishment of what comes to be seen as canonical or

¹⁸ Burr mentions Marie Bashkirtsev’s *Journal d’une Jeune Artiste* as containing the best description of what constitutes a proper autobiographical intention, which is writing “as if no one in the world were to read it, yet with the purpose of being read” (30).

¹⁹ A pact between the writer and the reader by which the autobiographer commits himself to produce a sincere examination of his own life.

representative of a given genre, historical or literary epoch. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that traditional studies of autobiographical writing have primarily, if not exclusively, focused on the work of the “Great Men”²⁰ who make up a significantly reduced percentage of the total population, and whose lives end up being perceived as the norm, excluding everything else as deviant or unimportant – a mere fantasy tale versus the truth.

Fortunately, the last three decades have witnessed an increase in scholarship that has strived to question and expose the subordination of minority groups in the construction of the autobiographical tradition. As Laura Marcus notes, gender studies and feminist revisions of literary history have been extremely valuable for the rescue and reevaluation of collectives historically oppressed. Specifically, she argues how:

[a]utobiography was a central case for feminist criticisms in the 1980s, exposing processes of exclusion and marginalization in the construction of literary canons. Not only were women autobiographers self-evidently outside the ‘Great Men’ tradition with which many autobiographical critics operated; generic definitions served to exclude forms of ‘life-writing’ such as diaries, letters and journals, often adopted by women and those outside mainstream literary culture. (“The Face of Autobiography” 1)

Against the white male who has traditionally represented canonicity, women and other minorities have shaken the foundations of what autobiography stood for both by inserting their life-stories in the canon, and by making available alternative forms of autobiographical writing which were not employed by canonical autobiographers. For example, women have taken advantage of diary-writing and memoirs to find a loophole through which to express their subjectivity.²¹ In addition, by deviating from the androcentric voice which reigns in traditional autobiographies, women look for a different mode of portraying their personal experience. Some feminist criticism has even focused on the connection between the different forms of autobiographical accounts written by women and a, in theory, intrinsically different approach to identity

²⁰ This tradition started with Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, and has gained strength with authors such as Montaigne, Hume, Rousseau, etc.

²¹ As Jane Marcus, observes, “Unlike epic poetry, the drama, or the novel, the memoir made no grand claims to high artistic achievement. Consequently women could write in this genre without threatening male hegemony of offering claims to competition” (1988: 120).

formation based on gender. As Tess Cosslett points out, “if women have more relational, or more fragmented selves, if they have difficulties with subjecthood, as Patricia Waugh has argued, their stories will take a different shape [...] fiction, and the biographies of others, will enter into their ‘autobiographies’” (2). Therefore, recent feminist criticism of autobiography seems to point to a set of characteristics which might be found in autobiographical accounts written by women and that, to a certain extent, can be said to affect – or infect, for those who consider it a degradation – clear-cut definitions of autobiography.

In spite of memoir’s history of negative stereotyping – seen as secondary literature, closer to fiction than autobiography and even interpreted as pure gossip – Beat women, most of them writers and authors of other works of fiction and poetry, chose or accepted the label “memoir,” and not “autobiography,” for their accounts. The next two sections deal more explicitly with the way memoir – which has achieved a central position in recent female Beat criticism – is used by these authors.

II.1.2. The Women & their Work: State of the Art

As mentioned in the introduction, the body of work of this chapter comprises those autobiographical accounts written by women associated with the Beat Generation which, either have been defined as “memoirs” by themselves or their publishers, or have been received and analyzed as such by critics and the academia. The reader might notice, therefore, the absence of crucial names to the movement whose work is not analyzed in this study. Joanne Kyger, Janine Pommy Vega, Anne Waldman and others, although having a vast and outstanding body of work, are not included in the analysis as the chapter concentrates only on women writers who have written works explicitly built or read as memoirs.

That being said, studying these texts as a group can be done from several perspectives which can, incidentally, influence the analyses. For example, one could group the texts chronologically by dates of publication. In this case, the early ones date back to 1969 – *Memoirs of a Beatnik*²² and *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* – followed by *Heartbeat* (1976) and *Minor Characters* (1983). 1990 saw the publication of two of these memoirs – *Off the Road* and *How I Became Hettie Jones*. Finally, after a ten-year

²² Diane di Prima had already published *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* (1958), *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), *Seven Love Poems from the Middle Latin* (1965), *Freddie Poems* (1974) and *War Poems* (1968).

break, a new wave of memoirs broke in the 2000s – *Nobody’s Wife* (2000) *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2001), *Missing Men* (2005) and *You’ll Be Okay: My Life with Jack Kerouac* (2007) and *The Awakener: A Memoir of Kerouac and the Fifties* (2009).

Similarly, one could also analyze the memoirs in relation to the date of birth of their authors, and their chronological position in the Beat Generation’s history. In “Mapping Women Writers of the Beat Generation”²³ Ronna C. Johnson establishes a division of women Beat writers according to three different generations; these generations, as she states, “correspond to the well-known male writer’s first and second generations, and stretch beyond into a third” (*Cool* 8). To the purpose of this chapter, it is relevant to point out that none of the first generation women²⁴ – Helen Adams, Madeline Gleason or Ruth Weiss²⁵ – wrote memoirs, and that the majority of memoirs studied here were written by second generation writers²⁶, those born in the thirties and therefore a decade younger than the core Beats. These include di Prima, Johnson, Jones and Frazer. The same lack of memoirs is found in third generation writers – those born during the Second World War – including names such as Waldman and Pommy Vega.²⁷ Edie Kerouac Parker (1923) and Joan Haverty Kerouac (1931) and Helen

²³ Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson, eds. *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. Further references to this work will be given in the text and referred to as *Cool* when necessary.

²⁴ Edie Parker, born in 1922, should be considered first generation writer, however, she is excluded from the writer category.

²⁵ In communion with the Beat ethos, Ruth Weiss tends to rely on personal experience for her poetry. In works like *Single Out* or *Full Circle* Weiss gives expression to her life through poetry, inserting many autobiographical details. In much the same way, *Can’t Stop the Beat* (2011), although described as by Anne Waldman as a “fragmented Memoir-Cum-poetry [...giving] a pungent and moving sense of her life and times” (*Can’t Stop the Beat* n.p.n.) is a collection of some of her works rather than a memoir per se. All of these works will be dealt with in Chapter III.

²⁶ A possible explanation is that second generation writers felt a greater need to write memoirs both to illustrate their lives and interaction in the movement, and also to make visible other works prior to the memoirs. While first generation writers might have been too close to appreciate their position in the movement, and third generation writers might have felt less excluded from the boy-gang, as Anne Waldman has commented, second generation writers were directly influenced by male works like *On the Road* or “Howl,” and as they were closer to the men’s success might have felt how they often lagged behind their male counterparts.

²⁷ Vega turns to forms of life-writing in *Journal of a Hermit* (1975) and in *Tracking the Serpent* (1997) which, to some extent, could also be read as autobiographical or memoir-like. In fact, in Brenda Knight’s *Women of the Beat Generation*, *Tracking the Serpent* is referred to first as an autobiography, and then as a memoir. It has also been read as a lyrical memoir and travel memoir. Though it certainly could be read as autobiography, I believe the genre Vega was more consciously using – or misusing – is the travel narrative, which she revises to fit her search for traces of worship of female deities. Eileen Kaufman – who was married to Bob Kaufman – started writing a memoir in 1986 entitled *Who Wouldn’t Walk with Tigers?* Although excerpts from this memoir have been published in Brenda Knight’s *Women of the Beat*

Weaver (1931), although corresponding chronologically to first and second generation, are not included in Johnson's repertoire. In fact, in *Women of the Beat Generation: the Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution*,²⁸ Brenda Knight includes both Edie Parker and Joan Haverty – as well as Carolyn Cassady – in “the Muses” category.²⁹ This category, which also includes names such as Joan Vollmer Burroughs, Eileen Kaufman, Helen Hinkle or even Kerouac's mother Gabrielle Kerouac, is built around those women who served as inspiration – directly or indirectly – to the work of male Beats. It is interesting to note that while some of these women never wrote or published books, others like Cassady, Haverty and Parker – who did write memoirs – are not considered writers, minimizing the importance of their books or seeing them only in relation to their relationships with male Beats. Interestingly, it seems it is not just the quantity, but the quality – or lack of it – of the books they wrote that places women under the “muses” or “writers” category. Brenda Frazer's memoir, for example, while it was also the only book she published,³⁰ is placed in the same category as di Prima, Kyger, Johnson, weiss, or Waldman, to name a few. This might be due to the fact that unlike Cassady's, Haverty's, Parker's or Weaver's memoirs, *Troia* has a distinctively “Beat” style – she was highly influenced by Kerouac's prose – and the storyline also represents, more typically, the life of a “Beat” person.

Therefore, the category of “women Beat writers” fluctuates in some of these works, raising issues of authorial identity and status. For example, in general critics and scholars consider “writers” those Beat women with more or less established literary careers and published works. Nonetheless, Brenda Frazer – with little published material – usually accesses the category. While I am not arguing against the label of writer for Frazer, I believe strict categorizations are detrimental to these women, and negatively influences the way the works are received. Besides, it can be somewhat

Generation and Ann Charters's *Beat Down to Your Soul*, the memoir remains, to her death in February 2015, still unpublished.

²⁸ Brenda Knight. *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution*. San Francisco: Conari Press, 1996. Further references to this work will be given in the text and referred to as *Women* when necessary.

²⁹ Weaver is not included in the book. Mostly known as a translator, and with a memoir which was published more than a decade after Knight's book was released, the absence comes as no surprise.

³⁰ In Ann Charters' anthology *Beat Down to your Soul* there are two short stories which are described as early chapters of her memoir. The first one, entitled “Poets and Odd Fellows” narrates how she met and fell in love with Ray Bremser while attending a poetry reading where Beat poets performed. The second one, “The Village Scene,” narrates their life as newly-weds in the Village, Frazer's need to work to support the couple, and her role as the poet's muse.

unfair to neglect the writer position just because they only managed to publish one book – especially if we bear in mind the historical limited access to publishing women have suffered from. For example, Edie Parker – whose book is the least literary of all – spent more than just a few months writing her memoir, and if her intention was to publish an easy book to profit economically, time played a dirty trick on her, as she died long before her book was published. Besides, as her papers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill attest to, she also wrote essays and poems which remained, on the whole, unpublished. Joan Haverty, similarly, also wrote more throughout her life than her memoir shows. As Knight writes, “[a]lthough she wrote constantly and tirelessly throughout her life, Joan destroyed most of it, for she viewed writing as something private, a way she worked things out for herself” (*Women* 88). In light of the rest of memoirs analyzed here, one cannot help but wonder if behind this reasoning of writing for oneself lies a conscious decision or if, on the contrary, it is the product of the “special syndrome” Diane di Prima describes women artists suffering from. As we will see in following sections, there is indeed a noticeable feeling of guilt and shame towards writing in many of the memoirs analyzed.

Nevertheless, whether the analyses include more or fewer authors, life-writing by Beat women, especially due to its increased visibility after Johnson’s *Minor Characters*, has attracted a fair amount of critical and scholarly attention. In this section, I go through some of these texts to have an overview of what has been said about life writing in women of the Beat Generation in general, or about specific aspects on individual memoirs. On the following revision of literature, the tension present in criticism between “writers” and “women who have written memoirs” becomes evident. The memoirs the different critics choose to analyze, as well as the way the texts are regarded, say something of the reception of the texts, which depends heavily on the prior position of women in the specific literary canon of women Beat writers.

In 1996, Helen McNeil analyzed gender disparities in the Beat Generation through the initial reception of Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). The essay concentrates on gender discourses surrounding Beat history, and highlights the exclusion of female Beat writers by pointing, at the same time, at the narrow representation of femininity in the work of male Beats. While life writing is not the main concern of the article, the author considers Joyce Johnson’s *Minor Characters* and Brenda Frazer’s *Troia*:

*Mexican Memoirs*³¹ in her analysis. Nonetheless, McNeil offers only a superficial analysis, using the memoirs to contextualize the feminine exclusion or the negative consequences – as it is in Frazer’s case – of being a woman leading a “beat” life.

Barret Watten (2002) has focused on the dialogue existent between Hettie’s and Leroy Jones’s work to analyze the relationship between form and content or, in his terms, between “poetic agency” and “historical motivation” (98). The essay emphasizes the presence of Hettie’s poetry in the memoir as crucial to the discovery of her own identity, and her early literary blockade is seen as an initial failure to come to terms with who her true self. Watten argues that Hettie’s lack of identification with her literary side is expressed in the narrative in an excessive valorization of material culture – her various editing job, the creation and management of the literary magazine *Yugen*, or Totem Press – which is seen as a substitute for her own poems and work. He also notices the tension between memoir as a “social document,” as the critics in *The New York Times* review wrote, and the reception of the memoir for its literary value.

Nancy M. Grace (2002) has pointed out to the controversy the use of memoir, genre usually relegated to secondary literature and linked to pejorative connotations, has created in the life-writing produced by women of the Beat Generation. In her article, Grace emphasizes the irony behind the fact that it precisely this genre which has served as the “vehicle that has brought to public attention the presence of women artists in the Beat literary movement” (“Snapshots, Sand Painting, and Celluloid” 141). Focusing on *Minor Characters, How I Became Hettie Jones, Troia: Mexican Memoirs* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Grace analyzes the style and techniques employed to recall the past and well as the devices used – such as irony or multiplicity of selves – to recreate the speaking-I.

Roseanne Giannini Quinn (2003) has analyzed part of di Prima’s body of work – including *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Recollections of my Life as a Woman* – through her socio-political position as a young Italian American woman writer. Quinn reads the memoirs to contextualize the poet in a specific Italian upbringing and explores the

³¹ In the article the memoir is referred to as *For Love of Ray*, the name of the second edition. As Ann Charters explains in the introduction to the 2007 Dalkey Archive edition, [t]he first edition of Bonnie’s memoir was published by Croton Press in 1969 with the title *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* and republished as *For Love of Ray* by London Magazine Editions in 1971” (vi).

consequences of growing up ethnic in America.³² In the article she praises di Prima's courage to *speak* her way out of not only the history of marginalization of female Beats in particular, but also the marginalization of Italian American women writers in the American canon. Her analysis shows how di Prima's Italian heritage permeates her two memoirs, an interesting approach to ethnicity that is not common in Beat scholarship.

More recently Gillian Thompson (2011) analyzes various mechanisms used by women of the Beat Generation to inscribe themselves in the movement's legacy. Through the analysis of *Minor Characters*, she discusses Johnson's conscious move to portray herself outside the circle³³ – as a critical observer – at the same time that she emphasizes the small impact the Beat Generation actually had on the development of her literary voice, supporting the idea that the memoir detaches her from the object she is supposed to be relating to.

Ronna C. Johnson (2012) has investigated cross-cultural aspects and gender issues in *Troia*. In the first part of the essay, Johnson discusses the controversies the text raises due to its complicated relationship with authorship. Written by Frazer in epistolary form, but edited by Ray Bremser and Michael Perkins, *Troia* stands as a complex artifact in relation to “female Beat's struggles for literary legitimacy” (52). Frazer's narrative, according to Johnson, serves as an “auto-ethnographic text,”³⁴ (53) that challenges hegemonic representations through appropriation and auto representation, at the same time that it subverts the road tale narrative through the female protagonist's tension between prostitution and maternity.

More comprehensive studies of life-writing in women of the Beat Generation include two published dissertations. The first one, Larissa Bendel's *The Requirements of*

³² An excerpt of di Prima's *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, focusing on early memories of her grandmother, is included in *Growing up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction about Learning to Be American*. (eds., Maria Mazzotti Gillan & Jennifer Gillan) The collection also includes other writers interested in ethnicity such as Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, or Sandra Cisneros.

³³ Even Jack Kerouac, who was given the title of the King of the Beats, showed a certain amount of distance from the movement and the characters he included in his novels. As Michael Davidson points out regarding Sal's famous lines – “and I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones who are mad to live, mad to talk...” (113) – stating that “Kerouac's characteristic position, shambling after the ‘mad ones,’ allows him both a narrative and an existential distance from his own story: He may act as first and third person, subject and observer of his own story, even while the ostensible focus is the wild, spontaneous life of others” (*The San Francisco Renaissance* 68).

³⁴ Using Mary Louise Pratt's terminology.

our Life Is the Form of our Art: Autobiographik von Frauen der Beat Generation (2005), analyzes the autobiographical writing of female Beats³⁵ from a postmodern perspective in which the fictionalization of the text works in relation to the American myth of the self-made man. Thus, she focuses on the text as a linguistic construction in which complicates historian objectivity. A second dissertation, Heike Mlakar's *Merely Being There is not Enough: Women's Roles in Autobiographical Texts by Female Beat Writers* (2008), offers an analysis and categorization of memoir writing by female Beats in light of societal expectations of the time, and the authors' position within "beat" writing. While providing valuable insight into some aspects of the memoirs, her study lacks a global perspective as it only focuses on four memoirs: di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Frazer's *Troia*, Johnson's *Minor Characters* and Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones*.³⁶

This chapter uses many of the insights advanced in this body of scholarship, but aims at more comprehensive analysis. It encompasses a larger scope of memoirs written by female Beats and seeks to theorize life-writing in a feminist and proto-feminist context. At the same time, besides placing the works in a specific socio-cultural and literary period through the analysis of different themes recurrent in the memoirs, the study also looks at the stylistic characteristics of the texts and their revision, imitation or rejection of Beat aesthetics.

II.2. The Memoir as a Feminine Genre to Re-write the Past

Memoirs are a wonderful form because real lives are stranger than fiction. Their stories are shaggier; they are not as shaped and predictable as a lot of fiction. I think that is what keeps the genre fresh and people keep inventing new forms to tell their stories

(Joyce Johnson, interview, NBCC)

³⁵ Rather than focusing on memoir, Bendel focuses on the autobiographical self, opening up the analysis to include works like Janine Pommy Vega's *Tracking the Serpent*, or collections of correspondence like Johnson's *A Beat Love Affair in Letters, 1957-1958* or Kyger's *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journals, 1960-1964*. Since the aim of this chapter is not only to study autobiographical writing – which permeates much of the work of these writers – but to investigate the way in which they make use of memoir as genre, I only consider those works which are labeled or written as such.

³⁶ A short Masters dissertation by Patricia A. Pantano – entitled *Women of the Beat Generation Joyce Johnson, Diane di Prima, and Carolyn Cassady: Female Agency in Transitional Times* (2010) uses the Jeanne Perreault's approach to "autography" to explore the memoirs of Johnson, di Prima and Cassady.

Before delving into the analysis of the different themes studied in the memoirs, this section looks at the specific way the genre functions in relation to the position of these writers to the Beat Generation and the literary canon, at the same time that it contextualizes the texts within the authors' lives. I argue that the inconsistencies and contradictions which emerge from the study of life-writing in general, and the definition of memoir in particular, can be precisely analyzed as reasons why memoir becomes a fitter tool for women writers to challenge prevailing stories in which their presence was erased, offering a space for the construction of alternative versions of history. In addition, the categorical and aesthetic ambiguity of memoir turns it into a double-edged weapon, an apparently innocent but very powerful device women Beat writers have taken advantage of. To explore the relationship of the texts with the genre, I reflect on theoretical discourses of the genre to analyze the way the works studied here revise or appropriate the format.

For example, if we take into consideration the two most frequently-mentioned defining characteristics of memoir – the period of time covered and the subject focus – it becomes evident that not all the memoirs analyzed follow the same format. While in general the memoirs focus on the coming-of-age of the authors during the 1940s and 1950s, and their interactions or relationships with members of the Beat Generation, they are not always restricted to these years. Similarly, even if the titles promise a great focus on male Beats, most of the works shift the spotlight to address female subjectivity and experience. Furthermore, the memoirs are also used as platforms from which to emphasize their careers as writers – either by explicitly mentioning previous works, or by describing their techniques, and literary influences. The following individual analyses of these characteristics in the memoirs serve as an overview of the use of memoir in female Beat writers.

Brenda Frazer's³⁷ *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*, narrating her run from the law and escape to Mexico during the early sixties, shows the narrowest time-span of all the memoirs studied here and, in that sense, does follow more strictly the time restrictions of memoir. Nonetheless, although the memoir was later published as *For Love of Ray*,

³⁷ Following Nancy Grace and Ronna Johnson's example, in this study I will refer to Brenda Frazer – the author's real name – when referring to Frazer as a writer, and Bonnie Bremser – the name she adopted after marrying Ray Bremser – when referring to her as a character in her memoir.

the presence of Ray Bremser³⁸ is erased from the surface of the story, so that the focus of the text is on her survival during extremely difficult years, rather than on Ray's arrest or her abusive relationship with him. Ray's almost diabolical shadow is felt in the subtext of the story – being actually the addressee – but it is the author's choice not to focus on his actions, and face the consequences of the decisions she makes on her own – leaving their daughter behind being the hardest. Frazer finds a motivation within the narrative through the healing properties of writing, as she states: “[d]amn the pain; it must be written” (43). It is in the remembrance of the pain, and in its writing it down, that the author finds her strength, as she states, to “vow that I will live, and what's more, I vow that I will live to tell it” (99). *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* is a complex and compelling tale of abuse, addiction and despair in which the defiant and raw voice of the author speaks without barriers of the tragic consequences of the darker side of a “beat” lifestyle. It stands out from the rest of the memoirs analyzed in this chapter both thematically and stylistically, as I will analyze in subsequent sections. For the time being, while *Troia* conveys the short time span of memoirs, it challenges the relational approach by making her own pain and feelings towards what she went through as the main focus of the text, even if the ending speaks to the contrary.³⁹

Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*⁴⁰ (1983), Hettie Jones's *How I became Hettie Jones* (1990) and Diane di Prima's *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*⁴¹ (2001), share a greater focus on their author's childhood and girlhood, especially Jones's and di Prima's, which helps create the notion of a pre-existing – if not already formed – unique personality before being part or even hearing about the Beat Generation. For example,

³⁸ Ray Bremser was an American Poet often associated with the Beats who married Brenda Frazer in 1959. In Frazer's memoir, Ray is portrayed in relation to his problems with the law and his often violent outbursts.

³⁹ The book concludes with a desperate and lonely Bonnie who, after having left her child in Mexico, returns to New York and walks absent-mindedly through The Village. There she finds Ray by chance and, after taking drugs with him and beginning this way a new addiction, they have what is described to be as “the perfect fuck” and, as in an X-rated revision of the Sleeping Beauty fairytale, perfection returns to her life with a touch from the prince. It is important to note here that Bonnie did not arrange the final draft of the book, which she wrote over the years in letters she sent to Ray while he was in prison. The typed manuscript of *Troia*, entitled “Troia, or Memoirs of a Curious Courtesan” – available at The New York Public Library – does conclude with the “perfect fuck” anecdote; besides the fact that the memoir was edited, it should not be forgotten that it was written for Ray.

⁴⁰ I only mention here *Minor Characters* and not *Missing Men*, since the former is Johnson's first memoir and the one more clearly connected to the Beat scene.

⁴¹ Di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* will be analyzed later since, although a witty and humorous account, it is a fake memoir, and therefore does not share the same aim as *Recollections*.

Hettie Jones describes her early longing for independence by relating how she “started leaving home when [she] was six and weighed thirty-eight pounds” (5). Johnson describes the excitement she felt as a ten-year-old about going to a part of the neighborhood her mother had banned her from and labeled – in a pun for other places similarly prohibited for Joyce – “Down Below” (8). Likewise di Prima describes the influence of her grandfather, who read her Dante and told her stories which made her feel as if a “huge responsibility of knowledge lay on [her], age four or five” (9) showing her what it means to “Struggle for Truth” (9). All of these descriptions help the reader get an idea of who these women are as individuals, so that they are not seen just in relation to or in association with male members of the Beat Generation. Besides that, these memoirs are written by the most productive of the Beat women writers.⁴² By the time the memoirs were written, di Prima and Johnson had already been published books ranging from fiction, non-fiction, poem collections, and plays, and their literary career is present in the memoirs.⁴³ For example, Johnson mentions on several occasions that she was writing her novel *Come and Join the Dance* – which she published in 1962 – at the same time that she discusses her reading interests and early influences for her writing. Jones, who uses her memoir to draw attention to her own literary ambition, published poetry and other works after the success of her memoir.

In none of these memoirs – *Minor Characters*, *How I Became Hettie Jones* and *Recollections of my Life as a Woman* – is the narrative subordinated to Beat history or the stories of male Beat writers. Quite the opposite, the three works depict in great detail the formation of each author’s character and, more importantly, the place of literature in their lives. With this move, the authors avoid being seen as mere bystanders or “minor characters” in a larger and male-dominated movement, investing through the memoir in their identities as individuals and writers.

On a different note, Carolyn Cassady’s *Off the Road* does convey – at least at first sight – the restricted time limitation of the memoir. As the subtitle of her memoir reads, the book does concentrate in essence on her “Twenty years with CASSADY,

⁴² Of course I am referring here only to female Beats analyzed in this chapter, those who have written memoirs, as commented previously.

⁴³ To see other uses of autobiographical to improve one’s reputation or establish as status as writer, see Caroline Breashears’s article “The Female Appeal Memoir: Genre and Female Literary Tradition in Eighteenth Century England.”

KEROUAC & GINSBERG”⁴⁴ (Front cover). Being truthful to this, the narrative begins with the moment she is introduced to Neal Cassady in 1947, and concludes a year after Neal’s death, when she finally settles with his third wife, Diane Hansen, what to do with his ashes. Nevertheless, against Holmes’s words in the introduction to *Heartbeat*, she does present her own voice and experience in the narrative, so its value goes beyond the documentation of the relationship between Kerouac and Cassady – respectively named Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty in Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Interestingly, the memoir opens with a portrait she drew of Neal working on his typewriter:



Figure 1. Portrait of Neal Cassady, by Carolyn Cassady, 1951

At face value the choice of showing Neal’s portrait as a respectable writer-to-be right before her narrative may be interpreted as evidence of her focus on his life and work; however, I read this decision differently: as a way of drawing attention to her point of view, to her art and her (re)creation of things through her unique narration of

⁴⁴ The fact that the three names are capitalized in the book cover might be significant. Besides the picture, which in all of the editions I have been able to find use pictures not only of Carolyn, but also of Neal or Jack, the cover usually includes – in a size almost as large as that of the name of the author – the well-known names of male Beats. This advertising technique can also be seen one of the reasons why the books are labeled memoir, and not autobiography. Despite the negative connotations of memoirs – feeding popular hunger for gossip and scandal – and because of the profitable market memoirs have found in America in the last decades, it can be used as a loophole to get to a wider audience. Whether the authors are “selling out”, or if they turn the memoir into an arena for self-expression and self-promotion is a different matter altogether.

events. It is not his life the one shaping her experience and dominating the text, but her creativity – her art and words – that are reshaping his character and life. Indeed, in *Off the Road*, Carolyn is not necessarily denouncing her exclusion from the men’s world and experiences. She never considered herself part of their “revolution”, having nothing but contempt for it, an attitude that translates into a mature, distanced view of the events she narrates. Even though she also uses the memoir to set the record straight on some aspects of her life, such as her sexuality,⁴⁵ on the whole, the character she is trying to re-write is not herself, but Neal. As she has commented in several interviews, she wrote the book to eliminate the myth and the lies which surround the Beat Generation. Her patient, distanced and at times reserved voice should not be seen as a consequence of her subordination to male dominance, but as her effort to maintain her conventional and traditional values in a context of alleged amorality; in the narrative, this results in her effort to keep the house at all costs as a safe haven for her and her three children. Carolyn’s memoir becomes a conservative heterotopia which acts as a counterpoint when the norm has become the rebellious and the unconventional. In her wish to preserve Neal’s respectability, and her choice not to sell their life together as a spectacle, she makes use of the memoir to give expression to her personal vision and understanding of the story.

Joan Haverty’s *Nobody’s Wife: the Smart Aleck and the King of the Beats*, and Edie Parker Kerouac’s *You’ll Be Okay: My Life with Jack Kerouac*, offer a different perspective. Although they briefly focus on stories of their childhood and teenage years, they limit their accounts to their marriage with Kerouac, and cover mainly the events that led to meeting, marrying, and separating from him. Both books were edited⁴⁶ and

⁴⁵ As she tells in her memoir, because of an attempted rape by one of her brothers, she grew an abhorrence of sex, feeling for the most part of her life she was frigid. When she first has sex with Neal, with Ginsberg sleeping in the next room, she describes it as an attack, and Ginsberg mistakes her screams of agony with screams of joy. The memoir tells us how years later when that topic was brought up in a conversation with Ginsberg she told him how she really felt. Similarly, she does say she regrets not having told Neal anything about this.

⁴⁶ In Haverty’s case the manuscript was found after her death in a mess of papers her children – Jan Kerouac one of them – found under her bed. In Parker’s case, it was edited by Bill Morgan and Tim Moran, who from the preface makes it clear that Edie had no literary ambitions, stating that she, unlike Kerouac, was “not an intellectual” (18). Bill Morgan is mistaken, though, when he says in the preface that “the women associated with the group [Beat Generation] were guilty of living their lives without recording it” (18) and that “Edie’s memoir provides the only female voice from the nascent period, when the leading members of the Beat Generation were first meeting and becoming friends” (19). Although some of the best known names are a bit younger than the male core Beats, and therefore arrived at the

published posthumously; neither Haverty nor Parker had a writing career nor considered themselves, a priori, writers.

This is might be easily attributed to Edie Parker, who all through the memoir, which is devoted almost in its entirety to praise different sides of Kerouac, from his intelligence to his sexual skills, leaves no doubt as to whom was the literary genius of the two. Parker mentions not being interested in anything literary, reading only light literature by Thorne Smith or Zane Gray,⁴⁷ stressing from the beginning her only ambition was to be with Jack and see him prosper in his writing career. The lack of ambition and the submission to his wit are such that her own identity and expectations are completely overshadowed. As she declares, “I’ve never wished for anything for myself, but Jack and I dreamed about his success. All of my wishes had been for him. He was the genius, the writer. That is how I always felt” (28). Equally discouraging is her portrayal of their typical conversation about their hopes for the future, which focused on the “the things he wanted to be (a writer), what [she] wanted to be (with him)” (89).

Edie Parker’s book, then, complies with the time and, principally, the subject restrictions of the dominant understanding of memoir. She recounts a very specific period of time, and she does so using an extreme form of relational – other-directed – subjectivity in which her own identity ends up disappearing. Among all the memoirs studied here, Parker’s is the one that more evidently fits the negative connotations attributed to the term memoir for opportunism and gossip orientation.⁴⁸ The memoir

scene later, there is a vast and very rich body of work written by female Beats, which proves that did leave record of their lives and produced – and still do – many works of great literary value.

⁴⁷ Thorne Smith, an American writer of humorous supernatural fantasy fiction, and Zane Gray, American author of popular adventure novels.

⁴⁸ The few times that Edie Parker is mentioned in relation to Kerouac in analyses or biographies of Beat literature or writers, she is often portrayed as opportunistic, trying to take advantage of Jack’s success. For example, James Campbell, in his book *This is the Beat Generation* shows a pathetic vision of her: “His first wife, Edie, having read about his success in the papers, called up and suggested a reunion. Kerouac had always had a soft spot for her. She came into town especially for the occasion, and Jack took her down to the Village for old times’ sake. Before she had a chance to start enjoying herself, however, he was lying on the pavement outside a bar, drunk and crying.” (235) Similarly, in *Women of the Beat Generation*, Knight describes a similarly poignant recollection: “Edie married a total of four times before her death in 1992. She was bitterly disappointed when her writing remained unpublished, unable to understand why the world wasn’t eager to hear about her great love affair with Jack Kerouac. At Jack’s funeral in October 1969, Edie announced, ‘I’m Mrs. Jack Kerouac!’” (79)

then could be seen as a platform for her non-literary self to tell and sell her story.⁴⁹ She does not use the memoir to regain strength and the power of speech; rather, she merely perpetuates the subordination of female experience by always positioning herself in the shadow of Kerouac, both the author and the man.

Joan Haverty's memoir was also the only book she wrote, but it provides a stronger and more independent voice than Parker's. Although she also focuses on a specific moment in history, there are some early memories whose objective is to establish an identity of her own before getting involved with Kerouac or other members of the Beat Generation. One of these early memories – a central one to the narrative – involves the metaphor of the spider spinning its web, which raises questions in Joan's mind as a child about what knowledge is, where it comes from and how it is transmitted. She asks her grandfather who or what taught the first spider how to spin a web, and if life always existed. The answer she gets is that even if we cannot know the answers for everything, "there was always something to know [...] there was always the information that sustains life" (3). Unlike Edie Parker's, Joan Haverty's story depicts a strong urge to know more, to be more. If not a professional writer, Haverty's memoir is sustained, as Jan Kerouac says in the introduction, by her exceptional storytelling abilities and, I would add, by the latent wish to grow intellectually. Haverty's narrative highlights the unfulfilled potential of someone who since childhood has had higher aspirations, but does not manage to fully give expression to them. Although she enjoys her job as a seamstress and designer, which offers her the opportunity to work with different fabrics, cutting, combining and sewing them to her liking, she still wonders if knowledge comes to someone innately or if, hindered by circumstances, it can be blocked. Coming back to the analogy of the spider and its web, she asks herself: "[w]hat would happen to a spider if it was kept in a small box where it couldn't spin webs? Would it assume that it was never meant to make webs at all, and so never try again, even if it was released? Or would it make up for the lost time when it was released by crazily spinning web after web?" (77)

⁴⁹ However, as suggested before, there might be more to Edie Parker's memoir and attitude towards writing than it meets the eye. Her unpublished poems and stories might attest to her unfulfilled literary ambition, and the emphasis on her lack of literariness might have to do with her editor's revision. Stating from the beginning the lack of literary value of Parker's account, the book can then shamelessly read as pure gossip.

The metaphor of the imprisoned spider which has lost its ability to spin webs can be seen as a parallel to her own situation and, by extension, to other women whose potential has been restrained due to oppressive circumstances. The question she leaves open is whether, once freed, they would fail to express their creativity or if, on the contrary, their potential would be exploited to the full, as if to make up for the years they spent in silence. In *Nobody's Wife*, Joan manages to portray her personal experience – failures and ambitions – without subordinating it to Kerouac's relationship with her. She does not live following the rules attributed to her sex, and decides to be “nobody's wife” (22) when her friend Bill Cannastra⁵⁰ tells her that women can only be respected as long as they are somebody else's “Galinha,”⁵¹ (22) meaning other men will only respect her when she belongs to one man. It is because of these reasons that *Nobody's Wife* can be analyzed as a text which uses the memoir not only to correct or revise the past, but also to establish her own identity and creativity.

A similar approach is found in Helen Weaver's *The Awakener*, which begins with the moment Weaver met Kerouac in 1956 – in his love-life map she stands between Haverty and Johnson – and delineates the months they spent together; up until Weaver “kicks him out” of her apartment because he “interfered with [her] sleep” (221). Though at first sight the subtitle of the book seems appropriate – it is on a level “a memoir of Kerouac in the fifties” – Kerouac, unlike Parker's memoir, is just a part of Weaver's story. In fact, halfway through the book Weaver has lost all contact with him and when he dies in 1969, his death hardly has any impact on her account. All in all, Weaver's account is not so much about Kerouac as about her own life in the Bohemia, or her relationship with other counterculture figures such as the comedian and social critic Lenny Bruce. In fact, Bruce's obscenity trial and her teaming up with Ginsberg and other renown artistic and cultural characters to campaign against his prosecution, takes up as much space in her account as her love affair with Kerouac. In addition to this, Weaver's memoir goes way beyond the fifties to include the establishment of her career as a translator in the 70s, when she translated *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* – edited and with an introduction by Susan Sontag – or her later interest and work as an astrologer. This approach is interesting in light of Weaver's own concerns about the

⁵⁰ Joan's memoir offers a candid and moving portrait of Bill Cannastra, the legendary Beat figure who became well known after being decapitated while trying to climb out of a subway car window. Ginsberg immortalizes his death in “Howl.”

⁵¹ Portuguese for “hen,” and in slang argot it means “loose girl.”

genre she is employing to tell her story; at one point she writes: “I kept dreaming about my unfinished manuscript, this huge pile of unbound pages that I kept lugging around, attempting to save from fire and flood, uncertain whether it was the story of my own life or the story of the remarkable people I had known.” (214) Weaver’s comment highlights the genre instability of memoir⁵² – the thin line that separates relational tales from, in theory, completely autobiographical accounts. While the marketing of the book seems to put an end to the genre confusion, the content itself problematizes this reading. While the memoir does document her relationship with the Beat icon, his presence is – ironically – felt more strongly in the last chapters of the memoir, when Weaver reconnects with him through his novels, turning her account into an academic/personal diary where she analyzes his novels, or documents Beat events like the 1994 New York University conference “The Beat Generation: Legacy and Celebration.” As such, Weaver’s book not only expands the time-span of memoirs, but also – by reevaluating her relationship with Kerouac through his work – shifts the focus from all personal relationship to a hybrid form.

Finally, the division between fact and fiction – which has also come to be seen as a point of distinction between autobiography and memoir – is also relevant to the study of Beat memoirs. The negative stereotype, which was perpetuated by critics like Georges Gusdorf (1950), who saw the memoir as an inferior kind of history, raises issues of authorship and the power relations that determine who has the authority to write life-stories deemed relevant to the world. In the same way, Gusdorf also sees the memoir as “facts with a measure of creativity,” (Rak 313) linking memoir writing with fiction, as it cannot be regarded as legitimate truth. It is precisely due to this confusion, that the memoir lends itself to the incorporation of fiction into history, becoming an excellent instrument for writers to express their creativity in the telling of their stories. This did not escape Jamaica Kincaid, for whom *How I Became Hettie Jones* was an “artful book [...] full of *history*” (Back cover, my emphasis).

Fiction then, is present in the memoirs analyzed, sometimes made explicit rather than hidden. This is the case in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, where the author narrates two

⁵² In the acknowledgment section of the book she restates her concern, unable or unwilling to give an answer: “The Kerouac file sat on my computer for years pending the courage to complete. Residual anger at Jack, perfectionism, fear of hurting people’s feelings, fear of failure, fear of success, innumerable false starts, genre confusion (is this an autobiography or a memoir?, and just plain laziness”. (257)

different versions of the same night, mocking the readers' expectations at the same time that she draws attention to the fictionalization of all representation. In her life-writing Diane di Prima points to the absurdity of pretending to give a true account of anything. As she says in the author's note at the beginning of her second memoir, *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*: "Close as I can, this is how I remember it. I could be wrong about some things. Most everybody is" (n.p.n). In much the same way, Brenda Frazer, in many of the meta-narrative allusions to her own writing of the memoir, discusses the inclusion of fictional elements in her narrative. For example, while describing the setting on one occasion, she writes: "[t]his is a slop – I cannot remember – this is a composed interlude to what I knew happened at the time – does anyone blame me for embellishing the facts – be humble, Bonnie – the fact is I cannot remember if it was really Mocambo and the lizards hissed that day, or Villa Del Mar and faggots wrestling in their sandy suntans [...]" (44).

Thus, fictional elements are not disguised as facts, but singled out as if to directly draw attention to them. This technique, although it can be interpreted as the rejection of veracity, can also be analyzed as a celebration of their creativity and their literary side, and the exposition of the impossibility of achieving objective truth in any account. When history proves insufficient, fiction comes to improve it and, in the meantime, the authors become the creators of their own history.

Fiction is a very important element in Joyce Johnson's two memoirs – *Minor Characters* and *Missing Men* – and it is given the power to reshape her character and her life. An early example in *Minor Characters* is found in a scene in which Joyce, who has just graduated from Grammar School, writes a letter to a friend telling her about the two-week vacation she had just spent with her parents. She writes, as she describes it, "without [her] really even thinking about it, what could strictly be called fact" (43) about a crush she had on a college boy who was also on vacation there. Typing fast, she describes their fictionalized relationship:

I'm building towards my climax, which is when my parents and some other couples are taking their slow evening walk down a dirt road just as it's getting dark and they're swatting mosquitoes and turning on their flashlights, and Aaron grabs my wrist and says, "Let's take a short cut." He's pulling me after him, and we go over a fence and across a dark field full of cow flops and into a patch of

woods that are darker still – and all that happened in reality was that we came out onto the road on the other side. But this is not what I say. “And so Aaron took me into the woods,” I write, and I type an ellipsis six dots long. (44)

What could be seen as an innocent game – the imagination of a teenage girl in search of romantic and sexual experiences – turns out to be a very powerful device. As she states, her own words leave her “astonished, as [she] stop[s] and look[s] at the page in the typewriter, by the power of these dots” (44). She is about to discover their power when – after going out to do an errand and leaving the letter unfinished on the typewriter – she comes back to discover the angry faces of her parents, and the words “WE HAVE READ THIS [...] AND IT MAKES VERY INTERESTING READING” (44) overwritten with black crayon over her letter. It is her words that cause her parents to forget about their no-raising-your-voice-in-this-house rule, causing an exaggerated reaction in both of them – especially the father who at the end of the scene “walks into the bathroom and vomits” (45).

In any case, Joyce does not refer to her new version of history as a lie – or only as a product of her imagination – but as way of telling what happened with “heightened truth” (43); the story in her letter is not a cheaper version of the past, but an improved one. The moment she writes it down, it becomes alive and, even if not real per se, it does carry very real consequences – the mother’s anger and the father physical disgust are real enough to her – which were caused only by the power of her words, and those dots she left to the imagination of whomever read the letter. In *The Voice Is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac* (2012), a biography of Kerouac, Johnson draws attention to the fact that all products of memory⁵³ – either relational or autobiographical – are in some way constructed: “I have come to wonder, especially in the process of writing this book, whether there can be such a thing as a *definitive* biography. Even our own lives cannot be entirely defined despite our knowledge of ‘the facts,’ which is why

⁵³ As Emily Keightley writes, “Memories are texts with narrative codes and representational conventions; they have omissions and reinterpretations, polysemic readings and intense personal resonance [...] The memory text is a construction created in what Radstone (2000:18) calls the ‘liminal space’ between public and private pasts and as a result should always be considered as a mediation between the two.” (*Research Methods for Cultural Studies* 177)

some writers – and Kerouac was one of them – are drawn toward the ceaseless examination of the self.” (xviii-xix)⁵⁴

In short, these memoirs do not limit themselves to the relationship of the authors with the Beat Generation. Either they focus on a shorter period of time, or they go back in time and turn the memoir into a literary Bildungsroman. In addition, especially in the case of those authors who are established writers, the memoir is used as a platform to strengthen their literary identity. Thus, women of the Beat Generation might have used the memoir as an elastic genre which is especially suitable for the expression of the female writer’s experience.⁵⁵ By combining autobiography and literary elements, they strike a double blow; on the one hand, they are positioning themselves as subjects – not objects – in a given historical time, and on the other hand, they are also establishing themselves as artists and writers.

II.3. Themes in the Memoirs

While the eleven memoirs analyzed in here are quite different from each other, which complicates the analysis as a totality, there are some themes and characteristics through which they can be linked. This section is divided into three main subsections which correspond to recurrent themes in the texts that are valuable to the revisionist and feminist analyses. These are: a) writing: process and the act; b) gender roles for the female sex, and c) connection to the Beat Generation.

⁵⁴ In addition to this genre-instability, the reviews after the publication of Kerouac’s biography stressed the strong gender-bias in literary genres. Indeed, while *Minor Characters* received mostly positive reviews – winning a National Book Critics Circle Award – *The Voice Is All* has received mixed critiques on account of the genre employed. In particular, a review written by Andrew O’Hagan on Walter Salles’s film adaptation of *On the Road* and Johnson’s *The Voice Is All*, entitled “Jack Kerouac: Crossing the Line” (*The New York Review of Books*, March 21, 2013) in which O’Hagan refers to the book as a memoir and not a biography, caused Johnson to reply with the following comments: “What is the Scottish definition of biography? I ask this because Andrew O’Hagan [“Jack Kerouac: Crossing the Line,” *NYR*, March 21] is the second Scottish reviewer in recent months to call my book *The Voice Is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac* a memoir. I suppose it would be futile to point out that I end the book in 1951, six years before Kerouac entered my life, and that my research was not conducted in the bedroom but in the unsexy archives of the Berg Collection, where I tracked Jack’s most important relationship—the one he had with his work. I do understand, however, that I may have disconcerted Andrew O’Hagan by stepping out of my ordained role as the limp Beat-chick object of his scrutiny and producing a sizable Kerouac biography. Previously he’d bracketed me with the *triste* crowd of Jack’s memoir-writing exes, whose books (five in all) “line the shelves,” as he charmingly puts it, “like wallflowers at a 1950s prom.” (“Beat Women’: An Exchange”, *The New York Review of Books*, June 6th, 2013)

⁵⁵ As Ronna C. Johnson states, the literature of female Beats tend to “hybridize and modify traditional forms and genres, rewriting myths and traditional histories” (“Mapping” 8).

To carry out the analysis of the different themes in the memoirs, the study takes into account the socio-political context in which these women lived and wrote, as well as the specific literary and artistic framework of the Beat Generation. Instead of providing an extensive summary of the context in a separate section, individual aspects are addressed in relation to the impact they have on each theme analyzed.

II.3.1. Writing: the Process & the Act

There were gradations of respect given to reading, gradations of respite. Doing actual homework or studying for school came closest to being sacrosanct. Then reading for pleasure, for whatever reasons. Last and lowliest was writing.

(Recollections 41)

Writing is an important part of the majority of the memoirs written by female Beats; on the one hand, as with most autobiographical writings – especially those written by women or other oppressed minorities – writing is a medium through which the self is made or remade. Through the act of writing their lives, they are necessarily inserting their narrative in a specific socio-cultural and political context. As Sidonie Smith notes, autobiographical storytelling, “cannot escape being dialogical, although its central myths resist that recognition [...it] is contextually marked, collaboratively mediated, provisional” (9). Through their written accounts, they employ a medium that has had the traditional hegemonic function of asserting male authority and authorship, in order to dismantle or contest patriarchal structures. On the other hand, they not only use the memoirs to position themselves as female subjects in a given historical period, but also to articulate an identity as writing subjects, as the creators of their own stories. This second use has a predominant role in the memoirs, where the act of writing is variously and frequently represented in the texts, placing the authors while writing or drawing attention to the techniques employed in their writing. This acquires a greater significance if we bear in mind the male dominance in the Beat literary canon and the way it has ignored women position as writers.

In this section I concentrate on the particular ways in which the process of writing and the act of writing take form in their narratives, focusing on three different aspects: a) Writing history and writing their work into history, b) “Shameful” writing or the “female syndrome”, and c) Techniques and influences.

Writing History & Writing their Work into History.

Up to this point, the recovery and revisionist approach in the vast majority of life-writing done by women of the Beat Generation cannot be denied. Texts like di Prima's *Recollections* or Johnson's *Minor Characters* explicitly draw attention to the different mechanisms through which the female voice was silenced, exposing a history of patriarchal domination. The specific situation of women and women artists in the Beat Generation, as it could not be otherwise, is also emphasized in the memoirs. In her memoir, Johnson for example, reminds the readers of John Clellon Holmes famous statement of masculine comradeship – "[t]he social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang" (*Characters* 79) – to what an inspired Allen Ginsberg added, "Not society's perfum'd marriage" (*Characters* 79). The danger of these lines does not only reside in their misogynist tone – it is not the idea that masculinity is most powerful in homosocial contexts – the danger, especially to those women with creative ambitions, lies on the exclusion it projects on female artists, who are banned from art altogether. With such comments in mind, it comes as no surprise that these authors felt the representation of women in male works did not match women's literary ambition of the times. Holmes' novel *Go*, subtitled "a modern novel of the search of experience and of love," Johnson might agree, could have more appropriately been called "a modern novel of *his* search of experience and of love". In *Minor Characters*, Johnson describes *Go*'s negative description of female characters Holmes himself discussed in his introduction to a 1977 edition of the novel. Here he recalls how it felt to re-read a book he wrote almost thirty years ago, and wonders how much of it is invented and how much represents the truth.⁵⁶ He writes:

⁵⁶ Regarding fact and fiction in an autobiographical text – since *Go* was indeed based on Holmes and the people he knew – the novelist makes an interesting comment: "If the act of writing gobbles up and transforms the experiences about which you write ('Did so-and-so actually say that, or did I invent it?'), it also preserves indelibly the moment when a truth broke through. To write about your own life is to transfer from memory to fact. The page exists to block you way into the usable past, and this is probably what keeps you forging on against your losses." (xvii) While he sees the inevitable fictionalization of one's life once it is written down – however faithful one wants to be – he also points to the potential of writing to preserve the truth. Once your memory is written down, it becomes facts, and in doing so, the text itself prevents you from thinking alternative pasts (it is no longer usable). This, Holmes seems to suggest, can help you move on, freezing past demons. The problem comes, I would add, when it is someone else who has frozen your past – your story and history – blocking your access to it. Women of the Beat Generation, through their own stories told in the memoirs, might have wanted to fight those blockades, so that they can "use" their own past again.

These gloomy lofts and tenements, these thronging streets and bars, the continual parties and confrontations – can it really have been like that? Did we really resemble these feverish young men, these centerless young women, awkwardly reaching out for love, for hope, for comprehension of their lives and times? Can this picture of the New York of twenty-five years ago be accurate? I can attest that it is. These were the places we lived in, the events that occurred, the way we talked, and the things we talked about. In this sense, the book is almost literal truth, sometimes a truth too literal to be *poetically* true, which is the only truth that matters in literature. (xvii)

It might be because of his insistence on the veracity of his story, almost equating it to a historical document, that Johnson feels infuriated when Holmes draws attention to the correspondence between the real names and their fictionalized representation in the text. While he “scrupulously matches each of the male characters in his roman à clef to their originals” (79), as Johnson notes, “the ‘girls’ are various ‘amalgams of several people’, ‘accurate to the young women of the time’, ‘a type rather than an individual’” (79). If we go the original introduction, though, one can appreciate how Holmes tries to justify his decision to represent a picture of womanhood from a collection of different traits he considered recurrent in females. For example, he says that even though “some of the girls are amalgams of several people [...other characters like] Dinah, Christine, Winnie and Bianca are as close to their originals as [he] could bring them” (xviii). Holmes emphasizes, that way, his effort to portray, even if only in some cases, a balanced and faithful representation of the women of the period. This effort is what caused critics like Cynthia S. Hamilton to have a more sympathetic approach to Holmes’ representation of female characters, stating that while the author “never challenges traditional gender roles, Holmes’ more nuanced portrayal of women and his recognition of self-serving male behavior sets him apart, especially from Kerouac” (121). Even if offering a wider representation of women, Joyce Johnson still feels that the Frankenstein recreation of a unified female character proves that women were not participators in the action and that “they were mere anonymous passengers on the big Greyhound bus of experience [...] what they did [...] was fill up the seats” (79).

Diane di Prima, who started publishing very early in life, is one of the few who was more easily assimilated and accepted as a peer writer. She is the protagonist of Ginsberg’s famous – or infamous – comment on the alleged subordination of female

writers in the Beat Generation period. As quoted in Richard Peabody's *A Different Beat: Writing by Women of the Beat Generation*:

Yes, it's all right to blame the men for exploiting the women – or, I think the point is, the men didn't push the women literally or celebrate them. But then, among the group of people we knew at the time, who were the [women] writers of such power as Kerouac or Burroughs? Were there any? I don't think so.

Were we responsible for the lack of outstanding genius in the women we knew? Did we put them down or repress them? I don't think so...

Where there was a strong writer who could hold her own, like Diane di Prima, we would certainly work with her and recognize her. (1)

In *Recollections*, di Prima gives a complex account about her personal position in the literary world and the position of women artists in general. On the whole, di Prima includes herself in the writer/artist category, using always the pronoun “we” to strengthen a sense of a special community against mainstream society. As she recalls: “[c]hoosing to be an artist: writer, dancer, painter, musician, actor, photographer, sculptor, you name it, choosing to be any of these things in the world I grew up in, the world of the 1940s and early 1950s, was choosing as completely as possible for those times the life of the renunciant. Life of the wandering sadhu, itinerant saint, outside the confines and laws of that particular and peculiar culture” (101). Set against America's conformism, di Prima chooses to portray a genderless community of artists who simply recognize and respect each other, united in their commitment to their art. This feeling of communion is also present when, in retrospect, she answers the question of whether she felt pushed apart because of her gender in a world that seems to have been dominated by men. In her own words: “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 one-upmanship, their eternal need to be *right*. Or I took it in stride as not important. A minor part of their Act” (107).

Although di Prima acknowledges the presence and the importance of a type of “boy-gang”⁵⁷ in the artistic world of the time, she also states that back then she did not

⁵⁷ The boy-gang metaphor and its consequences have been analyzed in works like Michael Davidson's *Guys Like Us*, although he noticeably leaves women outside the scope of his analysis.

consider that it was an exclusive all-male club. She avoided thinking in gendered terms, responding solely to a shared passion to art. It might be because she chose to concentrate on what drew them together rather on what set them apart – their self-righteousness for example – that she believes that it “made it possible for [her] to walk among these men mostly un-hit-on, generally unscathed [...] Made it possible to walk the Dreamtime. Eternal world of the Poem. And with companions” (107).

Nonetheless, in her memoir she does denounce the problems women artists had to access, for example, the publishing world. For instance, while she was living in Michael Goldberg’s apartment, her upstairs neighbor – whose name is not mentioned but is referred to as “a prominent poet and translator” (349) – did not approve of di Prima, her friends and children staying there, to the point that he talked some Press House against publishing di Prima’s work, stating it “wasn’t poetry at all” (349). This memory triggers di Prima’s anger at the latent prejudice in the literary world. As she states, “[t]here are to this day accepted and prestigious ways of entry in that world that are based simply on race, gender, class and/or money, and everybody knows about them and nobody acknowledges them” (350). She mentions, for example, the importance of going to certain colleges, having money to start your own “arty” (350) literary magazine, as well as having the right acquaintances to give you a hand promoting your work. It is still women – especially if they have children – those who find great problems to afford, both financially and time-wise, the self-promotion side crucial to any literary career.

Although she refers to several other factors that can cause exclusion from the literary world – in her case, as she puts it, “my politics, my mode of dress, my deliberately cultivated Italian/American manner, New York accent, the concerns of characters in my short stories, the street slang in my poems,” (351) etc. – she does emphasize the exclusion of women from the literary industry, stating that “*It is a gentleman’s life for sure*” (351). Similarly, her distrust of prestigious universities at the moment of paying her for a reading or lecture, and her demand to get the check before performing, is for her an indication that she “was *not* one of the boys, and it worked against [her]” (351). Adding that “[i]t still does, in spite of the alleged gains of the women’s movement [and the] vague prestige and respect that simply surviving to the frontier of old age brings an artist, and especially a woman artist, in this all-devouring century” (351).

The lack of medium to give expression to their work is elsewhere in di Prima's memoir referred to as a specific female syndrome for women artists, as for example when she talks about her lover Bonnie and her painting studio. Finding no way of releasing her work to the world, her studio is crowded with old paintings and half-finished projects, which asphyxiate the artist and hinder her creativity. This is depicted not only as a problem she has seen before, but also fears could happen to her. As she states, she "had seen this kind of chaos before: the overflowing beyond anything that could be sorted out, anything that was called for by the world, and had a sense of the protagonist, the artist, literally *drowning* in it" (197).

It is in this context of double exclusion of female experience – neglected or trivialized in males' narratives and hindered in their progress towards publication in the case of female writers – that the memoirs written by female Beats emerged, proving to be an effective weapon. For example, up to Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*,⁵⁸ and especially after the memoirs published in the early 1990s, much of the work of women Beat writers was still fairly unknown, difficult to reach, and even out of print in some cases. With the memoirs, by claiming back their position in history, they also managed to attract greater attention in both the academia – renewed interest in their life and work – and the general public – re-printing books which facilitated a wider reach of their work. Quite possibly this re-emergence of female Beat interest is due to the way female Beats incorporated their work in their memoirs. This is especially noticeable in the memoirs by Johnson, Jones and di Prima, who are, correspondingly, the three authors with larger literary careers. For these writers, the memoir is the medium from which to assert their literary identity, defending their role and position as writers.

Joyce Johnson, in *Minor Characters*, wishes to bring her identity, as well as those of other women in her situation, to the foreground. The picture chosen for the cover of her book might be seen as an example of that, where Jack Kerouac – by that time an icon both as popular character and respected author – stands proud with his back turned to Joyce Johnson – also an author – whose image is blurry and diffused.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ In *For These Women of the Beat* (1997), Ruth Weiss writes the following poem for Joyce Johnson: "the beat the beat the beat / sister sister where's your man / oh the joy that turned to pain / but our words rise from the flame" (21)

⁵⁹ Her presence is so vague that GAP publicist found it conveniently easy to erase her image completely and replace her with the catchy line, "Kerouac wore Khakis" for an advertisement.



Figure 2. Johnson in the background

Nevertheless, the impulse is not to exchange places with Kerouac – or any other male figure in an apparently superior position – but to recognize and celebrate her own life and work, and the meaning it had from whichever position history placed her in. This idea is further emphasized in Johnson’s second memoir, *Missing Men* (2004), which in the preface highlights the relevance of the “negative space”, the space she can be said to occupy be in the cover of her own book:

I once had a husband who started obsessively painting squares – three squares in shifting relationships to each other on what appeared flat ground, colored emptiness. He explained to me that the negative space in his work was as important as the positive, that each took its form from the other. What interested him most was the tension between them. I remember being fascinated by his concept of negative space, though *negative* seemed the wrong word for something that had so much presence. (Preface)

Far from being “flat ground” or “colored emptiness,” Johnson’s memoirs confirm that the negative space is as important as what is in the foreground, just as her own writing shapes her story and those around her. While in *Missing Men* the impulse of her writing is basically therapeutic, in *Minor Characters* it is corrective, giving her a second chance to act, to say, or do what she did not dare to when life was happening. As a case in point, after a break-up with an instructor at Columbia University, who had left her and replaced her with another girl ipso facto, she relates in the memoir how she wrote a novel to reshape that story to her liking:

Elise [Cowen] and Alex [Greer] were characters in it. By making Alex into a character, I took away his power to hurt me. Just like me, my heroine would have an affair with the Alex character and end up alone. But in my fictional rearrangement of life, it was she who was going to leave him after their one and only night together. I rewarded her with a trip to Paris. I typed forty letters a day and dreamed of taking off myself. (117)

Fiction makes it possible for her to shape her life through her writing, just as her life would change if her writing took shape in the outside world – “Only the publication of my novel would transform my existence into what I wanted to be,” (118) she observes in the memoir. Through this double move her life is rearranged and fictionalized to her liking, while she waits for the opportunity to publish her work and turn some of those fictions into reality. In addition, Johnson uses the memoir to highlight other women’s long overshadowed presence. The author, who was a close friend of Elise Cowen⁶⁰ uses the memoir to bring her and her work back to life,⁶¹ transcribing excerpts of some of Cowen’s few surviving poems. At the end of the book, she explicitly says that her intention is to bring back not only her voice, but also Elise’s and Jones’s:

What I refuse to relinquish is her [herself as a young woman] expectancy.

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)

The memoir, then, is not just a document to feed people’s curiosity about Jack and Joyce’s relationship, but a tool to make visible not only her work as a writer, but also other women artists she knew and, like her, also spent part of their lives in silence.

⁶⁰ Born in 1933, Elise Nada Cowen had a short and turbulent life. After several treatments and stays in mental hospitals, she finally jumped to her death from a window in her parents’ house in 1962, leaving many poems behind; some of which were recently published in *Elise Cowen: Poems and Fragments* (2014) The vast majority of her work was destroyed by her parents after her suicide. Her close friend Leo Skir managed to save over 70 poems, which are due to publication in 2014.

⁶¹ This movement, which aims at recovering and giving their voice to those who were silenced, is widely spread in art criticism and it involves a vision of the artist – of any medium – as a historian. In *Materializar el Pasado. El Artista como Historiador (Benjaminiano)*, Miguel A. Hernández Navarro links this notion of the past as possibility – as something which can be used to create life – to Walter Benjamin’s work on memory and history.

Indeed, in a 2015 interview conducted by Laura Barton for BBC Radio 4, Regina Weinreich states that she does not think Elise Cowen “would have survived as a writer had Joyce not shown a spotlight on her” in *Minor Characters*.⁶²

In Hettie Jones’s *How I Became Hettie Jones*, the narrative is also focused on the author’s identity formation, and being a writer – the “Hettie” she is at the end of the memoir – is an essential part of it. Once again, the medium becomes the goal, and the literacy of the memoir – with its mixture of documentation and lyrical narrative – stands for the status she achieves as writer. Besides, Jones’s use of excerpts from her own writing – poems, short stories, etc. – and the unfolding of the many times she felt her poetry was not good enough, can be seen as another example of di Prima’s “female syndrome,” of the overwhelmed female artist, as well as the negative influence society’s expectations for the female sex.⁶³

Society, these memoirs show, had a bearing on the way these authors confronted their creativity. Being a woman writer becomes, in the context of the early 1950s and 1960s, a synonym for the outlaw, the non-conformist. At the beginning of the memoir, Jones discusses how it felt for her to be raised in the “Silent Generation”:

By 1951, the year we were labeled the Silent Generation, I’d been recommended to silence often. Men had little use for an outspoken woman, I’d been warned. What I wanted, I was told, was security and upward mobility, which might be mine if I learned to shut my mouth. Myself I simply expected, by force of will, to assume a new shape in the future. Unlike any woman in my family or anyone I’d ever actually known, I was going to *become* – something, anything, whatever that meant. (10)

If by remaining silent she is to obtain social and financial security, Hettie would rather speak, even if it means waiting for her final transformation until she finally becomes who she is – woman, writer, mother, teacher, etc. It is at the end of the memoir, which not coincidentally contains the majority of excerpts from her poems, that she finally sees herself as Hettie the writer. As she states, “[i]t was a while before I dragged the old poems out of their box and wrote new ones, and read them in public

⁶² “The Beat Women”, broadcasted June 29th 2015. In this interview Barton also interviews Hettie Jones, Joyce Johnson and Anne Waldman.

⁶³ The relation between writing and shame, especially in the case of women writers, will be discussed in the next section.

along with my stories, and began to think of myself as the writer whose name is on this book” (238). Her coming-of-age as a writer is almost placed in parallel with the recovery of the poems she kept hidden during many years, and she started to publish old and new ones. Speaking up, telling her story, commenting on her writing and reading her poems and stories, is all part of the discovery of her own identity, and the memoir unifies all aspects.

In addition, Jones also uses the memoir to reflect on her approach to writing and her early influences. After reading Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* and seeing her name quoted in two poems by her husband LeRoi Jones – signaling her status as a reference and not a subject – she decides to abandon her fear and starts writing again. Among the people she admires, she mentions Denise Levertov and Barbara Guest,⁶⁴ but admits their language is too sophisticated, opting for William Carlos Williams’ style, as well as the rhythm of Miles’ notes. In addition to the children’s book she wrote and refers to in the memoir, she also uses the memoir as a platform from which to give space to her own writing, including a total of five poems and a short story.⁶⁵

Just as in Johnson’s case, in Jones’s memoir, we also find the reaching out to other contemporaneous women writers. She brings up Joyce Johnson and her work, in retrospect stating that she has written several novels and her memoir *Minor Characters*, and at the time of the story, highlighting the fact that Johnson already had a contract to write her first novel when Jones first met her. Similarly, Jones talks about di Prima, whom she helped publish her first book through the editorial job she had, and mentions as well that Brenda Frazer was to write her memoir, *Troia*.

Something similar is found in di Prima’s *Recollections*, where the author also shows a great concern for the disclosure of not only individual cases, but also what she

⁶⁴ Both writers are included in Knight’s *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution*, 1996.

⁶⁵ Besides her own writing, Jones also gives space to other people’s writing. Excerpts from other texts are so common in the memoir that some critics have analyzed it as a way of constructing the self through language. As Grace points out in “Snapshots, Sand Paintings, and Celluloid”: “Many of these collage texts are authored by artists from the period, including Billie Holiday, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Michael McClure, Ron Loewinsohn, and LeRoi Jones. Jones is forthright about the ways in which such texts can speak for her and the culture of the time – their powers of language seem to her greater than her own. These embedded texts present the literary and political culture of Beat history, its intersection with other artistic and social movements. They also enact Jones’s sense of self as relational, that is, seeking herself in another, losing herself in another in order to separate from that other.” (156-157)

sees as the global situation of women artists. In this regard, di Prima denounces the exclusion of women from artistic circles and the literary world as the main problem which prompted the oppression of female painters and writers. As she states, once a woman is persistent enough to keep producing, then, “what to do with the work? How carve a niche for it, if one doesn’t have access to galleries, to publishing houses? How make a place if one doesn’t speak the language of the critic?” (198). Here di Prima is concerned, besides the fate of individual cases she explicitly mentions,⁶⁶ with a general condition of relegation that affects women artists; the memoir is, once again, a conduit to expose prejudice and inequality against them. Furthermore, in its more than four hundred pages, di Prima leaves abundant space for the discussion of her technique and the progression of her literary style in the different works she has produced.⁶⁷ She talks about *Thirteen Nightmares*, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*, and *The Calculus of Variation* among others, and includes excerpts of longer poems in the memoir, situating them in a specific personal and artistic moment of her life. More interesting are her reflections on earlier or lesser known works like her plays – including the yet unpublished *Whale Honey*, on Shelley’s death.

Therefore, it could be said that it is a double-dealing card that Beat women are playing with the memoirs. Firstly, by making their own experience visible, they challenge history and their position as “silent chicks” – female companions of the male Beat – or as compliant members of the Silent Generation. Secondly, by using literature as the medium in the first place, and by referring to their own work in their narratives, they insert themselves in the literary world as writers, and not intruders or mere observers. The memoir, thus, is employed in a polyvalent way, due to its evasive categorization and formal and structural alliances to different genres and literary styles.

⁶⁶ For example, when talking about the imbalance of work/merit in the publication of the *Floating Bear*, the literary magazine she edited with Leroy Jones, she draws attention to Totem Press Books – Hettie Jones’s and Leroy Jones’s press – stating that Hettie might have been going through the same exact situation: “often it was he who got the credit for the whole thing, most of the actual physical work devolved upon me and those friends I could dig up to help me. Most of the time, I am sure this was also true for Hettie” (253).

⁶⁷ di Prima’s description of her technique and style, as well as her main influences, will be discussed in greater detail in section IV.1.

“Shameful” Writing

“Either I am a genius, I’m egocentric, or I’m slightly
schitsophrenic [sic] probably the first two”

(Allen Ginsberg, quoted in *The Birth of the Beat Generation* 23)

From Kerouac’s “Genius all the time,” (*Letters* 487) to Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s “[t]he only thing that will stand will be the ‘narrative I’ [...] the voice of him sounding thru the American experience,”⁶⁸ (qtd. in Whaley 52) there appears to be a recurrent image of the male poet figure whose genius and strong voice is capable of speaking for America. This messiah-like figure, which inevitably has been dominated by premises of race, class and gender, might date back to the emergence of Eugenics. As Laura Marcus states in relation to the moral and cultural right to tell one’s life in autobiographies: “[t]hey [women] are excluded from the category of natural genius – sometimes on the historical grounds that there is no female equivalent of a Mozart or a Shakespeare. More precisely, they are seen as incapable of the sustained self-study, and lacking in the continuous goal-directed identity, held to be necessary for autobiographical consciousness” (*Auto/biographical* 65).⁶⁹

This prevailing sexist idea of a man naturally bent to genius may still affect peoples’ self-confidence, acting as a disposition towards failure of success or, at least, favoring or hindering intellectual accomplishments. Similarly, it might affect the way both men and women approach any kind of intellectual work, and they way in which they project their work into the world. This division between “self-righteous genius” and “intruder” is present in the Beat Generation’s writers and it is, at the same time, clearly divided by gender lines.

⁶⁸ As Preston Whaley notes not all Beat writers used the same image of the visionary poet or employed a strong and unified voice in their writings. While he points to Bob Kaufman and Ruth Weiss as example of writers who avoid the use of a unified narrative- I, he does confirm that Kerouac and Ginsberg – although concern with the multiplicity of character – “return to the safety of a unified, though greatly expanded, narrator’s vision” (52).

⁶⁹ Donald J. Childs discusses the role of Eugenics in Virginia Woolf and refers to her metaphor of the Manx cat as women who have no literary heritage – no tail to support their literacy. As he states, Woolf “contemplates the absence from the women’s writing tradition of a founding figure like Shakespeare by asking what ‘if a woman in Shakespeare’s time had had Shakespeare’s genius?’ Her answer to this question [...] ‘genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among working classes... But certainly it never got itself on to paper’” (62).

For example, when flicking through any of Kerouac's collected letters anthologies, the readers may notice some comments which seem to be addressed to a third person, as if Kerouac knew some day someone would be reading his personal correspondence to know more about the great author he was not just yet. One example comes from a letter Kerouac wrote to Neal Cassady in 1948 in which, after discussing the beginning of a new era in American Literature – where “his ‘*position*’ itself, personal and psychic” (*Letters* 167) will be valued – he discusses homosexuality and interrupts the flow of his letter to include a kind of author's note:

These are my views.... (SILLY) (SELF-CONSCIOUS TOO) ... and I'm not saying them for *your* benefit (don't have to) so much as for “posterity” which might some day read this letter, all my letters (as Kerouac). Posterity will laugh at me if it *thinks* I was queer... little students will be disillusioned. By that time science & feelings intuitive will have shown it is VICE, VICIOUS, not love, gentle...and Kerouac will be a goat, pitied. I fight that. I am *not* a fool! A queer! I am *not*! He-he! Understand? (167)

Leaving Kerouac's controversial views on homosexuality aside, it is interesting to note, as Regina Marler points out, that “Kerouac's concern for posterity is curious, since he was at this time an unknown writer, whose first novel, *The Town and the City*, would not be published until March 1950” (75). Even for writers like Diane di Prima there is, on the whole, a repressive presence which prevented them from proclaiming their right to literary success as loudly as Kerouac did. Much to the contrary, as the memoirs attest to, there is an underlying sense of shame or inadequacy in the fact of being women and writers/artists at the same time, which seems to be intrinsic of the period, or at least widely spread. The roots of this problem can be difficult to locate, and might go deeper than what it might initially seem. In the memoirs, nevertheless, the lack of confidence in their own writing seems to emerge from two different, but interrelated, sources: a) an established canon of literature written *by* men and *about* male experience, and b) the specific gender roles of the era and society's expectations for the female sex.

The former is clearly shown in an episode in Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*, in which Johnson and her classmates await their literature professor – a “grey-haired, craggy-faced, perhaps self-consciously Lincolnesque” (80) man – in Barnard College for girls. The grand-looking teacher introduces himself with a question for his students,

“‘Well’ – his tone as dry as the crackers in the American cultural barrel – ‘how many of you girls want to be writers?’” (80) The professor “watches with sardonic amusement” (80) as the young girls start to shyly raise their hands one by one, only to add, once all hands are up: “[w]ell, I’m sorry to see this,” says Professor X, the Melville and Hawthorne expert. “Very 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).

“The received wisdom of 1953,” (81) adds Johnson in retrospect. The professor’s comments are exemplary of the adventures Ginsberg would celebrate in “Howl”⁷⁰ (1956), or those of Dean and Sal in Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), two narratives which notoriously leave women, and their experience, out of their scope. Due to the dominance of male experience, Joyce Johnson’s attempted revision of Holmes’ sentence, “*The social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the girl gang*”⁷¹ (81) turns up being, as she herself admits, “absolutely absurd!” (81) The idea that women cannot be good writers because of the limited experiences their gender restrains them to, is also shown in an earlier episode in the memoir, when Joyce has to write an assignment on “‘colorful characters’” (42) for her English class. For the assignment she decides to write about a street fight she actually witnessed, and about people she had seen at the Waldorf Cafeteria, a “dreary-looking place” (38) frequented by “artists, poets, communist and anarchists, guitar-pickers, jailbirds, scavengers,” (39) etc. However, her teacher, Miss Kirschenbaum, denies her own experience by telling her she should “only write about things [she] knew” (42). In both examples, there appears to be a conspiracy which prevents women from being part of certain experiences deemed only possible for the masculine sex. If women are not allowed to be part of such experiences, or when they are their perceptions are trivialized or ignored, then, how can they fit into this new American prose which so effusively calls for the exaltation of personal experience and its uncensored expression into art?

⁷⁰ “who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard / wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts, / who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow / towards lonesome farms in grandfather night [...]” (*Howl and Other Poems* 10-11).

⁷¹ This sentence sounds absurd to Helen McNeil, too, who uses it as an example in the introduction of her article “The Archeology of Gender in the Beat Movement,” previously referred to in the literature review.

Add a pinch of influence of the external pressure to conform to the rigid gender roles of the era – being “full-time housewife with a station wagon full of children” (12) as Barbara Ehrenreich put it – and we have an easy recipe for intellectual shame. This situation, which to a XXI Century reader might seem inconsequential, might have had some influence on the writers analyzed in this chapter, since the narratives go back to this idea on more than one occasion.

For example, in *Nobody's Wife: The Smart Aleck and the King of the Beats*, Joan Haverty discusses the difficulties she had to articulate and give expression to her thoughts and creativity, which even made her think she might have been “certifiably insane” (62) as she had not found so far – with the sole exception of her grandfather – anyone or any social environment in which she was free to speak her mind. This feeling is further explored when she starts dating Herb Lashinsky, a young scientist. His academic background makes her doubt herself and hinders their communication and, as narrative points to, it is not only a problem of articulation, but also an intrinsically gendered construction of thought. While she “responded to his intellect” (64) and longed “to mingle with it,” (64) she knew her “ideas were ingrown and inbred from feeding on themselves. I longed for him to stir his ideas in, to make mine spark and grow, to help me learn. But I couldn't speak to him in the scientific terms he demanded, the language he understood. I knew only the language of metaphor and analogy, which he refused to hear” (64-65).

In the memoir, Herb represents the masculine tradition of science and facts, as someone who has access to quantifiable knowledge and can, therefore, speak with authority about it. Haverty, on the other hand, responds to a literary vision of knowledge; her ideas are not double-checked, tested-out; they relate to other things by processes of comparison and similitude, from one concept to another. Once dating Kerouac, although it could seem at first that communication would be easier between the two, Joan is reduced to a *wife* who can cook and take care of him. Still, for Joan, as she states, “Jack's appeal lay more in what he was not than in what he was. He was not sexually aggressive, not intellectually curious concerning me, not anxious for me to achieve goals or improve myself” (128). With Jack's assumption that she has no ambition besides serving him, she allows herself to put her feelings of intellectual inadequacy aside for a while, still unable to find a suitable form of expressing her thoughts. Even though Jack seemed to acknowledge her literary ambition and often

encouraged her to write,⁷² she never really saw the need of showing her writing to other people, believing it was something private (Knight 88). In any case, apart from her edited memoir, her ideas remained hidden throughout her life, and one cannot help but wonder whether they would have transformed into something else if circumstances had been different.⁷³

In *How I Became Hettie Jones*, the author also discusses her feelings of inadequacy when it comes to writing and showing her work but, unlike Haverty, she was able to overcome this blockade so that her work found a way through. From the very first image of a six-year-old Hettie weaving the clouds to make shapes with the power of her imagination,⁷⁴ she portrays herself as a creative and ambitious person. Nonetheless, from that first image to the last one in which she finally comes to terms with her identity as a writer, there is a long and hard struggle with her own writing and art,⁷⁵ which has to do both with the search of a literary voice, and with the courage to speak up and find room for her work in the outside world. For example, when reading William Carlos Williams, she decides her own poems “were not only bad but worthless” (24). Williams’ mode of writing, focusing on everyday circumstances, on the personal and on the lives of common people, is initially discarded as an inadequate

⁷² He even told Neal Cassady in a letter that Haverty really knew “how to write from instinct & innocence. Few women can do this. Joan Kerouac...a new writer in this old horizon. I see me & her cutting around the world in tweeds, yass...” (Charters, Introduction to *On the Road*, Penguin Classics Edition, 2002)

⁷³ In *The Awakener* Helen Weaver talks about a kind of writer’s block that she partially overcomes through her work as a translator – no longer facing the white page before starting writing. For this reason, in her memoir she emphasizes the creative qualities of translating works in which the language has a literary, poetical quality: “The more interesting my translating assignments became – the more closely the process resembled the creative act of writing – the more I longed to be writing my own words rather than rendering the words of others while remaining myself invisible. In my desire to be a writer I had always felt limited by my inability to make up stories: to write fiction.” (167) As these lines point to, the memoir – that is to say, using her own experience and life as the content – was the final resolution to this dilemma. Talking about her presence in Kerouac’s books, as well as in Johnson’s *Minor Characters*, Weaver wrote: “I was Ruth Heaper in *Desolation Angels*, Virginia in *Minor Characters*, and myself in *Memory Babe* [by Gerald Nicosia]. When was I going to tell my own story in my own voice?” (170)

⁷⁴ In an interview conducted by Nancy Grace Hettie Jones, discussing how she decided which span of her life to cover in the memoir, refers to this first episode when she was just a little girl, and concludes that it “was very, very important to me to show that the decisions I made, when I was a young woman, were a long time coming. They were really an organic part, a progression in the life I had been going toward from the time I was very small” (*Cool* 161-162). By opening the memoir with this episode, she describes herself as a determined, independent mind from the beginning, so her decisions are hers alone, and not influenced or brought about unintentionally by third parties.

⁷⁵ During this period, as Grace and Johnson state, Hettie “harbored a secret writing life, but it was not until 1978 that she gave her first public reading” (*Cool* 155).

technique for Jones, who lacks self-confidence in the value of her own experience. With regard to this question, she wonders “[w]hat – or who – was the subject of Morton Street [where she lived]?” (24), adding that her “single-minded coming of age lacked conflict [and that] if, as Aristotle claimed, the plot was the soul of the action, what was [hers]? What could be said of [her]?” (24)

The feeling of insufficiency towards her experience – which makes her discard it as a source of literary creativity – goes beyond a possible negative influence of society’s expectations. In search for a heightened way of living, one that might be worthy of being transformed into art, she keeps a small journal – following the advice of a friend – in hope of boosting the transformation that would shape her into a writer. In the journal she “wrote small impressions, likes and dislikes, about wanting to live unencumbered by things” (24). Similarly, as she puts it, she “made a list of the men I’d slept with, to see if I could shock myself (I couldn’t)” (25). Thus, the little events of her life, even if they break assumptions of the female sex – she becomes independent, supports herself with various jobs, is sexually free, etc. – prove not to be enough, leaving her unimpressed and offering no subject-matter for her writing.

Throughout the memoir, Jones continues to discuss her writing in negative terms, which ends up becoming an oppressive element she can neither deal with, nor get rid of. As an everlasting presence of work to be done, the act of writing is pushed to the margins in favor of other – still valuable, but less creative – activities in which she hides. In 1957, after “[h]aving failed to write a line for a week,” (25) she returns to work at the theater. Similarly, while working at *Partisan Review*,⁷⁶ she kept “a big green metal waste can, where most of [her] lunchtime attempts to write got filed,” (48) admitting she was “too ashamed to show” the poems (48). The inferiority complex made her destroy almost all of the writing she did in that period because she, in her words, “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 was so much better” (48). Once again, after a disappointing experience with her own writing, she takes refuge in other activities, as in her editorial job, where she could see “a stir of reaction, a gearing-up of the generations” (49) from a safe distance, without investing too much of her literary self in the process.

⁷⁶ An American political and literary quarterly published from 1934 to 2003.

It is after having married LeRoi Jones that she realizes with shame that by becoming “Hettie Jones” she had abandoned “Hettie Cohen” – the girl who shaped the clouds to her liking – and she feels something should be done to compensate for all of Hettie Cohen’s unfulfilled ambition. The way to reward her is to finally act in pursuit of her literary identity, and she starts by purchasing a space of her own to work:

Poor discarded Hettie Cohen. With all her grand ambition, all she’d ever “become” was Hettie Jones. I felt I owed her. The Friday before we moved I went out at lunchtime with my take-home thirty-seven dollars, determined to buy a desk, my first [...] I found one the right height, oak with carved front and a number of useful-looking compartments [...]

“How much for the desk?” I asked.

“It’s not a desk, it’s a secretary,” he said.

I wanted nothing to do with that word. “How much is the desk?” I said again, as if he hadn’t spoken. (115-116)

On this occasion, Hettie’s determination does not let anything come between her and her resolution to write, ignoring the man’s comment about the true nature of the piece of furniture.⁷⁷ Whatever it is supposed to be – whatever the function of its compartments and drawers – this will be the author’s personal space to write. In *The Portable Beat Reader*, Ann Charters misreads Hettie’s transformation in her memoir from Cohen, to Jones the wife, and Jones the writer, stating that in the memoir, she describes “her transformation from Hettie Cohen, a ‘small, dark, twenty-two-year-old Jew from Laurelton, Queens,’ to Hettie Jones, a radical poet’s wife who worked full-time as a subscription manager for the conservative *Partisan Review*.” (482) Oblivious to Jones’s most important transformation, that of a writer and independent woman, Charters downplays the importance of Jones’s poetry as well as the memoir itself by reading it solely in connection with her marriage to LeRoi Jones.

⁷⁷ In an early draft of her memoir, dated 1986, she writes: “The desk I’d bought was properly called a secretary, which I’d found out only after I owned it, and much to my disgust. I’d refused to learn stenography, had never been anyone’s secretary, swore never to be, and hated any alliances with the word. But since there was always a poem to suit one’s purposes, I considered Olson’s words: ‘What does not change is the will to change.’ The desk would be called what became of it” (154, Hettie Jones Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Columbia University, New York).

A different position is taken up in di Prima's memoir, *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, where the author reflects on the tension that being a woman and an artist created in those days; a tension she believes could even affect – usually did in her opinion – their physical or mental health. As she states, her “understanding at this time, too, was that there was inevitable guilt in being woman and artist, no matter how ‘clear’ one tried to get, and that guilt alone would bring one down eventually. At any rate make one sick,” (198) adding that she “knew no older women artists who were not ill. Not in the 1950s” (198).

As commented before, di Prima links this problem to the exclusion of women artists by the artistic world and literary spheres, restricting their path towards publication, public readings, shows at art galleries, etc. Even di Prima, who did not consider the male dominated world affected her own approach to writing, recognizes the obstacles the mere fact of being a woman placed on the artists' path back then. For example, while she includes herself in the group, describing it as “our writing community,” (237) she is not surprised when she is not invited to participate in a poetry conference at Wagner College on Staten Island. Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, Joel Oppenheimer and others were going, but di Prima knew that even though she “published with everyone in the usual places, worked side-by-side with the men putting out the magazines and books, read here and there with them on the East Side or the Village,” (237-238) as a woman, she “was invisible” (238). Similarly, after Donald Allen told her that he would not be including her poetry in the *New American Poetry* anthology⁷⁸ – it only included four female names: Helen Adam, Madeline Gleason, Barbara Guest and Denise Levertov – she concludes that “it really didn't matter *what* anthologies [her] work was in or not [...] the work was good [it] would find its audience anyhow” (238).

This is where di Prima distances herself from the “female syndrome” she identified as the special condition women artists suffered from. Perhaps because of her strong will, or the fact that since childhood she leant heavily on books and her own writing to hide from external threats, she feels no shame or guilt in writing herself. Much to the contrary, writing is described as a free space, a “world without shame,

⁷⁸ In the memoir, di Prima confesses that Allen told her it was Hettie Jones who requested di Prima's work was not included, due to the affair she was having with LeRoi Jones. This, however, was not confirmed.

beyond good and evil” (222). Although this might also be true for other writers analyzed in this study, the novelty in di Prima’s position is that she did not feel she needed to hide her work, even if it did not find a platform from which to be launched into the world. In her own words, her writing is a place where she “could be who I was, without pulling punches, where there was room for my cynicism, my bitterness and my strength, as well as for the vision and the passion” (222). And if it was not understood, or appreciated, it was not as important as doing the work for the work’s sake. As Ginsberg wrote in the dedication to *Howl and Other Poems* in relation to the unpublished work of Kerouac, Cassady and Burroughs,⁷⁹ maybe she also thought her books would also be published “in heaven” in the end. Therefore, although di Prima found the same obstacles, her strong-willed determination to her work, which she sealed in the vow to poetry she took very early on, made her take – at least on paper – a different approach towards the feelings of shame and insufficiency. The fact that her first collection of poetry was published when she was only twenty-four, might also have given her the courage and determination to keep writing, knowing that the work would find an audience in due time.

Notwithstanding di Prima’s position, the act of writing in the memoirs is generally explored through metaphors of lacking purpose or audience. This is true for writers like Jones, who did not give her first reading until the late 1970s, or even Johnson who, even though she published her first novel under contract in 1962, has admitted she wrote the novel with “uncertainty,” (*Cool* 190) feeling “scared” (*Cool* 190) and “nervous,” (*Cool* 190) as she was writing about things a woman was not supposed to write about. In any case, the memoirs of those who managed to overcome this barrier reveal a situation that is individual and collective at the same time. By writing about it, and including their lost or less known work – and that of others – they fight back and substitute shame for pride, making the memoir a celebration of their lives and work.

Technique & Style

This last section looks into the writing techniques and the general style employed in the memoirs, as well as on the themes that might link their work with the mainstream Beat Generation literature. In this respect, I look at the memoirs in two different levels; at the level of construction and at the level of content, to see whether they assimilate or depart

⁷⁹ “All these books are published in Heaven” (n.p.n)

from Beat themes and style. The memoirs analyzed are different from one another in content and style, so there is not just one technique employed in the texts. For example, while some of them offer greater innovations in form and subject-matter, others are fairly traditional as far as writing is concerned. To facilitate the analysis, then, the memoirs will be grouped according to similarities and affinities in formal, aesthetic and thematic matters, with the aim to offer an overview of the techniques employed.

Regarding thematic and formal innovations, the two memoirs which more clearly experiment with these subjects are Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and Brenda Frazer's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*. These memoirs – both published in 1969 – are more closely linked to the Beat movement in time, technique and content than the rest of memoirs. First of all, at the level of content, they both deal with subversive themes frequent in the literature of the Beat Generation – even if they often do so from a female perspective. These include, to name a few, the portrayal of explicit heterosexual and homosexual sex, drugs as means to expand the senses, problems with the law, alienation from the state and dominant values and mores, sense of an alternative community of artists against a larger oppressive force, etc. Regarding their style, they assimilate and mock Beat aesthetics at the same time primarily through the use of an ironic and defiant narrative voice.

Troia: Mexican Memoirs, recounts newly-weds Ray and Bonnie Bremser's escape to Mexico after Ray's parole violation in New Jersey. Striving to survive, and to feed their baby-daughter Rachel, Bonnie ends up working as a prostitute, quarreling at the border with US and Mexican officials to be able to visit Ray – imprisoned again – and finally giving up her daughter for adoption. Bonnie's story fits into the category "beat life" of a desperate, broken down, poor and definitely "beaten" person which might as well have been another "who-stanza" in Ginsberg's "Howl for Carl Solomon".⁸⁰ Similarly, regarding its form and style, the memoir "follows Beat aesthetics of immersion in memory and imagination enhanced by sensory deformation" (*Cool* 110). Following road narratives, the memoir revolves around Frazer's travels, and is divided into four books or chapters – Mexico City to Veracruz and back to Texas; Mexico to Laredo; Mexico City and rural excursions: Losing Rachel; and Mexico City

⁸⁰ My humble attempt at revising "Howl" to include Bonnie's experience: "who were forced to flee to Mex-city with skinny baby under arm / fucked for bucks & enjoyment full of tears and sweat / returned childless demolished yet triumphant & wrote it down in sand / not to forget."

and back to New York. Following her movement from one place to another, the narration emphasizes the idea of the characters being on the run, constantly moving. The style, likewise, has a sense of immediacy and spontaneity, which has led many critics to read the text as a revision of the male-centered Beat road tale. Backing up this theory we have Frazer's own comments on having read and consciously "copied" Kerouac's style in *On the Road*⁸¹ (*Cool* 115). Influenced by jazz and blues – she mentions the blues singer Bessie Smith – the process of writing consisted in writing two-paged letters addressed to Ray which were finally edited into the memoir, and it is described as a self-imposed ritual in which she would just "smoke a joint, sit at a typewriter, and go" (*Cool* 113). Frazer herself has described her method as follows: "Writing discipline consisted of copying my favorite author, Kerouac, and adopting a ritualistic existence centered around the daily hour or so of actual writing. I had only my memories, and recalling them was part of the creative atmosphere I set for myself..." (*The Portable Beat Reader* 465)

The memoir begins with an explanatory note addressed to the readers about her technique – or lack a technique as she states – when writing her story. In the very first page she comments on the structure of the book, the linearity or time transgression of the events narrated, and the therapeutic and healing process it meant for her. In her own words:

...First off I want to tell you a few very important things about me. I know that continuity is necessary, and I do my best up to a point, but I believe in distortion – I believe that if you get to a place where something is taking shape and want badly to comprehend the things that you have created, supposedly for yourself (since everything is personal anyway), then any old thing to fill the gap will do – and that is the point where you come in...in looking back, what's important is not the technique or lack of it, but those few minutes when you overcome the frustration, bridge the gap, and hold something incredibly beautiful to you; the point where you don't see yourself anymore but you are there, and OBOY, that's the way you really are... (1)

⁸¹ In the introduction written by Ann Charters for the Dalkey edition she mentions Kerouac's *Doctor Sax* as Frazer's model.

Just like Kerouac, Frazer gives up linearity and continuity in the narration of events in favor of the intuitive path created by her memory, and the representation of different images it triggers. For Frazer, it is in those moments – not in the technique or conscious use of language – that the writer is able to feel and articulate her presence in any literary creation, when the work acquires its value. The tone of her voice, too, represents an aesthetic innovation in comparison to the rest of the memoirs, at the same time that it distances her narrative from Kerouac’s style – at least in *On the Road*. The narrator and the author fuse in her prose with a harsh, direct, rampant voice which directly addresses the readers, mocking and challenging their expectations and their possible reception of her story, and increasing the tension between the veracity and fictionality of the text. Her attitude prevents the reader from judging her actions through her anticipation of his or her expectations. Early in the narrative she asks the reader to put the blame on her as she cannot blame herself “anymore, for the repentance is done in the act and working through it” (3). That way, she diminishes the reader’s power to judge her on moral grounds, since her repentance is already taking place through her narrative. She keeps teasing the reader throughout the memoir, calling him/her “thrill seeker” (5), as Grace and Johnson note, “deprecating the reader as voyeuristic,” (*Cool* 110) especially those readers who approach the memoir as a tell-all tale in which the author relates her life of abuse and sexual scandals. Through her tone she shields against the insults or negative comments of those who would condemn her, arguing that she will tell the story as it is, without invoking the muse or citing “history about the temple prostitutes” (5) in an attempt to justify herself, stating that: “[t]ell you straight? I’m getting to it – you wait, for a change, you drags, you barriers who want to shelter me from the purity of my own *action* by layers and walls of shitty, philosophical drag. Call me an addict...huh, if so, you yourself are the drug, a drug and a drag, all of us wallowing in it now [...]

(5). The reader in Frazer’s text is positioned as both a gossip behind the rear window and as a strict moralizer at the same time, plays a crucial role in the memoir, becoming the “drug” and “drag” – her executioner and liberator – author and reader participate or “wallow” in the same messy process.

The rest of the memoir is constructed through a series of different scenes which are usually introduced already on the move, without setting the context first. Similarly, the language is a fast, stream-of-consciousness in which the author mixes narrative bits with in-retrospect reflections of things to come. An example of this can be seen in the

following lines which, while taking place at the beginning of the narrative, already portray the threat of prostitution lurking in the shadows of her near future: “I go for a prophetic bus ride to the place where a young jiver in baggy pants, fixed suave style with bicycle clips asks me if I am waiting for someone – oh, the universe I am to grow accustomed to in Mexico. I am redeemed! In other words, I have got me an education” (17). Similarly, there is a strong meta-narrative element in the memoir, as the text repeatedly makes reference to its style and construction, especially when it comes to the use of fictionalized elements and literary devices. In her urge to tell her story straight, without dissuasive elements, she rules out the use of poetic images that might distract the reader and disguise the actual facts. As she puts it: “[t]his is not a time for thought, no poetical figures dancing in symbolic gesture to be remembered; the poetry is all depleted, the images so old and overused it is like the end of a lifetime. Everything is dragged out from the place where it has been consoling and laid down, lay it down, this is the end” (19).

Thus, Frazer emphasizes the urgency of a text in which there is not time to be contemplative, where the events just flow uninhibited through quick images. Nonetheless, in a double move, by making reference to the lack of poetical figures and literary style in the memoir, the text also draws attention to its construction, and the lack of style the text claims to aspire to, becomes a very distinct and evident effort to (re)create a “style.” Together with *Memoirs of a Beatnik, Troia*, is indeed the memoir which more closely resembles a work of fiction and in which the creativity and position of the author as writer and creator of the book more evidently complicate the relationship between fact and fiction. As Ann Charters states in the introduction to the 2007 edition of *Troia*, Frazer’s “creative energy overflows in the words that have transformed her down-and-out experiences in Mexico into art,” (ii) emphasizing the status of the memoir as an artful device, equating it to a novel.

Just as Frazer’s memoir, Diane di Prima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik* invests more highly in its style and consciously subversive subject matter than in maintaining the veracity of the facts narrated. Published in 1969, the memoir already draws attention to its own fictionality in the author’s note, as she answers the question “What do you supposed happened to all those Beatniks?” (1) by declaring that, “some of [them] sold out and became hippies. And some of [them] managed to preserve [their] integrity by accepting government grants, or writing pornographic novels” (1). This idea is further

explored in an afterword entitled “writing memoirs,” published in the 1987 edition. Making allusion to her economic situation, and the people she was responsible for – children, husband and friends – she admits she found herself “writing for [...] rent and dinner” (190). Therefore, the memoir – commissioned by Maurice Girodias – was written quickly, with its sixty-page advance “whipped out” (192) while playing “Bird, or Clifford Brown, or Miles” (193), and letting herself and her narrative be taken over by the memories of the early 1950s. Nevertheless, far from being a true recollection of those days – unlike the author’s note to her second memoir claims of *Recollections* – this narrative becomes an improvised, fictionalized version of her own life, encouraged by her editor to fulfill prurient expectations. As she puts it:

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 me: “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)

Apart from the two author’s notes, the memoir’s artificiality also shows in the narrative itself both through the playful and ironic voice of the narrator, and the exaggerated number of sex scenes improvised for the occasion. Following the “MORE SEX” demand, sex does indeed dominate the story, shaping the whole memoir for the sole exception of a few introductory passages where the setting, political or cultural context is briefly sketched. This openness about sexuality, among other things, is one of the features that links this book with the thematic interests of the Beat Generation, even while deviating from male narratives due to its focus on female experience and sexuality – even if it reads exceptionally phallogentric. The narration opens up with a young girl who has just lost her virginity, and explores her body for visible – or palpable – changes in her anatomy. After that, this fake-memoir continues to explore and give very detailed accounts of many different sexual encounters. In her – or her editor’s – desire to shock, the liberal politics displayed in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* even justify rape and incest. The narrator herself is raped by her friend’s father while she was staying for few days at their house. Although at first “repelled by his thick, older’s man

body,” (67) she ends up finding that there is no real need for her to struggle, realizing that “this was Serge, poor silly Serge, who never got to screw his wife, and if he wanted to throw a fuck into me, why I might as well let him” (68).⁸² This shocking position towards topics generally considered social taboos is also found in other works of di Prima,⁸³ and in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, it disestablishes moral and sexual mores at the same time that it feeds the reader’s prying demands.

Furthermore, the rape scene is described as though she was watching it from a distance, without believing “that this was rape, that [she] was about to be raped,” (68) as if that act of sexual aggression was incompatible with her sexual freedom. Nancy M. Grace reads this sequence as an example of the power of a totally liberated and sexually free woman who can turn around an act of violence against her, declaring “that it is she who can set up the rules, that sexual representation, no matter how hard core or soft core, need not be an insult or an assault upon women’s rights,” (“Snapshots” 166) at the same time that the author plays with masculine sexual fantasies – she ends up enjoying the experience. Something which is not mentioned in Grace’s analysis of the scene, is the fact that the narrator links twice Serge to his daughter, Tomi – with whom the author had had a love affair – fusing father and daughter and making them part of the same sexual energy, the ultimate force she is liberating. When Serge wakes her up, whispering in her ear to be quiet, she admits that “for an unspeakable minute he sounded like Tomi,” (67) and similarly, when he cleans her up after sex, he reminds her “abruptly of Tomi drying the mud off [her] feet with her panties the day before” (69). This mixing of bodies and gender is frequent in the memoir, describing feminine men – her first lover’s narrow shoulders remind her of a girl – and masculine women – she is sometimes compared to a pirate – who feel attracted to one another responding to a

⁸² The mother is described in the memoir as “a handsome little woman in her mid-forties, Anglo-Saxon and proper, grim and laconic, a woman who did what was expected of her, and took no pleasure in it. It was well-known – and frequently discussed – fact within the family circle that she was frigid” (47).

⁸³ As it is the case in Revolutionary Letter # 49, di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters*. In this poem, the speaker denounces various forms of social malaise and blames the state and the government for being the cause of it:

Every whore, pimp, murderer, a political prisoner
Every pederast, dealer, drunk driver, burglar
Poacher, striker, strike breaker, rapist
Polar bear at San Francisco zoo, political prisoner
(*Revolutionary Letters* 62-63)

larger sexual need without paying much attention to form, emphasizing sex itself as the goal.

Nevertheless, apparently subscribing to her editors' and readers' demands for a scandalous, pornographic coming-of-age account, di Prima manages to parody and subvert the tell-all memoir of sexual adventures by overtly drawing attention to its own fictionality. An example is found in the case of the two sections "A night by the fire: What you would like to hear" and "A night by the fire: What actually happened." While sharing an apartment with another group of writers, painters, dancers, among others, the author narrates how four or five of them usually had to share a bed to keep warm during the cold winter. Once the setting is described, and the reader starts to wonder what these beatniks might be up to crammed together in one big bed, she indulges the reader with two different possibilities. In the first one, the reader can let himself be told a tale of a memorable orgy, although the language soon breaks the illusion. This is achieved by changing the narrative present simple and continuous into a hypothetical tense which is, at the same time, emphasized with the use of adverbs like "maybe" or phrases like "I guess then..." at the beginning of the sentences. For example, "[m]aybe we all come once and then maybe Pete sucks Leslie off [...] I guess then Pete would build up the fire, and we would smoke some hash" (150). In the second option, introduced by "[o]r maybe not," (150) therefore denying the previous episode, we have a very different picture of a variety of people minding their own business – listening to jazz, reading, playing drums hipster's style, etc. – until it gets late and they go together to bed "in sweatpants and sweatshirt" (151) to avoid freezing. In this version, the only friction between bodies is aimed at trying to keep warm – "We are curled up, spoon fashion, all on our right sides, facing the fire. My nose is cold. My nose is always cold, and usually numb. I stick it deliberately into Leslie's back to warm it. He jumps a little, in his sleep" (151).

Something similar is found in the anything-goes Beat orgy – starring Ginsberg, Kerouac, Orlovsky, among others – with which the memoir ends and that adds to the sensationalist impulse of the book. Despite the different instances which demonstrate that the veracity of the events is, at best, compromised, popular belief still holds this event as true. This fact is stressed in di Prima's second memoir *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, which in a sense acts as an antithesis to *Memoirs* – from a sexualized, simplified version of the bohemian life, to a detailed and serious description of what it

was for her to grow up and develop her literary ambition in the 1950s and 1960s. In *Recollections*, then, di Prima sets out to dismantle the orgy myth she accuses Robert Creeley of spreading by describing it as a true account in a documentary about the Beats. She states that Creeley “tells it as a man would tell it, as a man would want to have it happen in fact, and [...] it’s time I told it like it was” (201). The night from which the myth was born took place in Allen Ginsberg’s apartment, where di Prima, Philip Whalen, Kerouac and other writers got together to talk about literature, drink and smoke marihuana. di Prima, who had left her daughter with a babysitter, had to leave early, and as the rest urged her to stay, Kerouac stood up and “announced in a stentorian voice: DI PRIMA, UNLESS YOU FORGET ABOUT YOUR BABYSITTER, YOU’RE NEVER GOING TO BE A WRITER” (202). Although Kerouac’s words revived her fear of not being able to combine motherhood and poetry, she resolves to go as planned. Still, as di Prima puts it, the story that circulates is that “it was an *orgy* [she] was invited to stay for (mixing it up no doubt with the orgy at the end of *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, or the eternal Beat Orgy that will live forever in the minds of all guys who were around for the second half of the twentieth century) and that [she] quickly forgot about the babysitter and stayed for the orgy” (202). This is one example of how the male point of view – however estranged from reality it is – dominates and shapes female experience and, what most infuriates di Prima, it overshadows her writing career, as her determination to go home as agreed with her babysitter carries as much weight as her vocation as writer.⁸⁴

Even if in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* there is not an overt attempt to re-write the past – *Recollections* was published more than thirty years later – di Prima uses the genre to parody readers’ expectations, dismantling stereotypes by overusing the trivial and the mundane. Besides contemplating double options for some events, the author also includes digressions that address the reader, at times even asking for their participation, as it is in the case in which she leaves a blank space – after a quick lecture on different kinds of kisses – for the reader to note down their favorite types of kisses.

Diane di Prima, hence, deliberately mocks the scandalous memoir by drawing attention to the made-up elements that create such stories; simultaneously conforming to

⁸⁴ A passing allusion to women’s responsibility against men’s freedom to attend orgies – or I guess any other “social” event – is made in the review “The Women Who Stayed Home from the Orgy” by Cornel Bonca.

and rejecting the stereotype of the sexually adventurous “beatnik.” Against popular belief, di Prima tells us, they did not just take advantage of every occasion to improvise orgies, but were also young independent people whose choice of a different lifestyle had placed them at risk of poverty, living in rusty “pads” with no heating and broken floors, where they tried to achieve their artistic vocation.

Therefore, both Brenda Frazer’s *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* and Diane di Prima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik* share similar thematic and stylistic features that connect them to the Beat Generation. Both memoirs, similarly, can be considered semi-fictional, at “the point at which confession borders salacious entertainment,” (*Cool* 109) and differ from the rest in their use of fiction. While in the majority of the memoirs fiction is employed to challenge patriarchy and to establish their position as writers, in *Troia* and *Memoirs*, fiction complicates their stories, acting as a detonator to expose their scorn for and their radical revision of the memoir genre.

The rest of the memoirs differ from these two both in form and content. On the one hand, while they are also based on their lives – which were reasonably unusual and unconventional for women of the era – in comparison to *Troia*, for example, they appear rather sober and moderate.⁸⁵ Similarly, on the other hand, their writing technique and style is also not as innovative, sometimes departing from their previous work in favor of a more conventional style in line with autobiographical accounts. Carolyn Cassady’s *Off the Road*, for instance, is the most conventional of all the memoirs analyzed in this study, both thematically and aesthetically. Regarding its content, as it has been argued before, Cassady’s emphasis on the underlying normality of her marriage to Neal Cassady⁸⁶ – placing the Beat Generation and its endless kicks and transgressions in the realm of mythology – often causes her to minimize the innovative or unconventional aspects of their life together. Although she discusses topics and events related to the Beat movement, she always does so as an observer, not a participant. This, nonetheless, should not be interpreted as the result of her victimized,

⁸⁵ It is important to note that the story told in *Troia* is only representative of a short span of the whole of Brenda Frazer’s life, who after coming back to New York and getting back with Ray, they separated in the early 1970s, and as Charters tells in the introduction to the book “in a remarkable turn-around, she went back to college and had a career as a soil scientist, working for fifteen years with the Progressive Soil Survey of the United States Department of Agriculture.” (vii)

⁸⁶ Because of her focus on the respectability of her husband, in a move to contest his popular image, Bent Sørensen refers to *Off the Road* as a “hagiography” (Unnumbered) as she tries to re-insert Neal and place him in a respectable position as a family man.

oppressive situation; quite the contrary, the narrative highlights her choice to stay on the periphery or, better said, to place the Beat Generation on the periphery of her life, denying – even if naively – Neal’s implication in the movement and the negative consequences it had for her and their children.

In the memoir she discusses marital and extramarital sex, homosexual relationships, drug consumption, police abuse, meditation studies and alternative religions, without losing sight of the core focus of the memoir: her efforts to maintain the stability at home. As a matter of fact, her decision to keep the house and protect her children, against Neal’s demand that she used the house to stand his bail – he had been imprisoned for possession and distribution of drugs⁸⁷ – is the detonator and the beginning of the collapse of their marriage. In any case, it shows that she placed her well-being and their children above Neal’s demands, realizing that the house was all they had, and that under no circumstances could she renounce to it. Despite Neal’s angry letters to her, she puts her foot down, showing a great deal of self-respect and proving her strong character – as her children admit in the documentary *Love Always, Carolyn* (Dir. Malin Korkeasalo and Maria Ramström 2011) it was a hard decision they need to be grateful for.

Similarly, the memoir employs the detached, sober and mature voice which usually accompanies contemplative, retrospective analyses and which – on the whole – fits Cassady’s global approach and position in the Beat movement, while also making room for irony and humor. For example, discussing their exchange of love letters when Neal was working as a brakeman for the Southern Pacific Railroad, she admits she believed everything he wrote, thinking “people can and must change, and ‘with love all things are possible’” (206). Pretending to be horrified by Carolyn’s suggestion that he could have occasional sex with other women in her absence, Neal wrote as committed to her as ever: “[w]hen I get home we’ll be in our rearranged bedroom and read to each other again all our love letters – all too few they are, so we’ll make up for it by telling each other, mouth to ear, all the things we feel and all we want to say and have wanted to say forever. Just remember this: I have solved our sex problem. Don’t forget to remind me to tell you about it when I get home” (206-207).

⁸⁷ It is described as a set-up, as two undercover policemen pretend to want drugs from him and finally arrest him for supplying them with two joints of marihuana.

The naïve, deeply in love Carolyn in the story bought the content of this letter, but the narrator has the insight of time, and so can dissolve Neal's words by exposing their deceptiveness and, incidentally, the lack of resolution to their sexual problems. Time also allows Cassady to look at the past with humor, suggesting Neal could have employed his lady-killer techniques to earn some money. In her own words, "[h]ow eloquent he was; where did he find the energy? (I only learned long after he'd died – thank Heaven – that he was as eloquent in writing sex letters to Diana [Hansen] at the same time. He should have written romance novels for bucks)" (207).

Regarding formal characteristics, the memoir is quite traditional in literary technique and style. Throughout the eighty-two short chapters into which the memoir is divided, time linearity is kept rigorously – from 1947 to 1969 – except for a few flashbacks which go back to her childhood and college years at Bennington. In addition, following the historian impulse of many autobiographers, her story is supported by documents – such as letters or excerpts from newspaper articles – which she includes in the narrative and which impregnate the memoir with an air of historical factual accuracy. This technique facilitates, at the same time, the corrective intention of her account. Carolyn Cassady's revision of history, then, is supported by the same sense of historicity her memoir employs, hoping this way to erase the fiction surrounding the Beat Generation in general, and Neal Cassady's image as the archetypal Beat mad man in particular. Nonetheless, there are some innovations in her style, as it is the case of the reproduction of long dialogues, something that, as Nancy M. Grace has pointed out,⁸⁸ was not permitted or well-received in autobiographical accounts. With this choice, Cassady's memoir gets closer to fictional forms like the novel, as the dialogues – unless transcribed from audio-recordings – are perforce fictionalized. However, the fact that the tone and voice of the narrator is the same throughout – cold, detached, wise, etc. – together with the detailed chronological descriptions, corroborate the idea that she mostly conforms to an autobiographical-I to gain authority and maintain the veracity of her account. Ultimately, as she had stressed in several interviews, her main intention

⁸⁸ Grace states that women of the Beat Generation do not follow clear-cut patterns for their autobiographical accounts, resisting traditional patterns for autobiography writing. Regarding Carolyn Cassady, she notes how "Even Carolyn Cassady, who is a painter by vocation and profession, not a writer [...] attempted in her memoir to experiment with reconstructed scenes and dialogues, techniques until recently taboo in life writing" ("Snapshots" 143).

was to set the record straight. Answering the question of why she wrote the memoir, she commented she wrote it:

Partially because there were so many myths and misunderstandings about Jack and all of us. In *On the Road* Jack didn't really mention me. He mentioned meeting me but that was because he didn't want to offend Neal. All that time in Denver; we spent a lot of time together alone in Denver [...] So I saw a lot of him in Denver, and he cut all that out. And then he lived with us in San Jose and he didn't talk about that in the book, so I had to write my book to clear up some of that. It's funny he was so afraid. But it was Neal's idea in the first place, so he wouldn't have been offended. But Jack was always paranoid and thought he might. (qtd. in MacKay)

Filling the gaps in Beat history, while trying to refashion the popular image of her ex-husband from holy goof to respectable family man, Cassady's memoir remains inside and outside the position normally taken in the Beat memoirs; sharing some of the features but on the whole defending her position against the movement,⁸⁹ keeping her house in the center of the narrative as the sustainer of her conservative ideals. In "Teaching the Beat Generation to Generation X", Robert Bennett reads *Off the Road* as rewriting "many of the characters and events in Kerouac's *On the Road* from a female perspective that exposes and reverses many of Kerouac's sexist assumptions and self-serving descriptions. In particular, Cassady's account problematizes Kerouac's representation of his sexual virility by describing him as a 'somewhat inhibited' lover and explaining how Cassady 'manipulated circumstance' to seduce Kerouac, rather than the other way around." (*The Beat Generation: Critical Essays* 13-14)

The focus on the domestic and the development of the story around the concept of home is what Hettie Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones* has in common with Cassady's *Off the Road*. In fact, this concept permeates the structure of Hettie's memoir, which is divided according to the location of the different "homes" she lived in – Morton Street, Twentieth Street, Fourteenth Street and Cooper Square – focusing on how the experiences lived in each of these addresses formed her character, being part of

⁸⁹ As Cassady has further stressed in many interviews, "the 'Beat Generation' was an invention of the media and Allen Ginsberg" ("The Blind" 163).

all the different possibilities which exist in her name,⁹⁰ and are part of her final identity. As she has mentioned in interviews:

my memories fell into those patterns associated with place, and then I wanted this to be a woman's book. I thought men would not focus on their homes. But here I mean "home" not just in terms of where I lived, but "home" as the art scene. So it seemed like the likely place to locate not only my life but the literary life and also because of the business of race, where things came together in terms of race. (*Cool* 162)

By focusing on her home,⁹¹ and doing so under the peculiar life she was leading – independent, sexually-free, in an interracial marriage, journal editor, poetical aspirations, etc. – she revises the terms under which domesticity has been discussed, challenging patriarchy from the exact realm she is restrained to.

Regarding the voice and position of the narrator towards the events told, although the memoir is also written in retrospect, from the vantage point of an experienced person, it is not as composed as that in *Off the Road*, allowing fluctuations and changes in mood, and therefore bringing the narrator's experience and feelings closer to the actual time narrated. An example of this can be found in the way she tells the events that took place in a party she and LeRoi threw in their apartment on New Year's Eve, 1962. The narration starts with a traditional technique, describing the setting and the facts which culminated in very high Hettie shivering and vomiting while an angry LeRoi screamed at her and questioned her intelligence for accepting drugs from one of the – male – guests he did not particularly like. From this point, the voice of the narrator gets closer to the events, describing what she did and how she felt without imposing too much wisdom of events to come. Shivering and very vulnerable, she asks LeRoi to get her the quilt from their bed to cover herself up but he, arguing that there

⁹⁰ The importance of different names to the construction of identity is crucial in both Hettie's and LeRoi's autobiographical accounts. As Deborah Thompson states, "[t]hat names are a central site of identity production is clear by the very framings of the autobiographies. Baraka's book says, on the cover, '*The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* [by] Amiri Baraka.' This seeming contradiction – that the name of the writer does not match the subject of the autobiography – is only the first of many clues not only that names matter a great deal to these writers, but also that names are a primary material of creative and artistic activity" (85).

⁹¹ Domesticity and home as a platform for her art is also found in her poems, as it is in the poem "Home," (*Drive* 56) which is shaped to represent a house, and in which the repetition and bold type letter of the word home direct the readers' attention to different narratives surrounding the concept.

were people sitting on it, takes her to the study and leaves her there, out of the guests' sight. Left alone and apparently helpless, it is up to herself to find a way to warm up. It suddenly dawns on her the problem stems from the fact she had not asked herself "why only the quilt would do – why [she] didn't just get [the] coat from the closet" (158). The solution is told in a narrative tone which is closer to the events told than to the feelings the author might have about them at the time of writing the memoir:

I began to shiver the way I'd only seen animals shiver, until one violent convulsion sent the wheeled chair out from under me, and me to the floor in front of what I hadn't even noticed, an enormous pile of coats, the topmost of which still glistened with snow. With a cry of relief I burrowed in, under all that steamy, human-smelling wool, and lay still until the shivering stopped. I felt warm and relaxed and sublimely lucid. [...] Well, I thought comfortably, I'll be fine. It came to me that the quilt had been on my childhood bed in Laurelton, and I felt pleased to have done with it, if indeed it had been a symbol, and thanked Roi for inadvertently pointing this out. (158)

She continues to tell her drug-induced experience and the visions and hallucinations she had as she felt them back then, imagining herself and her children inside a paperweight full of snow, but happy and warm, as well as "beautiful, complicated colors," (159) but she does so without trying to explain, in retrospect, what the vision meant or the reasons why she thought about those things. Fiction and reality fuse in complex ways in this memoir; although at times it follows the conventions of fiction narratives, a simple and direct style dominates the memoir, often avoiding metaphoric or complicated images, and favoring a linear narration of the facts based on an autobiographical approach in which truth is maintained. To support the latter, the events told in the memoir are often clearly contextualized. Location, dates, names of the people involved, as well as socio-cultural and political context provide her story with a reliable background which helps the reader locate the story within a real historical moment. This is crucial to the re-writing of history fundamental to many of these memoirs, and which in Jones's case, translates into a specific re-fashioning of her history and her involvement with the literary and social scene of the epoch. As she has stated in interviews, although at first she was hesitant about publishing a memoir,

believing people would just want to “get between the sheets,”⁹² (*Cool* 159) she changed her mind after noticing the predominant unawareness about women’s contribution to the era: “after I began teaching, after having run into a lot of young women and realizing that nobody knew this history – nobody knew what the women involved had done – I felt that I had to set the record straight in some way. And then, LeRoi published his book [*The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, 1984]. So I decided that I really had to do it” (*Cool* 159).

The memoir, thus, is clearly contextualized and placed in opposition to prevailing “histories” that have been written about her, and that threaten to be read as real facts if not contested. Nonetheless, as Hettie Jones is also a writer – and it is precisely this part of her identity which is emphasized in the development of the story – her fiction and literary works are integrated in the memoir, drawing attention to her position as writer and establishing her authorial voice in the creation of the memoir itself, which ceases to be a mere historical document, and becomes part of the body of work of her literary career. Interestingly, in a letter sent to Jones on account of a revision of a draft of the memoir by Little, Brown and Company Publishers – sent January 28th 1987 – the reviewer especially criticized Jones’s style and approach to the events related:

The basic thing to remember here is to strive for, as Harry Truman would say, ‘plain talk.’ Write this simply and plainly remembering that quotes/dialogue from that period provide the flavor of that time in a way much more genuine to the ear than your own language. That will bring back the feeling without the pretentiousness of writing as if you still talk that way. Keep in mind that the story is more important than how you say it, and not the other way round. Your

⁹² Jones’s concerns about writing a memoirs or sensationalist accounts are also very present in her unpublished journals (housed at Columbia University). For instance, in an entry dated February 11th 1983, she seems to be considering writing erotic novels: “This is what it comes down to, moving the chair and uncovering the typewriter for the first time in days, I don’t remember, it’s been the rain and now Sing’s roof and the meter and NY’s heaviest rain since 1894 if I remember correctly and two romances, the 2nd of which taught me how skillful those porno writers are, but I can learn, I’ll learn. I sat here all week trying to learn to describe sensation, all the bullshit I always cut out of my spare writing. ‘his tongue like a whisper on her lips,’ when all the while they are really sex manuals and make-me-hots. but I’ll learn to do something I’m feeling unskilled, all the time these days, not having literary opinions and not wanting any. Recluse don’t make money, but all I want is everything.” As if it was a writing exercise, alluding to Grove Press and its erotic books, in the rest of the entry she relates – or fictionalizes – her first sexual adventures.

feelings and the events that provoked them, straightforward and as they happened, is the story.⁹³

Complaining the Jones had put “the language before the story”, the editors reminded Jones of her position as a writer of memoir by actually telling her to stop trying “to write originally” and simply tell her story. We can only hope that E.P. Dutton – the company that finally published *How I Became Hettie Jones* in 1990 – did not ask Jones to report her life without any style or aesthetic intention.

Authorial voice – and notoriety – is what Joyce Johnson gained with the publication and success of *Minor Characters*. Published in 1983, the memoir – which won the National Book Critics Circle Award – is the earliest of the recovery memoirs, those which more clearly set up to re-write a specific period of time and the author’s and other women’s position in it. Johnson’s position might point to a gender-biased organization which dominates the Beat Generation, and which might affect the creativity of male and female writers. If writers like Kerouac, Ginsberg or Burroughs found their inspiration in their trips and “kicks”, women – who most of the times had to work to support not only themselves, but also their children or the male writers themselves – had to find different ways of participating in the revolution. As Johnson comments, “[m]ost of [the Beat women] never got the chance literally to go on the road. Our road instead became the strange lives we were leading. We had actually chosen those lives” (Douglas xix). Bearing in mind feminist mottos like “the personal is political,” *Minor Characters*, then, is not just the story of a “young woman’s coming of age in the beat orbit of Jack Kerouac” – as the subtitle for the memoir suggests – but a political stance against the subordination of female experience from cultural and literary spheres. Establishing women Beat writers as “transitional [...] a bridge to the next’s generation” (xxxiii) in the foreword to her novel, Johnson points out to the fact that the significance of her novel resides not in its form, but in its content, in the exposition of mechanisms of female subordination and in the celebration of the “strange” lives she and other women chose to live.

Without sharing the Beat Generation’s style or techniques – not like Johnson’s early fiction, which more clearly appropriated Beat aesthetics – the memoir uses a

⁹³ Hettie Jones Papers (Columbia University, New York).

sober, distant voice voluntarily positioned at the margins;⁹⁴ it offers her the necessary space to look at the events coldly and ironically. Just like Jones's memoir, *Minor Characters* deals with the complexity of female representation and identity formation. This problem, furthermore, seems exacerbated for young girls who felt they could not – or did not want to – fulfill their parents' expectations, but who also had problems situating themselves as part of the rebellion. Many of them found themselves in a position of in-betweenness, participating in both worlds, but belonging to none. In Johnson's case, her early attempts to achieve freedom caused her to mistake personal identity with physical appearance. On her weekly escapades with a friend to the Square – bohemian enclave – she associates membership with a given dress code, stating that she “long[ed] to turn [...] into a Bohemian, but lack[ed] the proper clothes” (31). Johnson's acknowledgement of the existence of “rebellious clothes” works on two different levels; on the one hand, the naïve Joyce Glassman⁹⁵ did believe a pair of earrings, or black stockings would grant her access to the kind of life she longed for.⁹⁶ On the other hand, Johnson as the mature narrator, speaking from the vantage point of time, also mocks her younger self and the representation of beatniks and other “bohemian” types who understood rebellion on merely superficial terms. This issue is further complicated if we take into consideration early discourses which prompted the distinction between “beat” and “beatnik.” This dichotomy is present in Jack Kerouac's article “The Origins of the Beat Generation,” published in *Playboy* in June, 1959. In the article he distances the Beat Generation from new, perishable trends. The original hipsters he met – Herbert Huncke is the epitome of the type – looked like or were criminals, but shared his philosophical and spiritual hunger, and are to be differentiated from the superficial meaning the word later attained. As he recalls, it was in 1948 when the hipsters were divided into “cool” and “hot,” which he describes as follows:

⁹⁴ When I say she positions her narrative voice voluntarily on the margin it does not mean that she enjoyed her secondary position in history. As she says in the foreword, she “was much more or an observer than I wanted to be,” (xxxiv) and the ending of the memoir, where she emphasizes that she wishes to put an end to her silence and other women in her situation speaks differently. What I mean is that the narrative voice is indeed placed in an external position which empowers her by giving her perspective and the ability to judge the Beat movement critically.

⁹⁵ Joyce Johnson's family name before marrying Jim Johnson.

⁹⁶ Weaver in *The Awakener*, similarly points to a physical transformation as part of a superficial approach to rebelliousness – she, in fact, refers to this passage of Johnson's memoir. Weaver writes that: “Now that I was a Villager I had to look the part, and that meant looking like a ballerina: long skirts, Capezio ballet shoes, and black stockings. Above all, black stockings. [...] Chun [a friend of hers] and I lusted after these objects that had the power to make daily life magical.” (26)

the cool today is your bearded laconic sage, or schlerin, before a hardly touched beer in a beatnik dive, whose speech is low and unfriendly, whose girls say nothing and wear black: the “hot” today is the crazy talkative shining eyed (often innocent and openhearted) nut who runs from bar to bar, pad to pad looking for everybody, shouting, restless, lushy, trying to “make it” with the subterranean beatniks who ignore him. (42)

As critics have noticed, women are excluded from the “hot” category, the only one in which the figure of the artist or writer is incorporated (Johnson and Grace, 2002: 6). Being forced to be “cool,” women are regarded as part of a superficial – mostly through clothing and attitude – approach to the revolution which values their position only as accessories, not as creative beings. Even though it might be counterproductive to rely on the importance of these two categories, especially after Kerouac’s repudiation of the many terms that had evolved from beat – he mentions “beatniks, beats, jazzniks, bopniks, bugniks,” (39), etc. – he does emphasize the fact that the younger generations have misunderstood the true meaning of Beat – as beatific – focusing on a “simple change in fashion and manners” (39). Johnson, therefore, plays with this dichotomy in her memoir, stressing the failure of her initial “cool” approach towards the life she longed for. Although wearing her rebellious mask proved convenient – she could escape and live her life as a double-agent – it was still a disguise, not her true identity. The double costume she wore, in addition, further complicated her capacity for self-representation, alienating her own persona from herself. Unable to fit into any of the two worlds, she becomes invisible:

Invisibility had become my unsatisfying resolution of the outside/inside problem. Moving back and forth between antithetical worlds separated by subway rides, I never fully was what I seemed or tried to be. I had the feeling I was playing hooky all the time, not from school, but from the person represented by my bland outward appearance – the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Glassman, under whose second-rate identity [... I] still nourished my mother’s extravagant dreams that I would achieve fame before I was in my twenties [...]

Yet in that greater world [bohemia, alternative world], which I had discovered for myself without her [her mother] knowing it, I had the distinct feeling that as

a young girl I was inconsequential, neither brilliant enough nor beautiful enough to make any mark whatsoever. (41)

Excluded from both worlds, Johnson discards all categories pre-established for her – the successful actress, or college girl her parents wanted her to be, and the “cool” silent chick the Beat movement assigned her to – adapting the revolution to her own terms and conditions. As she comments in the foreword, even if she “didn’t go anywhere [...] [she] just left the New York neighborhood where [she]’d grown up and moved much farther downtown [it was still her] revolution” (xxxiv). Therefore, the fact that the memoir does not follow Beat conventions at the level of content or style may reveal her distancing from Beat connections. Unlike Susan, the protagonist of her first novel *Come and Join the Dance*, who was indeed depicted as “beat,” her autobiographical representation exposes an uneasy position towards Beat history. As her second memoir, *Missing Men*, demonstrates, her life and writing career went far beyond the short time she was involved with Kerouac and, therefore, directly associated with the Beat Generation. Although she does not truly overcome the secondary positioning at the level of content in *Minor Characters*, it is the medium itself what attests to her successful dissolution of the fixed categories that inhibited her expression. By publishing the memoir, using her own tone and style, and discussing the revolution in terms of her chosen life-style and her literary accomplishments, she defends her own voice and position as a writer.

In much the same way as Johnson’s *Minor Characters*, Diane di Prima’s *Recollections of my Life as Woman* defends her independence and opts for a much more conventional style and writing technique.⁹⁷ Unlike *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, which both through the fictionalized representation of the author and through the use of irony and parody appropriated Beat aesthetics, *Recollections* stands as a much more direct and serious attempt to expose what it meant to grow up female in the socio-political context of the 1940s and 1950s and, especially, to harbor literary or artistic ambitions in a epoch of marked gender oppression.

⁹⁷ In an interview conducted by Jonah Raskin “Beating the Odds,” di Prima states that “[t]he book’s first editor, David Stanford, took six months to read it [the first draft] and turned my vernacular into smooth, regular English [...] That made me mad. He destroyed the physical rhythms of my prose.” She later restored the text to its original shape, and she was assigned a different editor.

Regarding the language, the memoir is written in a natural, rather colloquial style, and does not use the slang and argot used in her early poetry – *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards* – and prose – *Dinners and Nightmares* – what Timothy Gray refers to as “di Prima’s special brand of streetwise moxie.” (101) In general, it favors the use of a direct, straight-forward narrative voice which is, at the same time, flexible enough to include poetical elements and style variations as well. That is why, despite the overall conventionality of the prose, which tends to value the content and the political implications of her story, she also identifies a poetical quality in life-writing, stating that for her “autobiography, too, can be visionary, sometimes quite literally so – so at least [she] aimed for that in *Recollection*” (*Cool* 104). In these lines di Prima is referring to a specific quality of her work achieved through the progression of her writing style. From her early writing, in which she did a lot of revising and retyping – as she states in the memoir she “revised painstakingly and carefully, shaping the words to [her] Will, learning what that was” (136) – to a “received” (*Cool* 103) writing in which “a powerful voice found its way through me and into the world [...] now that I no longer sought to control the poem.” (222) This, she believes, is true of her later poetry, but also prose. The writing of *The Calculus of Variation*, for example, is described as a pivotal moment in di Prima’s writing career, when she realized that “the rough edges and awkwardnesses [...] were indeed *entrances* into a piece that was otherwise too abstract,” (384) and that she will let “the work lead [her] where it would” (384). By avoiding too much revision, she learnt to let the prose flow, achieving a state of heightened truth; the fact that she includes *Recollections* within this group of writings proves that she understood the work as much more than a non-poetical narration of facts.

In the twenty-one chapters in which di Prima’s memoir is divided, and although the main storyline of her life maintains basic linear chronology, the narrative is often interrupted. Even within chapters, the flow is disrupted by five big black dots which introduce different memories, events or ideas following – or not – the specific period narrated in the chapter. Although these interruptions are recurrent throughout the memoir, they seem to be more abundant in the first chapters, coinciding with di Prima’s earliest memories about her grandparents and her early childhood. These brief images, these “recollections,” might be her way of mirroring or representing the fickle and unstable memory of a little girl. To compensate for the lack of corroborated, specific

details, these early memories are especially sensory. For example, in one memory the house she was at was one “of dark and mellow light,” (1) her grandmother “smelled of lemons and olive oil, garlic and waxes and mysterious herbs;” (1) and she “loved to touch her skin” (1). Similarly, she remembers listening to Italian opera with her grandfather and tasting the “espresso, heavily sweetened” (7) he gave her. Chronology in the first chapters is difficult to establish, as the author merges her diffuse early memories with the relatively little knowledge she, as an adult, actually has about how her grandparents met and what brought them together. These sketches also include related comments which transport the reader to events which took place in subsequent years – as her grandmother’s wish to be buried in bright colors so her atheist husband would not “scold her” (8) when they met in heaven – or even to events which were taking place at the moment she was writing the memoir – finding her daughter in bed with a black skater and inviting them to a cup of tea for breakfast, which makes her think of all the strong women she has met who have welcomed her into their houses. Rather than keeping a straight time linearity, different memories and short images are used as platforms for related memories, which links her technique with Kerouac’s spontaneous prose dictate: “struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind” (*Letters* 487).

Throughout the rest of the memoir, paragraphs in italics break up the narration to include dreams, thoughts, stories told by narrators other than herself, extracts from her own writing or that of others, and similar, which on the whole support specific points of the story, drawing attention to the links the author’s mind creates between current events and other memories.⁹⁸ For example, after she had an abortion done following LeRoi’s wishes, and realizing that their relationship could only be based on lies, she introduces the following extract, which brings her back to the memories of her grandmother:

⁹⁸ In an interview conducted by David Hadbawnik in 2001, di Prima discusses the structure of the book, and the lack of time linearity in some passages: “I trust where my mind goes, so that if I’m writing about 1937 and my grandparents, and then I remember my mother when she came out here in 1983 and what she said to me at the conservatory, that’s where it goes, because there is a shape that the mind has already woven of all this material, and part of what I was trying to do in the book was lay out the actual process of remembering [...] I was following more the shape of my memory and also my consciousness rather than just the calendar years”.

What could you expect, after all? What could I expect? Hadn't I been forewarned by Antoinette Mallozzi? Men were an indulgence, not to be taken seriously.

What could I expect? Had I ever seen a woman treated well? Treated as she should? Not in my home, certainly, not among my parents, or their relatives, or their friends. [...] No room to speak the truth. For the woman to speak her truth and be heard. And be safe. (237)

In this case, the words in italics represent di Prima's reaffirmation of her grandmother's teachings that men cannot be trusted, and that women need to see them as peripheral to their own lives; they come and go, always unreliable. Fragments like this abound in the memoir, linking thoughts with memories previously narrated or simply bringing out certain episodes in her life.

Besides these sections in italics, there are other fragments embedded in the narrative which are separated and entitled by the author, and which also supplement the main narrative. These include "MEMORY SHARD," a childhood memory of her grandmother holding her ground while her mother and aunt angrily argue with her; "DREAM (AUTUMN 1987)", set in Sicily where di Prima is confronted with the need to forgive her father in what seems to be her mother's funeral; or "VIGNETTES OF A COLLEGE CAREER", describing various memories of her time at Swarthmore and how her closed door at her dorm got the other girls thinking she might commit suicide, when she was just enjoying her independence away from home. Some of these interruptions deal with subjects that stand outside the initial temporal scope of the memoir – the "New York Years" of the subtitle. Nevertheless, their inclusion in separate but equally important sections speaks to the difficulty of narrating a very specific episode in someone's life, and favors an understanding of a person's life as a disjointed continuum, allowing the narrative to include all those memories which come to her mind – which she naturally "receives" – and which are included regardless of their timing or actual contribution to the story.

Other fragments, deal more explicitly with the documentation process of autobiographical writing, one which is also common in other Beat memoirs analyzed. These include various journal entries – again, dated both inside and outside the scope of the memoir – as well as letters and correspondence, which help situate the story in its

specific context, increasing its veracity. For example, in one long letter never sent to her mother, taken up and continued on five different occasions, di Prima intends to fill in the blank spaces in her family history, asking her mother to answer questions such as:

- 1) What year did your dad and mom come to America? You said they were here before your oldest sister Mary was born – what year was that?
- 2) Do you know what year they eloped? What their anniversary was?
- 3) Do you know the names of Grandma Mallozzi's brothers (besides Silvio?) The name of the one who died while in college? Was he the oldest? What did the rest of them do?
- 4) Do you know the names of your dad's brothers and sisters? I have Caminuuccio and Eliseo. Were they the only two? (55)

As a journalist-investigator, the author searches through her family history to understand the anger and frustration she felt towards several family members – primarily her father. More than just satisfying her curiosity or backing up her story with concrete facts, di Prima's search for truth, her need to dig out the untold stories of her relatives, acquires a deeper meaning when seen through the light of her Italian heritage and the code of silence so firmly established in her family – especially for female members. Men were also governed by silence, but “[d]isappointment and silence marked the women too” (59), but the women's silence, as di Prima notes, “lay deeper. No tales were told about them. They did not turn from one career to another, ‘take up the law’ [as her uncle Bill did], but buried the work of their hearts in the basement, burned their poems and stories, lost the thread of their dreams” (59).

Her inquisitiveness, therefore, is set out to overcome the code of silence that, as the continuation of the letter to her mother suggests, prevented her from getting to know her. Perhaps realizing that she is not going to send the letter, her questions become gradually more direct, asking her “[h]ow can we know so little about each other? how is it possible to have lived a life here and never have spoken of where we are from, never tasted the names and villages on our tongues?” (59). Or, “Who are we, really? What happened to you [...] and brought a permanent look of fear to your face? When are you going to tell me what was stolen from you? When will you name your oppressor?” (59). Ruling out the possibility of actually sending the letter, the nature of di Prima's questions become introspective, as she suffered the same fear and anguish she

recognizes her mother felt but failed to articulate. The memoir, once again – even if too late for some people – serves as a platform to finally give expression to all of these questions, pertaining to di Prima’s “willingness to speak” as Quinn puts it;⁹⁹ it amplifies and projects her voice.

On the whole, and bearing in mind the dissimilarities between the texts studied, two main groups can be distinguished: the first one, including *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* – both published at the peak of the Beat movement – on the one hand, and the rest of the memoirs, published from 1983 onwards, on the other hand.¹⁰⁰ The early works, as it has been shown, get closer to the Beat Generation’s thematic and aesthetic interests, and read more like works of fiction or novels than autobiographical accounts. The voice of the narrators, at the same time, also differs from that of the second group of memoirs. Instead of distant and playfully deceitful, the voice in *Off the Road*, *Minor Characters*, *Missing Men*, *How I Became Hettie Jones* and *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, seeks a connection with the reader, trying to gain his or her sympathy and keeping their part of the deal in the autobiographical pact – letters, newspaper excerpts, pictures, etc. – help them document their stories.

However, the fact that the second group of memoirs respond to a more conventional approach to life writing, should not be understood as an indication that these works are detached from the authors’ previous body of work – even in cases in which the style deviates from their poetry or fiction. Besides including references to their work and to the progress of their styles – which draws attention to their literary life or vocation outside the influence or their personal relationship with male Beat figures – they employ some techniques that endow the works with a creative dimension. From Johnson’s visual memories or “snapshots,” (Grace) Cassady’s dialogue-reproduction techniques, Jones’s centripetal movement towards home in her search for a literary identity, to di Prima’s back and forth between “received” memories, the memoirs are

⁹⁹ As she states in the article, the phrase is taken from di Prima’s “The Mysteries of Vision: Some Notes on H.D.,” an essay in which the author praises Hilda Doolittles’ courage of articulation.

¹⁰⁰ As the reader might have noticed, I have not included Joan Haverty’s *Nobody’s Wife* or Edie Parker’s *You’ll Be Okay* in this section. While I include these memoirs in the analysis as Beat memoirs, the fact that they were edited after the authors’ death complicates the analyses of their style and literary technique. Although *Troia* was also edited, Brenda Frazer had a chance to argue whether her words were kept or not and, to my understanding, has only complained about the change of title – she intended it to be *For Love of Ray*, but it was changed for *Troia* (slang for whore) to attract ghoulish interests. Besides, the style is too simplistic – especially in the case of Parker’s memoir – so that giving all the attention to the content, therefore, might be fairer.

much more than mere fact-to-fact, flat, narrations. Understood in their context of recovery literature, their style delineates not only their historical value or/and political impulse, but also their creative and artistic value.

II.3.2. Gender Roles and Society

At this stage, it is evident that the women of the Beat Generation, those who wrote and those who did not have a literary career, lived outside the conventions of the dominant culture. As Maria Damon observes in relation to female stereotypes, women in the Beat Generation:

occupied positions beyond those of, on the one hand, sex objects and, on the other, Momist matriarchal tyrants hellbent on turning apron strings into straitjackets for their male partners and progeny [...] These women raised children, wrote, painted, cooked vast meals for extended families of aesthetic confreres and *soeurs*, established publishing houses [...] in short, they did everything the men did in addition to childbearing and domestic “duties.” (146-147)

The memoirs, texts in which their lives and work are discussed within a specific socio-cultural context, become valuable sources for the study of sociological issues – even if these kinds of texts have traditionally been left outside the scope of sociology. In this section, I look at the way in which the memoirs written by female Beat writers convey, contest or deal with their position in society both as women and as writers/artists. In particular, I look into the way the works address: a) ex(re)pression of the female body, b) gender roles and marriage, and c) motherhood & domesticity.

Ex(Re)pression of the Female Body: Independence and Female Sexuality

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.

(Minor Characters 102)

The 2007 edition of Brenda Frazer’s *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*, opens up with two different portraits of the author. The first one, used as the cover picture, is a black ink

portrait drawn by the American artist Alice Neel in 1963. Neel, who also had connections with the Beat Generation, and participated in Robert Frank's Beat film *Pull my Daisy*, became known in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the rise of feminist movements due to the way women's and gender issues permeated her work. As Denis Bauer notes, Neel "portrayed some of the most interesting and compelling women from U.S. twentieth-century history. In some of her portraits of ordinary women (whom she met on the street or who were her neighbors and friends,) Neel explored such chronic female hardships as domestic violence, child abuse, and poverty" (376). Her drawing of Brenda Frazer depicts a thin young woman in black clothes who stares fixedly at the viewer at the same time that she presses her temples with her hands. The quick, wavy lines of the drawing – present in much of her work – also alludes to the internal turmoil and anguish of the model.



Figure 3. "Bonnie Bremser" by Alice Neel, 1963

Placed in the cover, with the word "TROIA" in big letters underlining the picture, the drawing emphasizes Bonnie's psychological distress, pointing to the circumstances under which she became a "troia," rather than drawing attention to the act of selling her body for money.¹⁰¹ The second image, which we find just before the

¹⁰¹ Frazer complained about the marketing of her book, as Ann Charters observes, "[s]he was angry that the publisher sensationalized her book with the title 'Troia,' meaning adventuress or whore. The dustwrapper for the memoir promised the reader that the book about the Bremers' adventures in Mexico with their baby daughter Rachel, dodging the American law from Matamoros to Mexico City to Veracruz and beyond, was 'a female *On the Road*.'" (*The Portable Beat Reader* 468)

narrative, is a black-and-white photograph taken by Bernard McCaffrey. The photograph depicts a completely nude Frazer who, although slightly turned on her back, looks back at the camera with a blank expression, showing nor anger or shame. At first glance, one could assume this picture utilizes her nakedness and sexuality as a lure to attract attention, stressing her to-be-looked-at-ness¹⁰² and her sexual objectification as a prostitute. However, this reading is contradicted somewhat by the author's attitude in the narrative, and her direct stare at the camera, defies the viewers' impulse to commodify her as a passive, inert being who has lost control over her body and sexuality.

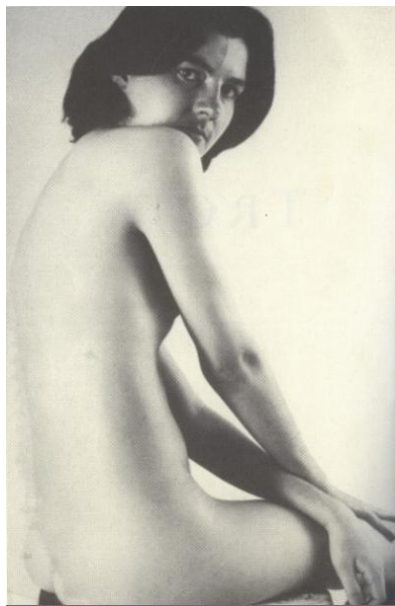


Figure 4. Photograph taken by Bernard McCaffrey

In addition, the photograph acquires a deeper meaning if we take into consideration McCaffrey's work philosophy and his determination to separate the naked body from pornographic discourses, understanding nakedness as a medium to achieve a heightened state of divinity and spirituality.¹⁰³ Interesting to the analysis of McCaffrey's portrait of the author, are his intellectual affinities to the philosopher Ludwig

¹⁰² In 1975, the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey developed the term in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," exposing the passive role of female characters in cinema, she stated that: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking had been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (33).

¹⁰³ See the connection with the Beat Generation's "nakedness of mind" motto so often used – even literally enacted at readings – by Ginsberg.

Wittgenstein – “The human body is the best picture of the human soul” – and the feminist activist Gloria Steinem – “we must take back the images of our bodies from the pornographers” – which stress the body’s ability to function as restraining or liberating medium. As this example advances, the memoirs contest or reproduce, mainly through discourses of self-representation, dominant articulations of female sexuality. In this section, thus, I look into the ways in which the female body and sexuality are depicted in the memoirs. Set against the sexually repressive culture of the 1940s and 1950s – especially for the female sex – and in the light of the 1960s sexual liberation movements, the memoirs analyzed here offer great examples of the problems that contested views of female sexuality brought to the authors’ lives.

Born and raised in rather traditional and conforming – lower and upper – middle-class families, for many of these women, sexual liberation first came with physical independence. This is the case of Joyce Johnson, who in *Minor Characters*, describes what her friend Elise Cowen’s rented room represented for her. Against society’s “sordidness and disgust” (63) towards single young women who sought independence, Johnson praises Cowen’s bravery and contextualizes her move in the socio-political framework of the era. She admits, she:

envied the courage it represented. Nineteen-year-old girls did not leave home except for dormitories or marriage. If you wished to live free, you could not also expect to live well. You entered a world where janitors refused to give you clean sheets and Puerto Rican hookers screamed in courtyards. You were in danger of celebrating Thanksgiving with a solitary Turkey Special in Bickford’s Cafeteria on Broadway. (63)

Social exclusion, therefore, seemed to be the price to pay for women who sought independence out of marriage or in the context of college education. As Johnson further observes, “[t]he postwar period was an age of enforced innocence in America. Ground that women had won in the Jazz Age and during the war years was suddenly gone, as if society had deliberately contracted amnesia. Women who had worked were now relegated to the home, and girls were sent to college to get their MRS.¹⁰⁴ Sexual

¹⁰⁴ “MRS. Degree” is colloquially used to describe young girls who attend university with the sole purpose of finding a husband, and usually get married before finishing their academic degrees.

intercourse was reserved for married couples” (“Beat Queens” 42-43).¹⁰⁵ Although Johnson’s comment might be read as bit extreme, it must have held some truth for Beat women, who seem to have faced similar problems in their search for independence – including familiar and/or societal exclusion and poverty. In *Minor Characters*, the negative stereotype of the independent woman is further explored when Johnson herself decides to move out of her parents’ house in 1955. Knowing full well her decision will raise some kind of confrontation with her conservative parents, she secretly finds an apartment and starts moving her things using her mother’s shopping cart, not to raise suspicion. The scene in which she finally confesses her “sin” is described as if Johnson’s attitude was physically hurting her parents.¹⁰⁶ As the author puts it, she felt “sick to my stomach, as if I had murdered these two mild people. I could see their blood on the beige summer covers” (101). Furthermore, she observes how “in the stillness of their house, [her] parents moved slowly around the rooms as if injured” (102). It soon becomes evident that it was a sexual crime she was committing by looking for her independence. For example, the superintendent’s quick association of her moving-out with the fact that she must be pregnant – he even told her parents about his speculations – leads Johnson to emphasize the inevitable link of independence with sexuality, stating that “[t]he crime of sex was like guilty by association – not visible to the eye of the outsider, but an act that could be rather easily conjectured” (102). Rather than an unfounded supposition, she also makes explicit that her desire to be free meant – or had the most visible incarnation in – the pursuit of her sexual freedom.

Her search for independence is depicted in the memoir as closely link to her feelings of inadequacy and inability to fit anywhere. As a teenager, as she puts it, she dreamed of knowing “what life was like. Real life. My very name seemed a metaphor for what I saw at seventeen for my unique apartness. *Glassman, Glassgirl*” (69). Recognizing her concept of Real Life was “sexual,” (30) or rather, it “often seemed to take the form of sex,” (30) she uses her own sexuality as a simile for both the safe, protected life she has had, and the fragility it entails. If sex is a “forbidden castle” (30) as she saw it as a teenager, then the “alternative was to break into the castle and take its

¹⁰⁵ The same article can be found in *Beat Culture: 1950s and Beyond*, under the title “Beat Women: A transitional Generation” 211-219.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson’s actions are frequently depicted has having physical consequences on her parents, as when the mere idea of thinking her daughter had had sex made the father physically ill, even causing him to vomit – as we saw earlier in this study.

power for yourself” (30). However, this radical step is not that easy to take, as sexual independence was easily mistaken for uncompromised sexual availability for men. In fact, the search for her new apartment was not inner, but outer-motivated, as her main goal was to prove her lover – the instructor at Columbia – how “mature” and “free” she really was. This first move towards independence collapses as we are told that in her “strange scheme of things, independence seemed the chief prerequisite for marriage” (103). Johnson’s narrative points out to the complexity of breaking stereotypes and finding a true liberated space for women. Echoing Virginia Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own,” (1929) she shows her situation and exposes her failure at finding a sense of achievement in her new “free” space. As she puts it: “[i]n the room of my own, on the nights I was there – which became more and more frequent – I’d lie on my bed with my eyes wide open, waiting until it was time to go to sleep. I wouldn’t feel homesick so much as uninhabited, like a coat Alex had taken off and hung up on a hook” (103). Despite the repetition of the first personal and possessive pronouns in this extract, Johnson still has problems finding her own identity, feeling “uninhabited” and empty when not around her lover, still unable to reconcile her physical freedom with an inner – psychological – freedom.¹⁰⁷ Johnson’s highly dependent independence, then, works as a kind of first step towards change, a proto-feminist impulse which, while positive for women in the long run, is still constructed under the influence and the control of patriarchal structures.

For Diane di Prima, female sexuality and independence were also crucial elements of the revolution, something which is apparent in both *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*. In the former, di Prima shares Johnson’s view of college as a duplication of society’s systems of control and surveillance, where the same stereotypes and restrictive gender roles prevailed. In the memoir she defines college as “a place of male and female stereotypes in cashmere sweaters, and of raucous, ugly beer parties. A place of unhappy faculty members casting sidelong

¹⁰⁷ Critics like Alix Kates Shulman has scorned the alleged sexual freedom Beat women gained. As she comments in her article “Women Writers in the Beat Generation,” she found it shocking that radical feminist of the 1970s mentioned Beat women as predecessors of feminism, stating that: “these memoirists [di Prima, Johnson, Jones, Cassady and Frazer] were college educated, they had enough rebelliousness and personal ambition to draw them to the Village – to put them at the right time in the right place to develop their talents – yet, for all the ambition and formidable talent of several of them, for the most part they seemed hardly better able to escape or defy the feminine mystique they had presumably fled than the rest of the country.” (n.p.n)

glances at lascivious virgins from Little Rock” (45). Finding no solace in the kind of independence college gave them, she runs away with a college friend from what is described as an amalgam of oppressive forces – “from irate parents, the police they had more than once invoked, and the entire threatening world” (14). Although her friend eventually backs out, deciding not to become independent due to her family situation, the narrator does rent and live in several pads, which are described as sites of greater freedom, both sexually and intellectually. Soon enough, she recalls how her apartment filled up with a “collection of oddments – souls with no home and no particular merits – about whom the most [she] could say was that they were not boring, slept on the floor, or in the big double bed with [her]” (87). Besides the welcoming, free-spirit of the “pads”, the second ingredient that helps make them part of the counterculture, is the location. Located on Avenue A and Fifth Street – with the promise from her landlord that it was to become the “new Village” (75) – her neighborhood soon fills with cafeterias and bars born to attend to the new “young Bohemian crowd” (90). These were places where they “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 paper napkins. Intoxicated by the stories of our youth, by *Jean-Christophe* and *La Bohème*, we thought to play a similar game. We almost carried it off” (90).¹⁰⁸

Regarding the depiction of sexuality, as analyzed before, the main transgression of *Memoirs*, is the fact that it brings into the spotlight female sexuality from the point of view of a woman. Even if the narrative insists on phallocentrism,¹⁰⁹ the mixture of gender and the openness to depict all kinds of sexual relationships helps liberate the female body and sexuality by favoring the celebration of sexuality in all of its forms. However, the liberation of female sexuality, starting with the expression of the female body, is not an easy task, and it is in *Recollections of my Life as a Woman* that we see the other – and darker – side of the coin. Di Prima, whose poetry and prose frequently deal with female body and consciousness – her long poem *Loba* is a good example of

¹⁰⁸ Note how the rebellion is described in copycat, superficial terms. Influenced by classical novels and opera pieces, they copy their heroes’ behavior in a game they never succeed at. With this true/fake, real/affected duality, di Prima plays with the Beat/Beatnik dichotomy that so often has been used as a pretext to place women in secondary positions. For example in Steven Watson’s *The Birth of the Beat Generation*, “Beat Women” are included in the “From Beat to Beatnik” category, emphasizing their role as “girlfriends, supports, and mother figures [...] to the charismatic men” (264) and even then, he only includes Johnson, Jones and di Prima.

¹⁰⁹ See Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex which Is not One* for a study on the effects on women of a phallogentric representational system.

this – contests in this memoir what seems to come naturally or without negative consequences in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. Especially in the early chapters of the memoir, the author associates the female body with images of pain and the unknown. She connects her inability as an adult to recognize her own body, to be able to know what she looks like or to try to do anything to change her physical appearance, as a consequence of her harsh upbringing. With parents who slept in separate beds, who never undressed before each other's eyes and who taught their children to avoid all physical contact,¹¹⁰ it comes as no surprise that she had a poor understanding of what her body was or how it looked. What she knew, then, was only that the body entailed pain – “grief, discomfort, imploded anger,” (33) as the author puts it. Indeed, the knowledge she had about her body as a girl was:

only that it hurt. Hurt to be washed, scrubbed: soap in the eyes, shampoo, rough digging into the ears, the ass, soap on the cunt. Daily grooming as torture. Mom would boast of how many combs she *broke on my hair*, trying to get the tangles out. Great heavy combs with “unbreakable” stamped across the top in gold. She'd pull them straight through my hair, pulling handfuls out daily. My thick, ultra-curly red hair that was my special and particular torture [...] was my mother's pride and joy. (34)

Raised to believe that her body can only be represented from the inside-out, she uses her feelings of pain and anger as the only thing she connects with her physiology. Besides her ignorance of sexuality and lack of body awareness, the memoir depicts how sex and pain are also connected, adding to her already complicated understanding of physical contact. This is shown in one of those early diffuse memories in which she recalls her mother sending her to her room – aged four or five – to await her father and receive a severe physical punishment for something she cannot remember. In her own words, she recalls that after her father “*beat me he was sexually aroused. Would sit me on his lap with a hard-on to ‘comfort’ me – or worse, I don't remember, only sense*” (10). The harsh images which further describe the beating are aggravated by the ritual

¹¹⁰ As a little girl she is so unused to physical human interaction that when a teacher in nursery school tries to hug her, she warns her not to wrinkle her dress – “*My dress of a semitranslucent cotton, dyed lavender, light blue and pink, so that they almost run together. Colors that set me dreaming of other worlds. My mother was very proud of me for this prissy behavior, the response of a child for whom touch, affection, was already too much.*” (38)

of the scene, with the mother and aunt “preparing” her for the occasion, combing her hair, and then – when he is done – they return to the room to fix her up again, stop the bleeding if necessary. For all of these reasons, she loses the power of self-representation, being able to connect only through pain.

Furthermore, due to the sexual oppression – and tension¹¹¹ – present in her family history, she comes to see her body as a dangerous and unreliable weapon; as an object which, wrongly used, can entail terrible consequences. These violence and oppressed sexuality are intertwined in a fantasy in which she dreams of killing her father with a knife – “The bread knife is weighty and ample, and the father’s back is turned” (54). The use of the determinant pronoun, instead of a possessive pronoun might be telling in this case. Her intention is, as she articulates it, to “kill the father, to Wake Up the mother,” (54) which can be understood as representatives of greater categories – patriarchal violence and dominion and female passivity and self-induced ignorance about the suffering of others. In her fantasy, as she puts it, she “would carve filthy words into my body, throw myself naked from public Brooklyn rooftop. Flat roof of our brownstone house, ‘tar beach’ of that ghetto. So They Would Know” (54). The capitalization of the last sentence also points to the widening of the reach of her sacrifice, which is to change the system on a bigger level than her personal situation. All through the rest of the memoir she initiates the healing and feminist process of reclaiming the body,¹¹² which she believes to be a collective necessity shared by many oppressed individuals, as she puts it: “I seek now, like how many others?, to reclaim the body.” (37) Although the process is slow and not clearly stated, one of di Prima’s “memory shards” seems to point to a reconciliation with her body image in recent years: “I sit here in make-up. It is Mother’s Day. My kids are about to take me out to dinner. I am actually enjoying my hair (cut shoulder-length, loose, easy to care for), my skin, the feel of my clothes against it. I am actually enjoying learning to paint my face. Playful disguises if and when I want them. It has taken all those years” (35).

¹¹¹ After years of what she describes as “weird sexual innuendoes always in the air,” (53) an uncle of hers finally overtly asks her if she would like to go to a motel. This scene helps her understand the mechanism through which her body can make things happen – even without her wanting them. As she states, it is “[w]hat I bought, what I lost, with my body.” (53)

¹¹² Another way in which di Prima reclaims her body, as I discuss in the following sections, is through motherhood.

Although the solution might seem superficial to a contemporary reader – for whom make-up and freedom of choosing clothes might be a given¹¹³ – other writers point in their work to similar dilemmas related to their specific female body image. Hettie Jones, in *How I Became Hettie Jones*, also points to her early attempt at representing her independence through her body image:

[w]ith a razor and to great effect, I thought, I cut my hair in an odd, pointed fringe, and on my feet wore Girl Scout oxfords that seemed, to me, the perfect signal of a new, sexy but surefooted woman. And when interviewed by the school newspaper (*The Bullet*), I declared myself a “mutation,” since there didn’t seem to be anyone like me, either where I’d come from or where I was presently.
(13)

Jones keeps finding ways throughout her life to represent her individuality and uniqueness at the level of her physical appearance as, when too pregnant to wear her normal clothes, she sews them up herself, in what is described as a liberating and almost political move referred to as “the lovely bravado of anticlothing!,” (84) which allows her to free her own body from the restrictions of Western culture fashion. Cutting the fabric to her liking, she discovers that “once you release the shoulder, and allow the breast its natural room, you make way for the next step, that of taking off the hard, restrictive bra (soon, soon)” (84). In interviews, discussing the early feminist influences of Beat women in women liberation movements, Jones has stressed the political significance of clothes. As she observes, “[y]oung women today don’t have any idea of the discomfort [...] to take off your girdle was a radical move– first came the girdle and then the bra – but to take off your girdle! Ah! To be able to think and walk and move without feeling blistered all the time. To acknowledge that you could have an *ass*. And to wear pants!” (*Cool* 160).¹¹⁴ The association of female identity and freedom with physical recognition is a recurrent theme in her poetry, too. For example, the poem “Finally, Narcissa” appropriates the Greek myth to bring out a specific female agency:

¹¹³ This, of course, depends on the cultural and political situation of the country of origin or residence of those reading, as many cultures still oppress people’s freedom to wear the clothes they want or look the way they wish.

¹¹⁴ In “Poets and Odd Fellows” Brenda Frazer also links her initiation into Bohemia with the idea of getting rid of the girdle and the bra. In her own words, getting ready to go to the poetry reading where she met Ray Bremser: “I remember how I got ready for this evening, more important than I knew. Bathed and girdled up, didn’t know this was the last time I would put on a girdle or a bra in my life, ever again” (Charters 2001: 18).

The girl has found herself
 for the first time, in a
 mirror she will never look into
 again. Far from home, under
 gaslight, here is a thriller,
 a woman she can live with.
 She stares, entranced, eleven
 and in love at last (*Drive* 70)

Unlike Narcissus, whose fixation on his own image prevented him from seeing others – and eventually killed him – Narcissa will not look into the mirror again, having finally seen her true face and with it the fuel to find a greater future for her. As the poem continues, she “sees herself in a larger/ darker, louder place/ her body ecstatic/ her thoughts like wild vines” (70). The new space Narcissa will inhabit, therefore, is one where her body and mind move fast, no longer fixed to an immobile representation.

In Joan Haverty’s *Nobody’s Wife* and Edie Parker’s *You’ll Be Okay*, there is also a similar impulse for freedom which is, similarly, often associated with their physical and sexual liberation. Parker emphasizes in her memoir the suffocating atmosphere the Age of Consensus – soon analyzed as the Age of Conformity – placed on anyone who did not fit into it. As she puts it:

As I grew older, I realized that my freedom was only relative. The outside world was not open to me, but forbidden territory. I was trapped inside one green ghetto after another. These were ghettos of sculptured lawns and leaded glass windows; ghettos of “Private: Do not Enter” signs [...] ghettos bejeweled and bequeathed from generation to generation, the blood running thinner, the boredom and the passivity growing. (47)

Set against the unnamed, all-inclusive, forces of oppression¹¹⁵ the Beats, New Bohemians, or other embodiments of discomfort, represented an open door towards a different life for many women. However, as these two memoirs also expose, physical

¹¹⁵ Philip R. Yannella (2011) states the Beats and other counterculture movement’s rebellion was often loosely described as against “the crass stupidity of parents, teacher, and other authorities; the oppressive social order; the miserable world that was being passed on to the young by crazed adults; the emptiness and meaninglessness of middle-class life, and so forth.” (60)

independence is not always sufficient to achieve a freer sexuality. While Parker's narrative only reinforces the stereotype of female sexual passivity – she only feels complete when with Kerouac – Joan Haverty contests women's passive role, at the same time that she exposes masculine views projected on the female body. Just as Neal offered Carolyn to Jack, the latter – to be no less a man than him – also tries to share his wife with his friend. Enraged by the suggestion, not of sleeping with another man, but of Jack's idea that he needed somehow to consent, Haverty says: “*You're giving me permission to sleep with Neal? [...] I don't need your permission. It isn't yours to give*” (180). In addition, in a reversal of the pimp-whore roles he tries to impose on her, she adds, responding to Jack and Neal's wish to go out: “I understand, Jack, and I won't feel any jealous if you and Neal take a subway into town and find a girl you can share. You're free” (181), scornfully adding at the end: “I give you my permission” (181).

The same kind of objectification is denounced on their wedding day, when Jack buys her a night gown and urges her to wear it to bed. Haverty's description of the scene, telling how she felt as Jack's gaze settled on her, criticizes female subjugation to male desire, which places the narrator in a degrading position: “[a]pproaching the bed, I was conscious of Jack's appraisal. There was something humiliating about being looked at like that, being judged like a horse. *Was I high in the withers? How were my flanks?* Oh well, I had brought it on myself. I walked awkwardly to minimize the effect of the nightgown and got into bed” (136).¹¹⁶ Accepting her share of guilt for having married a man like this, her momentary solution is to consciously work against the attributes regarded as central to her female sexuality by purposely walking in an unsexy, strange manner. In the memoir she also points on several occasions to her lack of femininity, stating she was a “skinny girl, no *femme fatale*, and [that she] looked more like a boy than a woman” (7). Like di Prima, she is unaware of her femininity, and understands womanhood only through the “problems it presents,” (34) for which she dreamt of

¹¹⁶ In her memoir, Helen Weaver depicts the first time she had sex with Kerouac in similarly objectified terms, as he looks at her as if she was a work of art or a statue for him to admire: “That was fifty years ago, but I still remember how gentle he was. And I can still hear the way he muttered ‘perfect breasts’ under his breath, as if he were talking to himself or taking notes in one of his little nickel pads. Given my lack of confidence in my modest charms and my tendency to compare myself with Helen [her roommate Helen Elliott], that was music to my ears.” (55) Even if she is temporarily happy with her objectification, she later resents the way Kerouac allegedly tried to reduce her to the stereotype of the modest, simple, wife: “The was someone inside me who was not satisfied with the role he wanted to assign me, he who believed that ‘women must be guided by men’ and who warned me to ‘stay sweet’ and not be ‘aggressive’ or there would be ‘a continuation of the nightmare.’” (80)

being “a boy at times” (7). Even if not possessing the “right” female attributes, she is sexually assaulted several times – just in the first two chapters she is almost raped on two occasions,¹¹⁷ and groped by strangers at a party. These issues are connected in the memoirs to the widespread chauvinist assumption that women cannot control their own sexuality, sending “signals” men cannot but respond to. Johnson points to such an idea when she discusses her friend Maria’s overt sexuality in *Minor Characters*. Described as an uncontrollable thing, it becomes “this new power, [with which] she becomes more helpless” (34); a power she not only cannot master, but which can backfire. From Maria’s relationship with an ex-convict named Billy, Johnson learns that “a man’s longing is like an actual physical pain. Having created it even unintentionally, it seems you’re responsible for its assuagement” (34).

Looking like men, or as far from the ideal of sexualized female as possible, therefore, can be interpreted as a non-satisfactory solution or way out of the over-sexualized, hyper-feminine, masculine projection on the female sex. Di Prima’s longing “to be a boy: pirate, bandit, outcast” (*Recollections* 54) shares the same impulse that is later replaced in the narrative with the urge to reclaim her body; not running away from the images imposed on her, or going in the opposite direction looking for shelter, the idea is rather to free female sexuality from the grip of patriarchy, so that it is not turned against women, or used as a pretext to justify male abuse.

In conclusion, it can be stressed that the expression – sometimes repression – of the female body can be analyzed both as a site of conformity and resistance in the memoirs, an issue which remains, on the whole, unresolved. While in general they emphasize the freedom their physical independence led them to, they also expose different mechanisms of oppression through which sexual violence and male dominance inhibited them from truly enjoying their sexuality. Nonetheless, even if the supposedly more flexible sexual mores of the Beat Generation did little to liberate female sexuality – perpetuating passive roles and merely celebrating their availability – the fact that these

¹¹⁷ The first time takes place when a married man her mother knew gives her a ride to a party. Pulling the car in the middle of the road, he jumped on her. It is interesting to note that Haverty’s reaction, far from fear or passivity, is just boredom and disappointment, which points to the fact that it had happened before to her, and that it confirmed her suspicion that she could not trust anyone. As she puts it: “we wasted my time and my patience as he attempted to impose his weight on me, huffing and puffing. I extricated myself from his grasp, slid out from under his sweating bulk, and finally got out of the car [...] I wasn’t afraid of him, just insulted, and really weary of this type of scenario” (7).

women had freer sexual lives than the preceding generation should not be obscured. For example, even if LeRoi had repeatedly cheated on Hettie – even getting di Prima pregnant on two occasions – he is enraged when he finds Hettie with a lover. Utterly offended that she could do what he had done, he spits a range of insults that culminate in misogynistic climax in which “woman” as the rudest of all insults: “Whore! Bitch! Dumb! Woman!” (103). Her sexuality, intellect and even her gender are disgraced, but that should not be interpreted as her failure, but rather as men’s inability to see that the sexual revolution did not only concerned the masculine sex, and that women had every right to participate in it, or at least to be judged under the same premises.

In the end, it might be true, as Paul Goodman infamously put it in *Growing up Absurd* (1960), that female rebellion against society is exclusively sexual (22). While men’s problems with society are political, and pertain to the role they are to fulfill in a given society, women are excluded from the world of politics because their only role in society is limited to being mothers and caretakers. Nonetheless, what Goodman failed to see, was that sexuality has been, and still is, a very political issue – especially for Women Liberation Movements – as the last four decades have demonstrated. In this light, the discussion of their sexuality – whether they manage to find a freer space or not – and the chronicles of their ability or inability to see their body image in the memoirs, become political statements which do indeed have an effect on society.

Gender Roles and Marriage

I am sick I said to the woodpile of doing dishes.
I am just as lazy as you. Maybe lazier.
(di Prima, “The Quarrel,” *Dinners and Nightmares* 74)

Wini Breines (1994) takes sociological studies of America in the 1950s – such as Goodman’s – as a starting point from which to deconstruct gender politics and analyze the influence that dissident groups like the Beats had on the mitigation on female gender roles. In her article, Breines blames sociologists and the mass media’s focus on masculine forms of nonconformity for overshadowing female noncompliance, minimizing its importance by reducing it to individual cases. As she observes: “[s]exism in mainstream and alternative cultures constrained and shaped their defiance into forms not easily recognizable, especially by analysts not predisposed to discover gender rebellion. But it was gender rebellion. These stirrings prefigured its full-scale

articulation a decade or so later” (385). That is to say, whether recognized by society and other spheres or not, the fifties witnessed a relaxation of traditional female gender roles which deviated from the dominant stereotype of the white, middle-class wife at ease with her domestic and childbearing responsibilities. If the male Beats ran away from conventional masculine roles as responsible, bread-winners – leaving them for women – the latter might have perceived the reversal of gender roles as a blessing, or at least, as a promising alternative to a bland, uneventful life.

This might be true for Joyce Johnson, who in *Minor Characters* proudly tells what it meant for her to buy Jack Kerouac dinner on their first date. Even though he takes the initiative, asking her if she wants to have anything, when “the coffee arrives, Jack looks glum. He can’t pay for it. He has no money, none at all” (127). Johnson, who had been working and supported herself, rapidly appropriates the bread-winner role, saying she can pay for it and adding “Do you want me to buy you something to eat?” (127) “Frankfurters,” (127) adds Kerouac, making the most of the situation.¹¹⁸ Far from feeling less of a woman, or uncomfortable in a new situation, the author emphasizes how this position made her “feel very competent and womanly” (127). This situation is paralleled in Joyce Johnson’s second memoir, *Missing Men*, in which her parents find themselves in a similar situation in one of their first dates. Joyce’s father, in an attempt to impress her mother, takes her to a rather expensive restaurant. On seeing the prices on the menu, “he blanched [...] but did not have the nerve to suggest they immediately walk out” (37). Noticing his reaction: “[w]ith one look, my mother realized that he could not afford the meal. ‘I’ll have graham crackers and milk,’ she quickly said to the waiter. My father, no doubt embarrassed by her face-saving choice but immensely grateful, did not protest as he should have” (37). Johnson’s mother’s need of preserving his masculinity by letting him pay the meal – even if it means going hungry – can be analyzed as complaisance with prevailing gender roles. The fact that a generation later Joyce Johnson can, not only afford to pay dinner, but is willing to do so, speaks of a certain relaxation of masculine and feminine gender roles. In addition, this notion of supporting not only themselves but also the men is recurrent in many of the memoirs analyzed in this chapter.¹¹⁹ Even if this can be seen as an abuse on behalf of the men –

¹¹⁸ Kerouac actually had, as Johnson informs us, “frankfurters, home fries, and baked beans with Heinz ketchup on them” (128).

¹¹⁹ See Wini Breines and Barbara Ehrenreich on female gender roles and masculine ideas of middle-class jobs as emasculating.

who might be using women to avoid working themselves – in the memoirs it is generally described as a positive experience and/or as a crucial step towards their independence.

The memoirs stress, nevertheless, that some of the jobs they took were far from ideal, frequently pushed to a secondary position in their own lives – in favor of their art, children, or sentimental partners. For example, Joyce Johnson describes a summer job at IBM copying “numbers onto forms that were put into a key-punch machine” (86). Utterly bored, she would “sit down at [her] desk hardly conscious of the numbers swimming under [her] pen from one piece of paper to another as the clocked crept towards five” (86). Similarly, di Prima feels “caught [...] trapped in a dull world with no choices” (93) in the job her parents arranged for her at an insurance company. Hettie Jones, too, despised jobs as one she had at the Wilentze’s Eighth Street Bookshop, where she classified bills and checks in a “dinky” (201) room. Just like the men, women did not want to conform or become grey flannel suit *women*,¹²⁰ but if the alternative was staying home until marriage, going from their parents’ control to their husbands’, these boring, non-challenging jobs were seen as the least tedious option.

Be that as it may, it is other kinds of jobs – related to editing and publishing – which better fulfilled these women’s expectation, as they allowed them to participate in the literary world. Working as a secretary for several publishing houses, Johnson dreams of eventually being hired as a writer, so that she would be able to “make it [her] business to write about young women quite different to the ones portrayed weekly in the pages of *The New Yorker*” (*Characters* 148); and through her later job as an editor, she even manages to edit and publish Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody*¹²¹ – which remained unpublished until 1972. Similarly, Hettie Jones dedicates much space in the memoir to her editorial work on *Yugen* and Totem Press, which she sees both as a contribution to the world – publishing the work of new voices in America – and also as a learning experience for her; a way of nurturing her literary ambition while she overcame the shame to show her work. That is to say, “[i]f [she] hadn’t yet managed to speak for

¹²⁰ On the development of the grey flannel suit revolt see chapter 3 “Early Rebels: The Gray Flannel Suit Dissidents” in Ehrenreich’s *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*.

¹²¹ Helen Weaver relates in her memoir how she “rejected” *Visions of Cody* while working as an editor for a small publishing house called Greenwich House. Of the manuscript she says: “Then I read it – or tried to – and while I found some of it quite brilliant, the transcripts of taped conversations with the Neal Cassady character went on forever, and at 550 pages, I felt it cried out for cutting.” (158) Kerouac’s novel managed to escape Weaver’s scissors, and was finally published in its original version.

[her]self, here at least were these others” (55). Di Prima, too, discusses *The Floating Bear*¹²² and the Poets Press, stressing the potential to reach “the people who mattered: in poetry, painting, music, dance, theatre and such” (244). In any case, the fact that these women sought their economic and physical independence – through more or less appealing jobs – attests to the fact that they entered marriage with no assumption or hopes of being provided for.

Up to this point, one can ask how marriage fits into their desire for a freer, independent space. The answer, once again, is problematic, and even though their experiences with marriage differ, there is an underlying feeling of loss – as if they had somehow made a bad bargain. For example, Carolyn Cassady, tired of being valued only for her physical appearance, felt attracted to Neal believing that he “was a man who could lose himself with [her] in intellectual give-and-take” (13). However, once married, she often felt as a “neglected household drudge”¹²³ (*Heartbeat* 9) when Neal and Jack went out or shut themselves in the attic of their house. In addition, although there are several occasions on which sex roles are reversed in her memoirs, or in which marriage is felt as a freer space for her, on the whole they are always temporary, coming back to conventionality. One of these changes takes place during a very short period of time in which Carolyn has night job as a camera girl in various night clubs in North Beach, an event narrated in both memoirs. In *Heartbeat*, she relates how the temporary role reversal seemed to please the men, at the same time that her life and experience was more highly valued – becoming now more than just a housewife in their eyes. She observes how: “Neal and Jack seemed content with their babysitting obligation and the time alone together. I worked from six until two, but often they were still up when I’d get home. We’d have a cup of coffee while I unwound, and they’d encouraged me to tell them my adventures for the night. ‘So what’s in the sinful city tonight, eh?’” (48). In *Off the Road*, the child-caring obligation for the men is erased, and the narrative effects a slight change of focus, as Carolyn finds it amusing that it was she “who had first introduced them to North Beach” (172). Similarly, encouraged by Neal to have sexual

¹²² The literary magazine was named after Winnie the Pooh’s boat. Trying to convince LeRoi Jones of the appropriateness of the name, she comments that “The Floating Beat was an upturned umbrella and ‘sometimes it was a boat, and sometimes it was an accident’. I figured our magazine would be like that.” (244)

¹²³ This term is attenuated in the latest version of the memoir, *Off the Road*, stating she often felt as a “neglected wife,” (86) unable to accommodate her idea of marriage into the kind of relationship the trio had.

relationships with Jack, she accepts, hoping to break negative patterns in their marriage. Even if for a while Cassady enjoys having two husbands and feeling “like the star of the show,” (*Heartbeat* 24) it becomes evident that she was not shaking traditional gender roles, but merely fulfilling their male fantasy and homosocial sexual competition, as it ends the minute Neal gets tired of “sharing his toy”.

Therefore, however interesting having a night job and two husbands proved to be, traditional patterns of female oppression are continually imposed by her marriage to Neal Cassady. Maybe she should have trusted the impulse she felt on their wedding day, when the Judge who was marrying them had a Freudian slip which seemed to speak to their future life together – as she tells it: “Judge Golden was cool, bored and automatic. ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’. I want to correct him to say ‘husband and wife’, but resisted the impulse. ‘That will be ten dollars’” (64).¹²⁴ Just as Kerouac could not afford the coffee – and all the other goodies he ordered – in Johnson’s *Minor Characters*, Neal Cassady realizes he cannot pay for the wedding: “Neal turned to me with such a blank look I nearly broke into laughter again. Panic prevented it. I came to with a snap to fumble in my purse until I found my wallet, from which I withdrew the only bill in it – luckily a tenner. I felt as though I had just bought a husband, but it was cheap at that, considering my need” (64).¹²⁵

Carolyn, then, is the one who completes the transaction, purchasing a husband – whether it is a good or bad bargain she is yet to find out. Interesting about this episode are the Judge’s words, which are based on the chauvinistic assumption that men are able to maintain their status and masculinity even if married, while women are essentially

¹²⁴ In an untitled poem included in *As Ever: Selected Poems*, Joanne Kyger reflects on the use of the generic noun “Man” to refer to the human kind. Although she understands man simply as people, not male or female but just “someone/ to talk to” (242), dominant narratives exclude women from the category, elevating “man” to a superior position. As the poem reads:

“And God said let us make MAN in our own image,
After our likeness and let them have dominion.”

And “Nature may stand up
And say to all the world,
‘This was a MAN!’ “

And then “I pronounce you MAN
and wife.” (242)

Quoting from the Bible, and William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Kyger exposes two predominantly masculine texts which use the term “Man” not as a generic name, but as a distinct and – mostly – elevated category.

¹²⁵ She was already pregnant with their first child.

changed, becoming something rather than women, completely losing their independence and identity prior to marriage.

This idea is also found in Hettie Jones's memoir. In it, the author also makes use of economic metaphors to describe her marriage, stating that she had "traded Hettie Cohen for Hettie Jones," (62) pointing at the same time with irony to the non-materialistic reasons for marrying LeRoi Jones – as she worked before marrying him and continued to work and support herself after that. Furthermore, just as in Carolyn's case, marriage acquires a different meaning for men and for women in Jones's narrative. Correcting a friend who had introduced Hettie as "Hettie Cohen" at a party, LeRoi claims his possession – "Her name is Jones now" (65) – unintentionally revealing the inherent modification of Hettie's identity. As the author observes, "[d]espite 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).

Marriage, in Hettie's memoir, complicates female self-representation and identity; it is only with divorce that the woman is free again to write a history of her own. This longed-for independence is felt as soon as LeRoi abandons her, as she quickly notices that "[w]ithout a *him* in the house, there was of course more space/time for *her*, and [she] tried to redefine the way a woman might use it" (234). Similarly, when a friend of her divorces her husband, Jones also encourages her to take advantage of the situation, advising her through a poem to "[b]ecome a pearl/ of a girl/ Yeah, momma" (234).

Diane di Prima, both in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and in *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, reflects on the institution of marriage and on the limitations it represents for the female sex. In *Memoirs*, she links the oppression marriage imposes on both men and women directly to the limitations of one-to-one relationships, stating that marriage is only another "form of the old monster" (109). Like the chastity belt in the middle ages, which "could be dealt with, with a hacksaw if nothing else," (109) marriage could also be dealt with more papers – divorce. Defending polygamous relationships as a solution for this self-imposed limitation, she states that: "[I]ive with one man, and you begin to have a claim on him. Live with five, and you have the same claim, but it is spread out,

ambiguous, undefined. What is unfilled by one will be filled by another easily, no one hung up guilty and inadequate, no one pushed to the wall by demands that he/she can't meet" (109).

In *Recollections*, where ideas are not so sensationalized, she turns away from an oppressive understanding of traditional marriage without openly defending polygamy. For instance, discussing her willing position as an outsider, distancing herself from "the wars, the cruelty, murder, oppression" (102) reigning in society, she denounces repressive marriages and American's dreams of a prosperous life: "[t]he narrow and cruel judgments in the name of decency, order. Not ours the brutal marriages, children beaten into mental deficiency, the blind and blinding worship of money/achievement: is he a surgeon? Did she marry a corporate lawyer? The final world of judgment: "She could have done so much better for herself" (102).

Not believing in conventional marriage, di Prima gets engaged to Peter Hartman, a gay composer who had dated her roommate, the dancer Freddie Herko. The author sees "nothing odd about [her] being in love with LeRoi – and continuing to sleep with him [...] as there was nothing odd about Peter's being in love with both Freddie and [her] at the same time" (245). However, marriage is not only weighed up because of their connection and openness to other relationships but also, as she puts it, because of "the fact that Peter had money, a private trust of some sort" (246). Still, di Prima's short-lived hopes for a comfortable life – economically speaking – break into pieces when her fiancée literally becomes an obstacle in her life. Having had an argument over some trifle, Peter's melodramatic resolution is to sit down on the bed and remain in the same position for several days which, as di Prima says, "made sleeping mildly difficult [...] and conducting the business of life even more so" (247). One day, "with a series of small gestures, half-sentences and grunts," (248) he made di Prima hold the telephone while he spoke to his psychiatrist, who must have told him that he needed a rest, as he immediately decided to go to the Virgin Islands to get over his anger. The author's reaction to his solution is priceless:

Nice option, I thought [...] How come it was, as we would have said back then, that Peter could sit like a statue on my bed for days, discombobulating my entire household, disturbing my rest, causing endless people to come by and worry about him, and then arise unscathed, like Venus from the waves, and announce

he was off to the Virgin Islands, thank you. Not so much as a word of apology.
How come, huh? (248)

Even though she breaks the engagement with Peter, marriage continues to be described as an obstacle in her memoir, especially when it comes to her creative freedom, a notion which is found in other works, such as the poem “In Praise of my Husband”, where the speaker’s work is constantly interrupted by her husband’s irrelevant questions:

and you, interrupting me in the middle of a thousand poems
did I call the insurance people? The time you stopped a poem
in the middle of our drive over the Nebraska hills and
into Colorado, odetta singing, the whole world singing in me
the triumph of our revolution in the air
me about to get that down, and you
you saying something about the carburetor
so that it all went away (*Pieces of a Song* 63)

The poem was written for her first husband Alan Marlowe, whom the author married after having had two children as a single mother; a marriage as unconventional as her first engagement. Another rejected lover of her roommate, described as “mostly gay,” (316) Alan soon took hold of the kitchen table, acting “as though he already owned the house,” (249) which in retrospect she sees as a warning of his domineering character. Although the marriage is seen on both sides as a marriage of convenience, with the consent of extramarital relationships, she later recognizes she had traded her independence for what she thought needed. In a similar episode as the ones in *Off the Road* and *Minor Characters*, after the wedding ceremony, the husband announces that he had no money to pay for gas to go to the venue where they were having a party. So di Prima spent the forty dollar she had on that, and in retrospect adds “[h]ow Alan would come to rely on the forty dollars that I must inevitably have in my bra. Or somewhere” (322). Besides being an economical burden for her, Alan also represents an obstacle for her creative energy, hindering her vocation as a writer. With this marriage, di Prima understood what she refers to as “the basic fact of married life: *if he was bigger than you, you couldn’t stop him from doing it*” (335), arguing that married women still had to face an intellectual and also physical dominance of their husbands.

Therefore, the memoirs delineate a tension between personal independence, gender roles and marriage. When single, most of these women supported themselves and lived independent lives in pursuit of their artistic or literary vocation. Their personal expectations and their search for freer spaces than those occupied by women in prior generations – their mothers are often placed in opposition to their own aspirations – made them feel attracted to the alternative lifestyles the bohemians or other counterculture groups like the Beat Generation offered – a priori – for both men and women. Once married – out of love, intellectual likeness, or even for convenience – they found out that fulfilling the bread-winner role, while essentially an inversion of traditional gender roles, only really added to their confinement. Besides being the one supporting their extended families¹²⁶ – they also had to cope with other traditional responsibilities of the conventional housewife role. The demands of their domestic lives and even the physical presence of their husbands – who kept getting in the way of their art, interrupting poems as it was in di Prima's case – overshadowed their literary creativity, burdening their everyday lives with small duties no one else was about to perform.

However, in a U-turn, domesticity achieves a central position in the poetry and writing of many of these authors, used both as a source of inspiration and as a critical platform from which to draw attention to the specific situation of women artists. Hettie Jones, for example, recognizes the inevitable presence of domesticity in her life, declaring that she “didn't *mind* [her] household life, [she] just couldn't do a damn thing with it. How did it translate into words, this holding pattern of call and response, clean and dirty, sick, well, asleep, awake. Its 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)

This “holding pattern” had an immediate and negative consequence on her own creativity, leaving little time and energy for it. As she comments elsewhere in the

¹²⁶ As Edie Parker states in *You'll Be Okay*, the reality of this type of bohemian life meant that she often had to sacrifice her time and effort to support the independent and free lives other people were enjoying. As she states: “[t]he people Jack and I shared our apartment with in New York City were all caught up in the dope scene at a time when I was working full time to support them. They filled their days with drink, music and philosophical conversation and I barely managed to subsist on mayonnaise sandwiches. In the end, I had to eat or be eaten” (21-22). In this account, Jack and the gang are portrayed as parasites who were enjoying the good life while she acted as their economic and well-being provider. In this asphyxiating atmosphere, she decided to regain her independence, even if it actually meant going back to her mother's house.

memoir, what she did was not exactly to renounce to her art, but to put in on hold. Describing her situation as a problem shared with other women artists, Hettie Jones uses an old saying to illustrate this tension – to “bury your talent in a napkin” (130). In any case, taking a deeper look at her work, one can observe how her household life did translate into words, finding a way into the themes of her poetry. The next poem, which is included in the memoir, is a good example of the incorporation of domestic spaces into poetry:

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)

The poem, written in the form of a short message for her husband to see – which could have easily been put in the refrigerator next to the shopping list – addresses the everyday life of a woman who is also a mother and a poet. Jones has stressed the fact that the content in this specific poem made her think it will never have a space in the publishing market place (*Cool* 163), as everyday-like experiences of women were hardly ever valued as literary. Another interesting aspect about the poem the author did not talk about, and which may be analyzed as a consequence of her household responsibilities, is its brevity – the form of the poem itself. In *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, Diane di Prima discussed similar issues in relation to formal aspects of women's writing. She commented on the problems women artists faced due to the juggling of familial and personal responsibilities and the creation of their art. She discusses women's pressure “to be available” (226) to sustain the needs of children,

lovers, friends, household chores etc., in addition to their art, which, just as the rest, also demands its space in their lives. The multiple things women need to be available for made di Prima summarize the equation with the following sentence: “THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE **IS** THE FORM OF OUR ART” (227). Women’s poetics, then, are intrinsically linked to the space available for their art, so that “[t]he writing of modular poems, that could be dropped and picked up, the learning to sketch when you used to work in oils,” (226) or short poems like the one Hettie Jones included in her memoir, become the medium through which they are able to manifest their art.

In this light, the memoirs – which bring their complex and varied lives to the foreground – stress the content of their lives and take it into a literary and political arena. Their deviation or acceptance of traditional gender roles, and the reinvention of domesticity to fit their literary creativity – both in content and in form – address issues of female independence. However, the fact that the authors did not manage to find free spaces from the beginning, and often saw themselves involved in repressive situations of female subordination to men, has led some critics to doubt their contribution to women’s freedom. Ann Charters, for example, rejects the label proto-feminist for Beat women on the grounds that true feminist precursors – like Plath or O’Connor in her opinion – “just wouldn’t have been attracted to these guys [...and to the] ‘What’s going on in the boy gang’” (*Cool* 220). For her, a talented and strong woman would have been able to see how these men would not offer free spaces to speak their minds, forcing them into traditional, oppressive roles. Writers like Joyce Johnson, speaking from a closer position to the Beat movement than Charters, acknowledged the fact that the “lack of respect [for creative women] was so pervasive in American culture in the postwar years that women did not even question it.” (“Beat Women” 214) Books like *On the Road* were appealing to women as who recognize themselves and their hunger for new experiences in Sal and Dean, not in the flat and object-like female characters in the novel.

In any case, the fact that marriage did nothing to help them achieve freedom, should not be understood as proof that they conformed to the status of “neglected housewives,” or that they did not object to the lack of creative or intellectual support on behalf of their partners. In this respect, the memoirs act more as “cautionary tales” than as exemplary accounts of how to gain your independence.

Motherhood & Art

“I’m an occasional poet,” she told her first publisher
some years later. He disagreed. “You’re a poet,” he said,

“who writes occasionally.”

(*How I Became Hettie Jones* 178)

On the basis of a reading of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Roy Kozlovsky redefines the “Beat endeavor [...] as a *spatial project*,” (194) in which “the continental, the urban, and the domestic” (195) spaces are contested. Regarding domestic space, he emphasizes the potential of Kerouac’s novel to authorize alternative lifestyles to those that revolve around home ownership and economic stability. Constant mobility, therefore, can be seen as an alternative to normative domesticity in the 1950s. However, as Alexandra Ganser’s *Roads of her Own* points to, women’s limited access to mobility might have hindered their inclusion in alternative or revolutionary lifestyles. This idea is given expression in the memoirs, in which the authors speak of failed opportunities to go “on the road,” just as the men did, or the oppressive situations they found themselves in and which were aggravated because of their restricted motion. Di Prima, for example, sees her situation as “a bit more immobilized than some [women] because [she] couldn’t drive,” (*Recollections* 335) but still sees the abusive husband as the main cause of her, and other women’s, captivity. On a similar note, Joyce Johnson’s plans to go to Mexico with Kerouac never materialized, just as the title of Cassady’s *Off the Road* denounces the rejection of women from road adventures and alternative lifestyles. Behind these failed attempts and obstacles, however, lies not only the notion that they could not break with traditional patterns of female domesticity but, most of the times, the fact that their domesticity is simply equated with their responsibilities as mothers.

For example Cassady, while feeling a “tempting thrill of pleasure and suspense” (195) over the plans of her vacation with Kerouac in Mexico, just as Johnson, ends up not going, accepting that she would “never leave the children for weeks at a time” (198). That is to say, dominant assumptions such as Breines’s (1994), which claim that both men and women felt attracted to the “rejection of bourgeois respectability and the family,” (399) might need to be redefined. As the previous section demonstrated, old patterns of domesticity are usually rejected in the memoirs – even if they do not manage to escape them completely – however, as this section sets out to analyze, the concepts

of family and motherhood are not rejected, but reformulated to fit their alternative lifestyles.

One of the first issues that is brought up in relation to motherhood is the problem of combining their literary or artistic career with children, and issue which is not addressed in relation to society's expectations – since they were sometimes consciously avoiding those – but in relation to the challenge it posed for their art and the dilemma it meant for the development of their artistic self. Diane di Prima is the one who most explicitly articulates this problem, offering an excellent example of the tension between the different spheres. Throughout *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, di Prima sees poetry as a calling, as living by the vision, understanding that more than just writing poems, it means “the shape of a Life [...] Life lived in the Vision of art to be achieved,” (78) which she sealed the day she took the vow to poetry when she was just fourteen. In her early understanding of what it meant to be a poet, she saw its advantages but also the things she would need to renounce: “[s]imple comforts of the regular human world, sentimentalized for a moment into a worth, a worthiness they didn't usually have for me even then [...] the quiet unquestioned living and dying, the simple one-love-and-marriage, children, material pleasures, easy securities. I am leaving the houses I will never own. Dishwashers. Carpets. Dull respect of dull neighbors” (78).¹²⁷

The inclusion of children in the list of incompatible things with the call to poetry changes once the author also approaches motherhood as a calling – if not divine, then physical – which she paradoxically needs to fulfill if she is to be true to her Art. In her reasoning, all kinds of experience are the essence of the poet – male or female – who should not avoid any of them. Just as Kerouac emphasized the exaltation of personal experience in his *Essentials for Spontaneous Prose*, di Prima believes the constant

¹²⁷ In “Poem of Refusals,” di Prima discusses in similar terms everything she is not only renouncing to, but consciously rejecting:

No strong men in shirtsleeves
striding thru
my kitchen: warm & obtuse.
No me curled-like-kitten around
a sleeping child & smiling
seductively [...]
No dishwasher; washing machine
unlikely. No flowers,
good legs, plaintive
poems about marriage ... (*Pieces of a Song* 132)

search for new experiences is “part of the job, part of what one as writer set out to do” (161). Being a mother, is felt as essential “[i]n order to be a woman and a poet,” (162) so that she believes there should not be any conflict between the two. But there is, and she will soon find out that personal experience is valued when the doer is a man or, at least, when women copy their experience.

In the narrative it becomes apparent that the source of her dilemma stems from the masculine tradition she was following once it takes the corporeal form of John Keats, her “mentor and guide” (162) throughout the years in her pursuit of Art. As she tells it, “it was with real shock, and something like terror, that I felt the John Keats in my heart, in my mind’s eye, turn away, condemn what I was doing [wanting to be a mother]” (162). The words Keats pronounces in this fantasy, speak directly to the impossibility of being a mother and poet at the same time: “*You have said nothing will be as important to you as Poetry. And yet you now plan to have a child, a child who will certainly come first in your heart. In your life. There will be no time, no energy for the work*” (162). So far, di Prima has been following the path created by male precursors – John Keats being the epitome of everything she believed in. She lives by the vision just as they did, but that means living ultimately for it. Now that she has chosen to become a mother, no path is offered for her, as she observes, “[i]t was as if the ground was gone from beneath [her] feet. The road was no longer marked” (162). Implicit in these lines is the notion that a true poet that lives only for the art, can really only be a man. If she is a woman, she has to give up several things: motherhood being the first one.

It is one day in her apartment – which she had been arranging and preparing for the not-even-conceived baby – that she finally confronts the male tradition by summoning the presence of John Keats. The latter reiterates his opinion, warning di Prima she “might lose Poetry forever by giving another being claim on [her] life” (164). At the same time, Keats adds that women did not do art right, as they “wanted too much of the human world besides,” (164) pointing to women’s need to conform to masculine roles and lifestyles if they wish to be artists. In the end, di Prima is true to her instincts, and resolves to do it anyhow. Putting an end to the dilemma, she tells him:

I told him I knew the risks, but I had to try. Not at all sure it would work, sure only that I was putting the one thing I loved most in jeopardy. Because of some urgency I couldn’t explain. We said goodbye, me knowing I couldn’t be sure

when I'd "see" him again. *If* I'd see him again. I simply couldn't be sure I would still be a poet.

But I was damned if I refused to try. (164)

With this turn of events, di Prima redefines motherhood by making it an integral part of her art, of what it means to be a writer. The second action she takes to liberate motherhood from restrictive narratives completely is to decide for herself when to have children and to eliminate the father-figure from the picture. Probably due to her strict upbringing, and the physical violence her father vented on her, she declares "[n]o one, I vowed from the first, would ever tell me how to raise my children. No one would ever be angry or violent in my space. No one owns me in any way, my body, my love" (157). From this perspective, she frees motherhood from patriarchy and traditional gender roles, by making it solely a female decision, not just a consequence of marriage, or of a liberated approach to sexuality.

This vision of motherhood as an independent, female decision stems from the slow changes that were taking place since the 1930s and 1940s. As Regina G. Kunzel observes, social workers of the 1940s and 1950s working with single mothers witnessed the dissolution of old stereotypes which dated back from the nineteenth century – which judged unwed mothers as sexual "delinquents, moral defectives, or prostitutes" (308) as they realized that "the extension of unmarried motherhood into our upper and educated classes in sizeable numbers further confounds us by rendering our former stereotypes less tenable [...] when the unwed mother must be classified to include the nice girl next door, the physician's or pastor's daughter" (308). Not a pastor's daughter but the daughter of two college educated people, di Prima could be considered "the nice girl next door" who did not see her motherhood outside marriage as a problem, but as a blessing and an inspiration for her art.

This independent and strong-willed view of motherhood also manifests in her poetry. In "Song for Baby-O, Unborn," di Prima depicts a proud unmarried woman poet deciding to have a baby and telling it how her independent lifestyle, without guaranteeing luxury, will definitely show it what love is. In the poem, she rewrites motherhood by making it an act of love – not of love for her partner – but for the future baby itself. As Amy L. Friedman pointed out, "[t]he expectant poet-mother [...] focuses

on poetic gifts she has to offer her child over material ones” (*Beat Generation Writers* 204). Di Prima writes:

Sweetheart
when you break thru
you’ll find
a poet here
not quite what one would choose.

I won’t promise
you’ll never go hungry
or that you won’t be sad
on this gutted
breaking
globe

but I can show you
baby
enough to love
to break your heart
forever (*Pieces of a Song* 17)

The language in this poem follows di Prima’s colloquial, direct, hipster-like speech. With the repetition of “baby,” and sentences like “this gutted/ breaking/ world” di Prima uses the rhythmic street language to oppose the domestic role assigned to women by the 1950s mainstream society in two ways; firstly, she opposes the traditional role of having children after marriage by deciding to have children on her own; secondly, she will be the breadwinner and will support herself and her child through her poetry. Even in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, which on the whole depicts a sex without consequences,¹²⁸ the narrator’s pregnancy at the end of the memoir concludes

¹²⁸ On one occasion, a sex scene is interrupted to include a section entitled “FUCK THE PILL: A DIGRESSION,” in which the author rejects condoms, diaphragms, the pill and the IUD as contraceptive methods. Discarded as uncomfortable, time-consuming or harmful to the body, she advises the reader to

the narration and puts an end to the life she has had so far, pointing towards a new adventure. The connection with the moon, which “shone on the fire-escape” (187) when she did not get her period, and then waned, as her “breasts grew and became sore,” (187) unites women and nature, making motherhood a female process she initiates on her own. As she states, “I began to put my 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). Thus, motherhood is reinterpreted not as the end, but as the beginning of a new journey.

A similar independent view of motherhood is present in Joan Haverty’s *Nobody’s Wife: The Smart Aleck and the King of the Beats*, and is portrayed in Joan’s resolution to have her baby despite Kerouac’s countless orders to have an abortion done. When threatened with the me-or-the-baby ultimatum, Haverty quickly answers: “[y]ou mean which baby do I want? The husband or the one in here?” (204). After their divorce Haverty regains her freedom and welcomes the prospects of having her daughter as a single mother. This way motherhood becomes her decision: “my choice, my dream. I wanted her more than anything [...] She was mine, my child. She’d have Kerouac blood, she might even have the Kerouac face and features. And maybe she’d even possess a Kerouac literary gift. But she’d grow up with me, learn to see the world through me” (211). The possibility of raising her child all by herself becomes an opportunity for her to free her child from societal constraints, to let her “spin her own dew-sparkled webs” (211). In addition, she sees her future daughter as someone who maybe one day “would write the truth,”¹²⁹ (211) challenging prevailing discourses about her and Beat history in general.

Hettie Jones – who had a fight with her parents over their wish that she would abort her first daughter – discusses motherhood in terms of the extra work it meant and her fears of being not longer recognized as anything other than a mother. This is beautifully shown in an episode in which she is walking down the street with her older

practice unprotected sex and have babies: “Takes less time, trouble, and thought than any of the so-called ‘modern methods of birth control.’ And to support the creature? Get welfare, quit working, stay home, stay stoned, and fuck” (106). In case someone read the texts as a guide for safe sex, the author included a note in 1988 warning contemporary readers: “Please, folks, this is not, repeat this is *not* an encouragement to avoid condoms now. Flirting with pregnancy is one thing: having a kid can be a great celebration of life; flirting with AIDS is something else: is simply courting a quick and ugly death” (103).

¹²⁹ Bearing in mind the fact that this memoir was edited, and that Jan Kerouac also wrote, this remark can also be read as advertisement for Jan’s novels.

daughter, Kellie and one-year-old Lisa in the baby carriage. To complicate their walk, “it is ninety-six degrees and about the same humidity,” (189) and they are carrying a big cake to celebrate Lisa’s first birthday. Losing balance, they almost fall to the ground, a scene that is described as a recurrent episode in her life, and in which she describes herself as “[o]ld Mother Jones in clothes that were stuck to her old mother bones” (189). Despite her “gloom of self-pity – spiced with self-loathing” (189), when the saxophonist and friend Ornette Coleman appears just around the corner, he redeems Jones by simply addressing her as “‘Hey, man’,” (189) not limiting her to her actual situation – two babies, stroller, cake falling, apparent tiredness, etc. – and recognizing her as one of their own.

In addition, while she does not renounce motherhood or blame it for the lack of time to do art, Hettie Jones also refers to the essence of di Prima’s dilemma, the seemingly impossibility of combining a writing career with motherhood. For example, in the memoir she relates one occasion on which she burst into tears while feeding the baby in the restroom of one of the bars she used to go to before becoming a mother. Cheerfully rocking the baby and telling her “Hey baby, we’re in the outhouse,” (96) she suddenly realized that she herself had been pushed to the “outhouse” by being a mother. In her own words: “[b]ecause mothering her I’d neglected the self to whom I’d always been just as kind; I’d put myself in the outhouse” (96).

Besides her own example, Hettie talks about her friend Martha King, who was married to a Black Mountain poet. Once pregnant – and married to an artist, which translated into her need to work – Martha saw how “most of her will toward self-expression went straight to resourcefulness,” (178) and how everyday chores consumed all of her time. Due to the deficiency of birth control methods available at the time, she soon found herself with two babies, which only worsened the problem. Motherhood becomes another job in the list of things to do, as Jones says “[t]he *job* of being Mom – the involvement, time, goo, *stuff* – was astonishing. Like pregnancy and birth, it was rife with professional myth” (93). However, just as Hettie, Martha found the space – even if it was years later – to “write not only poems and stories but articles about medicine,” (179) and when she told her first publisher that she was “an occasional poet” (178) he seemed to understand the special situation of mother/artists by answering that she was, in turn, “a poet [...] who writes occasionally” (178).

Occasional time to write is what Joyce Johnson would have like to find after the birth of her son, Daniel. In her second memoir, *Missing Men*, she talks about the years after her son was born and finds it very difficult to distinguish her own figure, as the years “lack definition” (226) in her memory. In the quick images that form her recollection of those years, the blurred figure of the woman:

is running, running in circles – from the baby to the subway, from the subway to the job, from the job to the subway, to the supermarket, to the apartment, which is never clean enough, where the sitter is waiting to immediately hand over the baby, who needs to be played with, who needs a clean diaper and a bath before the husband comes home needing dinner, which there really isn’t time to make but somehow gets made anyway, leaving a sink full of dirty pots and dishes which will have to be washed once the baby is put to bed, by which time the husband has gone out for the evening and the woman is free to amuse herself as the laundry churns in the washing machine or to black out until the reentry of the husband, the two A.M. feeding, the four A.M. diaper change, the bleary beginning of a new day. (226)

This “day in the life of” stressful routine does not really include the time to work on her novels, and it is only years later that she is able to delineate the silhouette of the woman she used to be, finally finding time to “sit at the typewriter during the long nights after [she]’d put [her] child to bed” (127). In addition, after her second marriage was over, inspired by the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Colette, she came to appreciate her apartment as a new and free space where, as she puts it, “it was possible to write, if I did everything in the morning before Daniel woke up – just for an hour, just one page or even one paragraph; one sentence that pleased me could light up the day” (247). Diane di Prima, in *Recollections*, also needs to redefine her life to find time to write, discovering that “after the routines of dressing and feeding the kids, and eating breakfast,” (311) she would simply sit at the typewriter and write, so that it dawned on her that “maybe, just maybe, *a writer was nothing more than someone who wrote*” (311). With this, the concept of writer is liberated from gender distinctions which frequently reject women as artists once they become mothers and, as Keats reproached di Prima, give claim to other being in their lives.

Rather than dismissed, the mission towards independence and poetry is relocated. For example, although Joyce Johnson has commented that she felt liberated

from dominant discourses by the Beat movement and books like *On the Road*, once her baby was born, the way she could contribute to the revolution changed radically. As a “woman who could never get out of the house unless [she] was on [her] way to the office, who spent lunch hours searching midtown drugstores for the ‘revolutionary’ disposable diapers” (235), her revolution could not translate into road trips or wild kicks as the men’s did. Her publishing and editorial work, as well as her own novels – focusing on female protagonists who find the same obstacles as she did – become the ways in which she contributed.

Finally, the memoirs also draw attention to radically more obscure themes related to motherhood and pregnancy, such as abortion and, as it is the case of Brenda Frazer, adoption. Regarding the former, the memoirs contribute to the abortionist/anti-abortionist discourse of the postwar years which gained greater attention in the 1960s and 1970s. Rickie Solinger (1994) discusses the years before abortion was legalized and the risky situation anti-abortion laws placed women in. As she observes:

unhappily pregnant women looked for, and found, criminal abortionists in every city and many towns in the United States in the decades before *Roe* [...] The laws created the niche for and structured arenas of extreme personal danger for women seeking abortions and for their abortionists. When abortionists and their clients met each other, together they occupied “immoral terrain,” a place where human beings are very likely to encounter danger. (335)¹³⁰

These dangerous encounters are represented in the memoirs, as many of the authors also had to turn to illegal abortions to terminate unwanted pregnancies. When Edie Parker learnt she was pregnant – without knowing if the child was Henry Cru’s¹³¹ or Jack Kerouac’s – she turned to her grandmother, with whom she was living, for advice. They were referred to an abortionist “up in the Bronx on the Grand Concourse,” (71) who told Parker she was three months along and arranged the procedure for two months later, when she was forced to give birth to a stillborn. The procedure is narrated as follows: “[h]e put me on the examination table, placed a coarse white sheet over me, gave me two shots and then proceeded to force labor. After several hours of

¹³⁰ *Roe v. Wade* was a landmark decision by the United States Supreme Court regarding the issue of abortion by which the latter was considered – with some reservations – a fundamental right under the United States Constitution in 1973.

¹³¹ A close friend of Kerouac’s, Henri Cru left to the Merchant Marines and told his friend to take care of his girlfriend – Edie Parker – while he was away. He appears as Remi Boncoeur in Kerouac’s *On the Road* and as Deni Bleu in *Visions of Cody* and other novels.

excruciating pain, it was over. It was a black-haired baby boy. Gram took me back in a cab and I immediately went to bed – spending the next five painful days there” (72).

Although the events have little psychological impact at the level of the narrative, almost portrayed as the trigger that finally made Kerouac – and Henri Cru – propose to her, they did have negative physical consequences.¹³² She “was unable to have children as a result of the abortion of our son in 1942” (Preface). Parker might have been a victim of the physical dangers which were frequently associated with illegal abortions in the postwar years, and which Solinger refers to as “the back-alley butcher, the coat hanger, the knitting needle, the perforated uterus, the filth, the raging infection, death” (336).

In *Minor Characters*, Joyce Johnson relates the secret world of mouth-to-mouth information available for women who, like her, wanted to have an abortion in those days. Having played the “therapeutic abortion”¹³³ card with her therapist and seen it fail, she was forced to ask around until finding one of those women “who kept slips of paper, like talismans to ward off disaster, on which were written the names of doctors who would perform illegal abortions” (107). In Johnson’s account, the whole process of getting the abortion is depicted in an atmosphere of danger and mistrust, which are nevertheless tolerated due to the state of helplessness she was in. For example, to get to the doctor first you had to go through a kind of interview or “blind date” with a man who, in Johnson’s eyes, far from “a great humanitarian [...] was a young man who had a weird hobby – taking girls to get abortions” (108). Similarly, when she finally climbs into the operation table, the doctor tells her not to take off her shoes, so she wonders if she was “expected to make a run for it if the police rang his doorbell in the middle of the operation” (110). As for the operation, Johnson acknowledges she was one of the lucky ones, knowing how often things went wrong: “[t]he whole thing took two hours, but it seemed much longer through the pain. I had the impression that this doctor in all his fear was being extremely careful, that I was even lucky to have found him. He gave

¹³² In Parker’s memoir, both Cru and Kerouac become furious when they discover Edie had had an abortion without their consent, a situation quite different as the one told in Haverty’s case, in which Jack repeatedly insisted on her having an abortion.

¹³³ Carolyn Cassady also tells in her memoir how she tried to get a therapeutic abortion while pregnant with her third child, angrily quarreling with the doctor about women’s lack of birth control methods. She talked about: “society and its laws, the Catholic church, the peddlers of contraceptives that don’t work, and the doctors that guarantee they will. I proposed to demand an abortion from my former employer with the okay from her psychiatrist associate, because of my previous post-partum depression, etc. etc. ‘Must I look for this ever year?’” (*Off the Road* 136)

me pills when it was over, and told me that I could call him only if anything went wrong. “But don’t ever let me catch you back here again young lady!” (110)

Her friend and poet Elise Cowen was not as lucky with her abortion, of which Johnson knew little about. Ruling out the possibility of going to her parents for help and having no money to afford an illegal abortion – Johnson paid 500 dollars for hers – Cowen went from doctor’s office to doctor’s office requesting a psychiatric abortion, trying to convince the doctors that her life depended on that. However, as the process was slow, the operation became more complicated, and the baby finally had to be removed through a hysterotomy, a complex procedure which almost cost her life.

Both Johnson and Cowen might have been seen by society of the time as deviant females who rejected motherhood, or as two of the “wayward”¹³⁴ girls Ann Douglas refers to in the introduction to the memoir. Condemned by the public eye and the law, women who sought to decide *when* to be mothers, were judged guilty of their risky and rebellious lifestyles, which forced them to search for dubious methods to end their pregnancies. The moral pressure to keep their respectability is also behind di Prima’s father insistence on her having an abortion even after the doctor had told them that “*there was at least a fifty percent chance that [she] would die if abortion was attempted*” (175). Or Hettie Jones’s angry father shouting at her and demanding they go to Mexico to have an illegal abortion (*Became* 63).

In *Recollections*, di Prima also discusses abortion as being left as “simply women’s business [...] one of the unsung, unspoken, ways women risked their lives” (230). In her memoir she blames herself and the way she was brought up – the Italian code of silence and female compliance – for having an abortion the first time she got pregnant by LeRoi Jones. As in Johnsons’ case, di Prima was lucky enough to find an abortionist who seemed to know what he was doing, and one that did not judge her, as he “did the work out of the conviction that it was needed. That it was right” (232). Nevertheless, despite the anesthesia, she “lay on the table wide awake, feeling like my heart was going to explode. Every nerve in my body screaming. Screaming that it

¹³⁴ In Douglas’ words: “[t]he Wayward Minor Laws, passed in New York in 1944 and 1945, stipulated that anyone aged sixteen to twenty-one who associated with “dissolute persons,” who was “disobedient to the reasonable and lawful commands of parents,” or who “desert[ed] his or her home” fell within the province of the Wayward Minor Court. The law covered males and females, but wayward girls were treated differently than wayward boys.” (Johnson: 1999 xxiv)

wasn't too late, I didn't have to do this. I could stop it now. Get off the table and go home, why don't you? Just do it" (233).

However, she did not stand up, and when it was all over and she was home she wrote a poem to the baby she had "killed". "Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, After an Abortion", which has become one of di Prima's best-known poems, gives expression to di Prima's anger, and addresses the father so that he shares the guilt with her:

I want you in a bottle to send to your father
with a long bitter note. I want him to know
I'll not forgive you, or him for not being born
for drying up, quitting
 at the first harsh treatment
as if the whole thing were a rent party
& somebody stepped in your feet (Charters, *Portable* 363)

The voice in the poem ranges from very different emotions, containing anger, shame, sadness, and even sweetness, as when the mother asks the baby to send her its "address and picture, I want to / keep in touch, I want to know how you / are, to send you cookies" (363). The second part of the poem is full of imagery of the dying and rotting body of the baby, which is dissolving in a river. As the baby disappears all kinds of animals come to see it – mosquitoes, lions, giraffes, fish, etc. – not devouring but accompanying the baby on its new transition. Having left the baby in the water, the speaker walks "backwards, with [her] eyes on the sea," (367) and finally hopes the baby is not dead, but reborn in the water and given a second chance:

I mean to say
 dear fish, I hope you swim
in another river.
I hope that wasn't
rebuttal, but a transfer, an attempt
that failed, but to be followed
 quickly by another
suck your thumb somewhere
Dear silly thing, explode
Make someone's colors (368)

After the abortion, although things seem to continue as usual, di Prima acknowledges “it was all shot through with darkness,” (*Recollections* 236) having a “bitter taste, as of iron” (236). Never forgiving LeRoi Jones for “not being able to bear witness for [her], before or after,” (237) she sees her situation as political. Just as LeRoi told her about the “landlords who wouldn’t rent to him [and] the various political betrayals that had come close to costing his life,” (237) her illegal abortion was also forced on her both by LeRoi – who did not want the baby – and the legal system – which prompted the illegal clinics at which many women risked their lives.

Finally, a different representation of motherhood, also tinted with the harsh socio-political consequences of the bohemian lifestyle, is found in Brenda Frazer’s *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*. From the moment they get to Mexico, with the baby constantly on her lap, a sinister gloom surrounds the narrative, which gets darker as the events force the narrator to abandon her daughter. Throughout the narrative, motherhood is depicted in relation to complex and contradicting emotions of the speaker. Feelings of inadequacy towards her role as mother and wife invade the narrator from the very beginning, who asks herself: [w]as my fear at this time all composed of not being able to handle external circumstances, afraid I would not be able to keep Rachel healthy, or at least not crying (and that was a fear I didn’t often succeed in), and not to be able to satisfy Ray – what was happening in my head, something similar?” (9)

Similarly, once on the bus to Mexico, she carries her daughter on her lap and is overwhelmed by “the frustration of not being a very good mother really,” (9) a feeling which will only get worse as the circumstances lead to giving Rachel up for adoption, an event which is anticipated early in the memoir. Once in Mexico, the narrative takes us to a “flashforward” in which the speaker leaves the city “alone, lonely, alone, full of the meaning of death, and life, either end of it [...] shameless Mexico, I am your child, and you have my child as the token” (13). This strategy of anticipating events, of telling “the end first, and then tell it again,” (54) is used as means of regaining control over a situation that at the moment felt like the only alternative available. Being the active creator of the story, her “abilities of calculation” (55) to build the story as she likes help her Frazer achieve an “unemotional” (54) account of very tragic events, so she can remove guilt, shame or pity as valuable feelings both for herself and for the reader.

While in general the narration is very elusive, confusing the reader with sudden local changes and a vague temporality, it becomes even more so when dealing with descriptions of the baby or Frazer's relationship with her. As Nancy Grace observes:

Rachel is a ghostly presence, always "the baby Rach" whom Frazer seems to speak to through the letters, almost as if her tiny weight is still nestled against her mother's breast. Unafraid, uncorrupted, open to natural wonderment, this construction of Rachel is an innocent version of her mother, an elegiac shadow of Frazer herself, symbolic of Frazer's deep love for and desire to create the more laudable mother. ("Snapshots" 172)

But the narrative does depict Rachel and her circumstances as dangerous, formed by different scenes in which the baby is getting thinner by the minute, and crying constantly – "Rachel crying, twenty different times in the night, heard but unseen," (20) or "[t]he baby sneezes, coughs, gets sick all over every day" (19). These images break the narrative illusion and the author's attempt to represent her role as mother in a better light. Although at times mother and daughter are at peace and content – "Rachel and I sit in a beach chair smiling at each other's smiles, growing smilier with smiling" (45) – there is an underlying threat created by the anticipation of the tragic ending, which denies all possibilities other than what we know will happen. The author, foreseeing the readers' distrust, claims back her moments of happiness and discards any judgment on her life. "[W]ho says we weren't happy?," (45) asks the narrator while clinging to the few happy memories she had with her daughter.

The moment of the adoption is portrayed, firstly, as through the eye of a third party, who judges Ray and Bonnie as a "vagabond criminal poet and his wife" (121) who in their attempt to flee the country have put their "beautiful blonde American baby" (121) up for adoption. With the support – or rather demands – of Ray, Bonnie complies with the process: "I need Ray's arm around my shoulder to help me, Oh God, the notary asks me if I am in my right mind and my signing hand says yes, and he collects half of the world in his briefcase and leaves my life (forever?)"¹³⁵ (121). The events which follow the abandonment of her daughter are even more disperse and confusing than the

¹³⁵ In 1997, as Ann Charters says in the introduction to the 2007 edition, she "made contact with the daughter she was forced to abandon as an infant." (vi)

early chapters;¹³⁶ the change in narrative style representing Frazer's psychological distress and feelings of guilt.

Furthermore, *Troia* – which as commented earlier was written under the influence of Kerouac's *On the Road* – challenges the road tale by taking it into female terrain. Both adventurer and breadwinner,¹³⁷ through her prostitution she supports herself, Ray, their drug habit and Rachel, Frazer's story exposes the power of patriarchal oppression on women. As Grace and Johnson observe, the memoir inserts into "Beat discourses a mobile female protagonist whose picaresque adventures in existential and sexual hazard are modified from the male model by the presence of her baby" (*Cool* 111).

In conclusion, just like abortion, the forced relinquishing of her daughter is portrayed as the price to pay for women who rebel against conformity and their established roles. In addition, the memoirs also expose the misogynistic and gender biased rules that still apply even within bohemia. Seen as "women's business," women risking their lives with illegal abortions are the other side of the coin to the celebration of free sexuality the Beats so eagerly defended. Both adoption and abortion are proof of women's vulnerable position even inside the supposedly more liberated or open-minded portions of society.

Motherhood, similarly, is a factor that restricts women's active participation in the movement. Falling back into old patterns of child-bearers and housekeepers – plus breadwinners as the previous section demonstrated – motherhood translates into a dilemma between their literary or artistic vocation and their physical or emotional yearnings. Nonetheless, as it is in di Prima's case, motherhood is reinterpreted and used to compliment the vow to poetry, which feeds from the poet's open-mindedness towards

¹³⁶ Grace observes a change in style after the loss of Frazer's daughter, as the memoir moves "from reflective history, into redemptive fiction" ("Snapshots" 172).

¹³⁷ In the memoir she ironically refers on a couple of occasions to her position as the breadwinner of the family. The first time she has sex for money, with Ray acting as a pimp and watching from the patio, Frazer jokes about her new experiences as new merits to add to her C.V.: "I should write this like a résumé so that could get a job here in New York – things are not so different now. I joke about it, even then there was a kind of exhilarating joke about it when I was able to get money and even the horror of being the breadwinner dulled somewhat" (33). Similarly, she disdains American "revolutionaries" who no doubt are not striving to live as a revolutionary as she is: "I am full of moods and bad humors, always brooking my importance as the breadwinner. When revolutionaries come to stop at our house on their American way to Cuba, I am ungracious, not timid, but contemptuous. They are on their way to Cuba and idealism and here we are left to grope with the snake of time and capitalism growing; I wince every time I see a Coca-Cola sign" (55).

all kinds of new experiences. In addition, even if it means modifying their approach to literature – technique, form, poetics, etc. – motherhood is valued and incorporated into the content of their work. This, ultimately, attests to a certain deviation from the male example. Far from sacrificing their femininity in favor of the “phallic position,” in Julia Kristeva’s terminology,¹³⁸ the women of the Beat Generation celebrated their womanhood and combined revolutionary lifestyles and poetical ambition with maternity, regardless of whether the result was satisfactory or not.

II.3.3. Connection with Beat Generation: Influences and Position

More than three decades of scholarship and criticism on the literature of Beat Generation have demonstrated that it is quite difficult – if not impossible – to single out a set of characteristics which carry the essence of what writing “Beat” means, or how it translates aesthetically or thematically into the work. Unlike the Modernist, Dadaist, Surrealist, and other artistic groupings which devoted time to analyze and compile the characteristics that glued them together as a group in their manifestoes, the Beat Generation writers and artists belonged to a group which remained purposefully open. As Gregory Stephenson observes:

[t]he Beats were never (nor ever pretended or aspired to be) a homogeneous or a consistent movement. They issued no manifestos, subscribed to no basic tenets, formulated no dogma, embraced no common theory, doctrine, or creed. Rather, their coherence was of another sort, one founded upon mutual sympathy and inspiration, upon affinity and a sense of kinship in personal and artistic matters. (8)

Although acknowledging the Beats lack of solidified, readily detectable thematic or aesthetic values, Stephenson points out to a common denominator, which is their “concern with the issues of identity and vision [...] with the knowledge of the true self and with the discovery or recovery of a true mode of perception” (8). In this light, the memoirs written by women of the Beat Generation share the Beat concern for the representation of the self and identity formation; even if they stick to a more conventional format and language. Similarly, if the Beats were a group “as a result of a mythic outlook on their own lives and interactions,” (3) as John Tytell comments, the memoirs tap directly – sometimes critically – into the mythology that has solidified over

¹³⁸ See *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*.

the years around the group and which has frequently ignored the role played by women and women writers.

With the exception of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*, the rest of memoirs show no apparent connection with the style or form of other Beat works. Appropriating a genre mostly completely ignored by other Beat writers, they make use of the memoir – through a purposely relaxed approach – to construct their stories in relation to or in contrast with other Beat narratives. The aim of this section is to look at the way in which the authors position themselves and their work in relation to the Beat Generation in two different ways: a) by acknowledging their influences and b) by discussing the role of the movement itself in their lives.

Regarding the former, the Beats are influenced by different authors from different literary movements, ranging from the Romantics – Percy Shelley, William Blake, John Keats, etc. – the Transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau, Realists like Walt Whitman, or Modernists such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams or H. D., among others. Many of these names are mentioned in the memoirs analyzed in this chapter, both as influences or points of departure. For example, Diane di Prima speaks in depth of her literary influences in *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*. Specially influenced by the English Romantics, she uses Keats as the embodiment of the “Vision” she seeks. Reading Keats’ letters she “claimed and reclaimed poetry for [her]self,” (77) and to quench her thirst for poetry, she spent her days at a Brooklyn public library reading “Keats, Shelly, Byron, [...and] Shakespeare’s sonnets,” (77) among others. She saw herself and acknowledged her womanhood in Mary Shelley’s journals, which for her were models “of what could be done” (180). She was also influenced by Ezra Pound, and she even went to visit him on several occasions at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D. C. On one occasion she sent him some of her poems, and received the following remarks in a short note: “*They SEEM to me to be well-written, BUT – NO ONE EVER MUCH USE AS CRITIC OF YOUNGER GENERATION* (140).

Elsewhere in the memoir, she recalls LeRoi Jones copying Pound’s use of punctuation and spaces, filling his work with “slashes and speculations” (254). Although she also admits having used her “share of Poundian abbreviations, both in letters and poems,” (254) she shows a certain reluctance to overuse the style. On the whole, di Prima emphasizes the very different and eclectic influences she and other

poets and artists she knew had at the time. This mixture of sources which were an inspiration for their art is nicely shown in a scene in which the author observes the walls in her apartment as the marks “of some of our struggles, some of the aesthetic and political battles we’d fought with each other and with ourselves” (*Recollections* 165). As she puts it, the walls “[h]eld many marks of tape and thumbtack, from the hundreds of pictures we’d put up at various times: Lord Byron next to Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, Miles and William Blake and Greta Garbo as Mata Hari. Nijinsky and Jean Marais. Ezra Pound, Marlene Dietrich, Salvatore Giuliano, Gertrude Stein and Jean Cocteau” (165). In this potpourri of influences, there are references to literature, cinema, dance, music from very different periods, which coincides with a spread use of high- and lowbrow references also found in other Beat writers.¹³⁹ Regarding the cinema, di Prima makes special emphasis on its influence, describing how she watched the “movies of Dietrich, Garbo, [and] of Carl Dreyer,” (127) among others. From these and other figures like Cocteau, she learned about “[l]ight and time, the real dance, the essence of illusion” (127) appropriating it in her poetry.

In *Minor Characters*, Joyce Johnson also points to the blurring of barriers and the mutual influence of different mediums – literature, music, painting, etc. – which was recurrent in the 1950s and 1960s. Describing the painting technique which was breaking ground, she recalls how paint “would rain down on the sized white surfaces – house paint, if there was no money for oils – colors running in rivulets, merging, splashing, coagulating richly in glistening thickness, bearing witness to the gesture of the painter’s arm” (159). This spontaneity, as she comments, is also found in bop music or a “riff by Charlie Parker” (159) or in Kerouac’s “Fundamentals of Spontaneous Prose,” which she links to the process of writing to Jazz.¹⁴⁰ Hettie Jones also highlights the connection between music and literature in her memoir,¹⁴¹ where figures like Billie Holiday¹⁴² are

¹³⁹ See for example, Ginsberg’s “Howl”, which mixes reference to Apollinaire, Blake, Whitman, together with Marlon Brando.

¹⁴⁰ “Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image.” (159)

¹⁴¹ Hettie Jones’s interest in music is also given expression in her non-fiction work, as it is in *Big Star Fallin’ Mama: Five Women in Black Music*, in which she analyzes the biographies and voice of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mahalia Jackson, Billie Holiday, and Aretha Franklin.

¹⁴² Di Prima also cites Holiday as an inspiration for her and other artists/writers at the time. Of Billy Holiday she writes: “She was the Lady, the one who made fire out of the most tired lyrics, who turned our ears and our hearts for all time to come to the subtlest inflection, syncopation. Accent of the genuine in a breaking voice. What we later sought *in the poem*.” (148, my emphasis)

often mentioned. The influence of the latter is also used to show the generational gap which exists between herself and her mother, and which points to a new direction for the younger generation. One time she was watching Holliday sing on T.V. while her mother read *Life* magazine,¹⁴³ Jones depicts the different reception of the singer:

“Love is like a faucet,” Billie sang. “It turns off and on.”

“So what does it mean?” said my mother with a scowl. “Like a faucet? How stupid.”

I turned back to Billie and the other musicians. Even distanced by the medium, they seemed closer than my mother. Why did she pretend to know so little of love, after all her Broadway plays? (58-59)

Jones envied Holiday’s “genius approach to craft,” (59) and dreamed about having a “tone like that, like a sure bell, and to sing like her ahead of the beat, on [her] own line, in [her] own good time” (59). Similarly, she quotes Miles Davis’ “pretty, ambivalent notes” (148) as equivalents to William Carlos Williams repetitions, melodic lines and everyday language. As for other early literary influences, Jones mentions Whitman, Lorca and Brecht, among others, although she does not imply that they had an influence on the way she wrote. Brenda Frazer, on the other hand, does make explicit the connection between bebop and jazz and her own writing in *Troia*: “[y]es, funny, you who know me, Bonnie of the streets, of the hard touch, of the frantic spiritual judgment come to coerce you, you remember, jazz, soul, bebop, and well along the straight road to salvation” (4).

Just as literary figures, or the rhythm of Jazz music, some of the writers analyzed in this study used drugs as a medium from which to expand the senses to reach a deeper level of meaning.¹⁴⁴ In *Troia*, Frazer speaks of marihuana – which she used while

¹⁴³ Conservative news magazine.

¹⁴⁴ While some make explicit reference to drug-taking – both as a habit or sporadic thing – others do not mention taking drugs or their effects for the expansion of the senses. Carolyn Cassady, for example, both in *Heartbeat* and in *Off the Road*, describes drug experiences from a safe distance, even when she is actually participating. For example, in a party where everybody except her was taking drugs, she takes advantage of her situation to study “its effects on them,” (*Heartbeat* 28) and dismantles their ascension to a higher plane by describing how they talk about things “they apparently considered an inordinate display of brilliant wit [...] nothing they expressed showed any really heightened perception” (28). Describing their chat as pure “dumb things” (28) she indirectly attacks Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody* by pointing out how he included in the novel the transcript of the recorded conversations they had – in the novel it takes

writing the memoir – as a “habit thing with no pain, no remorse, no sickness” (15). Similarly, taking peyote she lets loose feelings of anger towards Ray she had tried hard to repress. After taking the drug, her “foot started patting immediately in unseen patterns of rhythm [...] alien to normal control,” (134) while her hand grabs a pair of scissors and starts “whipping the air and pouncing on each blade the other, syncopating each passionate foot sound” (135). In the narrative she interprets this experience as “seeing the light” (136); a religious and spiritual revelation that made her write in the ceiling: “THERE IS SALVATION” (136). Similarly, di Prima also achieves a heightened state of truth when she tries peyote, as she relates in *Recollections*. Lying high in bed, she saw the universe and understood “absolute truth, seeing it like it is – a universe of absolute precision and mechanical law” (211). In this harsh environment, humans are seen as vulnerable and fragile, unprotected towards everything. This and other “visions” she had that night, led her to the conclusion that she was “drinking in knowledge, a knowledge without words,” (212) and that creativity does not only come from “its own built-in courage, wisdom,” (213) but from the willingness to search beyond things, to be adventurous even if it comes at some risk.

Bearing all of these connections and shared influences in mind, one might think that the main purpose of the memoirs is to position their authors as members of the literary movement they are associated with. This notion could be supported by a widespread use of autobiographical writing in which individual authors fix their place in a movement through their autobiographies or memoirs. Laura Marcus observes how “biographies, autobiographies and memoirs, contemporary or retrospective, have been crucial in orchestrating literary or artistic groupings [...] confirming the individual identity of the writer or the artist while consolidating an image of group identity” (“The Face of Autobiography” 17). However, a closer look at the way in which the authors

more than 100 pages in a section entitled “Frisco: The Tape” (149-286). Furthermore, when she finally takes drugs, it is as if my mistake – they were passing joints in a circle and she had two rounds every time people just had one as she was in the middle. Besides, far from achieving a greater perception or the access to a mystical, profound truth, she becomes voiceless, her body rigid and unable to move. In fact, she remains that way until Jack turns to her to say something and touches her arm – “Thank God, I could speak! His touch broke the spell,” (*Heartbeat* 35) she adds. In *Off the Road*, she goes through a week-long training in taking marijuana supervised by Neal, hoping she would be able to comprehend the way it affects her. Unlike her reaction in *Heartbeat*, this time she does acknowledge “time expansion and second-by-second awareness, as well as the physical feeling of wellbeing, and certainly the heightened senses” (43). However, she finally discards drugs and she did not want her mind being controlled “by an external agent,” (43) believing she can achieve similar states through meditation and concentration.

refer to the Beat Generation reveals a complex relationship to the movement, and asserts that the memoirs are much more than mere ways of entrance to an already established literary and artistic movement. On the whole, the memoirs play with the authors' forced position as outsiders – both as women writers and as people living outside the norm. Carolyn Cassady, who in her memoirs takes considerable pains to dismantle the Beat Generation myth and to disassociate Neal and herself from the movement, is not always consistent, shifting from inside to outside the circle depending on the circumstances. In general, she shows contempt for the Beat Generation and how it was portrayed by the media – she thought it was just something Ginsberg made up, frequently describing “Beat” in negative terms. For example, when she meets the poet Philip Whalen, she describes him as “an extremely kind and gentle person, quiet yet openly friendly and definitely not ‘beat’” (348). However, when the journalist from the *New York Post* Alfred Aronowitz was researching for a twelve-part series article on the Beat Generation, Carolyn's position shifted towards a more amiable view on the Beats, even to the point of including herself as one of them or at least speaking for them. Aronowitz, who had been to San Quentin to interview Neal and had focused on the physical side of the Beat Generation, has a second interview with Carolyn, in which she tries to make him see the spiritual and intellectual vision of the group. Thus, she tried to “explain some of *our* beliefs and how *we'd* changed,” (326, my emphasis) hoping he would understand “the essence of *our* spiritual search” (327, my emphasis).

Other writers, such as Hettie Jones, show a similar position to Cassady's. For instance, the first time she mentions the Beat Generation, she describes it as an external movement, a “small but provocative literary group [which] sometimes gathered at the squeezed-up, wobbly tables” (45). She also adds that this new group “had a name – the “Beats” – ambiguous enough to include anyone” (45). However, she saw herself and LeRoi as “too sane” (45) to be included in such category, claiming that to “be beat you needed a B-movie graininess, a saintly disaffection, a wild head of hair and a beard like the poet Tuli Kupferberg, or a look of provocative angst like Jack Michelin” (45-46). Emphasizing her superficial description of what being “Beat” means, she adds that they “looked okay” (46) to her, once again judging from the outside. In the memoir, Jones also speaks of how the canon has obliterated her presence, as it is in the case of the 1983 *Dictionary of Literary Biography* volume on the Beats, where she was listed as LeRoi's “white wife, Hettie Cohen” (*Became* 234). When she is included in the movement, it is

in a superficial fashion – as beatnik. Such is the example of a 1959 article written by Diana Trilling on Ginsberg and the Beats. Trilling, Jones comments, “didn’t find *us* pretty, and hadn’t liked *our* legs at all. ‘So many blackest black stockings’” (my emphasis 129). Likewise, discussing Aronowitz’s article she includes herself as part of his research on the Beats, claiming that although they had made an impression on him, he “really thought *we* were freaks [...] *We* were hot” (my emphasis 85). Hettie Jones, then, moves both inside and outside the Beat circle, placing herself and LeRoi as part of a broader scene within which the Beats emerged, so that they can choose to participate or not to participate in it.

In much the same way, in both *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, Diane di Prima discusses her relationship with the world of bohemia and independent artists. Sometimes, the subject is treated with a certain amount of distance or even mockery, as when she and her girl friend went to Union Square and discovered a whole new group of bohemians discussing “mad politics” (84). Equipped with all kinds of vegetables, di Prima and her friend would imitate their frenzy and “argue heatedly some abstruse idea [they]’d make up on the spot and in the heat of [their] feigned fury [they] pelt[ed] each other with carrots and cabbage leaves” (85).¹⁴⁵ Walking later to the Village, they found a place where they felt welcomed to talk and write poetry. All of this was done, as she makes sure to establish, before the “poetry readings or the beatniks” (85). Because of their young age, one might think the author is simply trying to convey a sense of innocence or lack of maturation/expertise in the girls. However, as *Memoirs of a Beatnik* also attests to, there is also a sense of irony, of detachment from the “seriousness” of the Beat Generation. From this perspective the Beat Generation is both praised and ridiculed, a position that was also present in Ginsberg’s “Howl”, for example, in the following verses: “who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in beards and / shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin passing out incomprehensible leaflets” (*Selected Poems* 50). The image we get from these verses is interpreted from a detached ironic perspective. The Beats are presented as fighting for their freedom and preaching their truth with leaflets no one can make sense of. Just as Diane and her friend made up an “abstruse idea” and chose to

¹⁴⁵ Without knowing it they were being very “Beat,” as using food as weapon seems to run deep in the Beat tradition. See Ginsberg’s “Howl”: “who threw potato salad at CCNY lectures on Dadaism and subsequently / presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with / shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy” (*Selected Poems* 53)

defend it with various vegetables. However, there is much more than just irony to her interpretation of the Beat Generation, and in di Prima's memoirs it is also often depicted as an extended family or as proof that the work mattered.

The publication of *Howl and Other Poems*, for example, is given a special role in both memoirs. In *Memoirs*, it is seen as a proof that there were more people like her besides the few other poets and artists she knew. "[T]his Allen Ginsberg, whoever he was, had broken ground for all of us," (176) declares di Prima, who sensed she was about to meet her "brothers and sisters" (176). In *Recollections*, similarly, the book is "the proof that the work [she] was doing – had already been doing for some time – could and would be published" (163). In both narratives, the author is placed in a "literary" position before the acknowledgement of Beat, or the discovery of "Beat" works.

Joyce Johnson, who as I have commented before speaks from a detached almost self-excluded position to the Beat Generation, also makes sure to establish her independent "revolutionary" position before knowing anything about the Beats. In *Minor Characters*, for example, she relates the first time she ever heard about the Beat Generation by reading Holmes's famous article "This is the Beat Generation" in the *Sunday Times*. She states how even though the article claims the shift in consciousness was something new, it "was totally familiar" (70) to Johnson, as she and other friends like Elise Cowen felt the same dissatisfaction and eagerness to be part of something larger. In any case, although Johnson understands that Holmes was talking of an older generation, she still wonders if she shares the same intellectual and spiritual position: could she and her friend "be somehow more a part of the Beat Generation than of the Silent one [they]'d been born into chronologically?" (71). With these words Johnson points to the atemporal nature of the Beat movement, something which is still felt as the canon continues to expand, including writers from different eras and backgrounds. However, Johnson always saw her involvement with the Beat movement with reservations. After all, she wondered, "[h]ow Beat could [she] actually be, holding down a steady office job and writing a novel about an ivy-league college girl on the verge of parting with her virginity?" (205). In *Missing Men*, she states she was first "drawn to the Beats because they refused to settle for lives of 'quiet desperation,' because they challenged the suffocating terms of what constituted respectability" (235). However, in the memoir she also distances herself by representing the Beats as

immature or stuck in the past. For example, some time after she had broken up with Kerouac, and was living with her first husband, she receives call from Kerouac, who insists they meet in one of the bars they used to frequent. Here, she describes Jack as in such a “state of obliviousness that it never occurred to him he might not find [her] exactly where he remembered leaving [her]” (180). Furthermore, once Jack and Lucien Carr – who was also with him at the bar – start “yelling at each other and stabbing each other with the lighted ends of their cigarettes,” (182) Johnson decides she has seen enough and leaves, never seeing Jack again.

Representing the Beats as something external, which comes in the narrative long after it has started, can be analyzed as a technique to prove that they were “there” before the men did. Although chronologically the core Beats are a decade older than di Prima, Johnson and Jones, their stories show that they were interested in literature and writing before they became aware of the existence of a Beat Generation. With this move, therefore, they are legitimizing their position as individuals and writers, taking advantage of their in-betweenness. The fact that the Beats were a flexible group, which used no rules of entrance, also had a practical side to it, as other writers could position themselves inside or outside the group, following their own interests. Throughout the memoirs the women of the Beat Generation, then, speak of their affinities with and reservations about the movement.

It is precisely in its – in theory – rather inclusive nature, that the Beat Generation is an ever-growing field which is reinterpreted every time scholars expand the canon by including previously forgotten or ignored voices. Were it not for this, many of the work of female Beats would still be unknown, and it would still be considered that the movement included only the four or five male authors normally acknowledged as the core. In this respect, it is worth-noting the growing scholarship devoted to highlighting the connections and influences of the Beat Generation with literatures all over the world. Studies such as *Reconstructing the Beats* (2004), *The Transnational Beat Generation* (2012) and especially A. Robert Lee’s *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics* (2010), have broken new ground including many authors associated – thematically, aesthetically or spiritually – to the movement which, incidentally, attests to its still growing influence.¹⁴⁶ The memoirs analyzed here are also

¹⁴⁶ For example, A. Robert Lee explores the “shadow canon” (3) of the Beat movement and draws parallels and new connections which expand the Beat map to places like Britain, Russia, or Japan. At the

linked to the Beat Generation through various connections, and through their focus on history, they rewrite and challenge the canon, highlighting the importance of revisionist studies.

II.4. Conclusion

To be an artist: outcast, outrider, and *explorer*. Pushing the bounds
of the mind, of imagination. Of the humanly possible, the shape
of a human life. “Continual allegory”. Of a woman’s life [...]

(*Recollections* 103)

The growing interest in women’s studies in the last decades has put into the foreground the significance life-writing has had for women. As Judith Taylor states in her analysis of life-narratives by militant feminists: “[r]ich analyses of women’s life narratives demonstrate the politics and promise of memoir as a site in which individual and collective identities are forged and contested, agency and resistant asserted, and strategies for change are mapped” (3). Using different life-writing platforms, women have contested and re-written dominant narratives in which, most of the times, they were forced into secondary or highly subordinated positions. The power of autobiographical writing, in this context, stems from the fact that the “autobiographical ‘I’ names the historical person, the textual construction, and the author [...] for her [the subordinated woman’s] autobiography exists as an *alternative* site of self-definition and affirmation, an attempt to break patriarchal silences” (Joannou 32). Autobiography, in this light, necessarily opens up a dialogue between the past and the present, and if that dialogue is initiated by minority groups, the texts acquire a crucial political component by which the subject wishes to break the bonds which were keeping them silent.

The main objective of this second chapter has been to demonstrate the way in which the memoirs written by women of the Beat Generation are used as tools to rewrite the past, creating a new space in which their experience can be valued. The majority of the memoirs analyzed – especially those which were written by more or less established writers – not only position their authors as subjects and participators in the movement, but also stress their literary and artistic contribution to it. It is in this respect that the memoir as a genre – with its formal and stylistic ambiguity and tension between

same time, Lee studies the connection between the Beats and stresses the contribution of writers like Leslie Marmon Silko, Oscar Zeta Acosta, Richard Rodriguez or Monica Sone, among others.

fact and fiction – elevates the texts from conventional or opportunistic tell-all tales, to quasi-fictional works which could be considered novels on their own right. As Anne Waldman observes, “the memoir, which has become an accepted, high genre, is one of immense possibilities, the way you work with cross-genres and documentation [...] and then, memoir can be so imaginative.”¹⁴⁷ (*Cool* 269)

While autobiographies have consolidated over the years a reputation of veracity based on the status of the authors – encouraged by the elevation of the autobiographies of Great Men – the memoirs have traditionally been relegated to secondary literature. Interpreted as semi-fiction – what some critics call *faction* – or as a platform for nonliterary, everyday people to tell their stories, or the stories of others, the memoir stands as a complex and at times contradictory genre. However, it seems minorities have taken advantage of its inconsistencies, using it as a loophole through which to make their voices be heard, contesting oppressive forces through it. In this chapter, I have argued that it is precisely due to the genre’s unruly, disruptive nature that the memoirs work as great tools to express these women’s subjectivity, at the same time that they expose the subordination they were subjected to – both in society, and in the Beat circle. The memoirs analyzed exploit the genre to gain access to the center of the stage, making available other works and discussing their literary and artistic ambitions as well as the obstacles they encountered on the way. By making reference to other works – theirs or others’ – these women challenge the canon by drawing attention to peripheral voices and works. Significant in this regard is the fact that other works written by female Beats have experienced a re-emergence after their memoirs – such is the case of Hettie Jones or Elise Cowen.

In relation to the Beat Generation’s aesthetic or thematic interests, the memoirs were analyzed in two groups, those written chronologically closer to the Beat movement – *Troia* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* – and those written after 1980s in the resurgence of autobiographical accounts and revisionist narratives. While the first two employed a more radical style and themes – overtly sexual and highly ironic, using a detached narrative-I – the rest are more conventional in their narrative style, searching the sympathetic view from the reader. In any case, the second group of memoirs also made

¹⁴⁷ Waldman might be referring here to “literary memoirs,” which is a term we could apply to many of the texts analyzed in this study. The broad term, “memoir,” on the other hand, is not as favorably accepted as the later, often linked to non-literariness and stylistic simplicity.

use of stylistic transgressions, adapting the memoir to fit their needs – Cassady’s dialogues, di Prima’s fragments and “memory shards”, etc. – which proves that they are more than mere factual tales. For instance, they were used to give expression to the female body and sexuality, a movement that for many women started with physical independence. However, as Johnson’s *Minor Characters* shows, physical independence usually came with social exclusion, and did not necessarily lead to a freer position for women – who still found themselves trapped in subordinated positions even within Bohemia. In other texts, such as *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, female sexuality and female body image are complicated with discourses of violence and sexual repression. The need to reclaim the body, then, becomes an essential step towards the liberation of female sexuality. Ultimately, the importance of whether the individual authors achieved the total command of their own sexuality diminishes in a bigger political context of female liberation. Other themes covered in the memoirs – such as motherhood, economic independence, abortion, etc. – are dealt with in the memoirs both socially and in relation to their art and the position they occupy in their lives.

In conclusion, bearing in mind how the authors often extend their personal situation to the oppression of a larger collective, it could be said that the memoirs of the women of the Beat Generation deviate from the androcentric autobiographical “I” in favor of a relational mode that allows the practice of female solidarity. This relational approach ultimately highlights their political underlying intention. Although there is not an overt political agenda in the memoirs, the fact that they re-write the past, affecting history through the dialogue they initiate between past and present, cannot be stripped from the sociopolitical context in which these women wrote. If we understand reality as a socially constructed, these women’s accounts can be valued as instruments to (re)construct the past. As Herbert Hirsch writes:

The past is always constructed out of materials as perceived in the present, and memory may be viewed as related to politics in the sense that ‘images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order’ (Connerton 1989, 3) and are used to justify present policy (White 1973, 332; Nietzsche 1957, 209). It is in this manner that the control of memory is a type of political power. Persons in a position to manipulate memory, and with it the valued symbols of a society or group, hold, by my definition, political power. (*Genocide and the Politics of Memory* 23)

The memoirs, as vehicles of memory, endow these women with the power to construct counter stories to previously legitimized versions. In addition, by encouraging the movement from silence to speech, they call to other oppressed collectives to take action. This position, as bell hooks (1989) writes, is necessarily political. As she states, “[m]oving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech of ‘talking back,’ that is no mere gesture of empty words” (9).

In the memoirs explored, the authors claim back their voice at the same time that they draw attention to the oppression suffered by a larger collective of women. By using the memoir, a genre typically relegated to secondary literature,¹⁴⁸ they find a loophole to transform societal expectations and project their identity as writers. Through this voicing of their unique and collective identity, they wish not just to add their names to history, but to expose, and eventually change, the mechanisms by which they were erased. Ultimately, too, the memoirs act as a celebration of womanhood and femininity. In spite of all the pain and suffering they are supposed to bear, it is the magical and triumphant element which is celebrated in the end; as Diane di Prima states in *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*: “I write this book to try to understand what messages 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.” (26-27)

¹⁴⁸ In the case of the women of the Beat Generation, while some of their work is out of print, the journals and memoirs, as Gilliam Thomson notes in her, are still available, which she claims “suggests that readers of female Beat literature (as well as scholars), tend to read such pieces to find out more about the men or the women in their relationship to (or with) the men” (3).

CHAPTER III:

THE MYTHOLOGICAL SELF

III.1. Mythology & Feminist Thought: Uses of Myth

From ancient Greece to the Roman Empire, to Oriental societies, to contemporary civilization, myths have traditionally played an important role in the shaping and evolution of cultures. Either as testimonies of beliefs, as preservations of historical accounts, or simply as sources of entertainment, myths act as ongoing social practices that bear witness to the changes and evolution of societies until the present. If classical myth was used, as Edith Hamilton writes, as “an explanation of something in nature; how, for instance, any and everything in the universe came into existence: men, animals, this or that tree or flower, the sun, the moon, the stars, storms, eruptions, earthquakes, all that is and all that happens” (*Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* 12), its still significant influence in contemporary cultures must derive from other sources. Indeed as David Whitt and John Perlich write, “[w]hile myth is certainly a link to the past, it can also provide a unique perspective on the present, as well as the future” (*Myth in the Modern World* 2).

One of the most appealing characteristics of myth – one that simultaneously favors its continuity through generations and cultures – is its narrative, evolving nature. Critics concerned with literary appropriations and revisions of myth, such as Frances Babbage, have precisely emphasized this characteristic. In *Revisioning Myth* Babbage states that, “myths, [...], only really achieve significance in the telling: in this sense they are open structures differently filled by each generation.” (4) Beat women, as many other artists – poets, playwrights, fiction writers, filmmakers, etc. – have also felt attracted to this embodied quality of myths, accepting the invitation to retell them through their poetry.

In this respect, this chapter is a continuation of the previous one, where I focused on memoir and autobiographical writing by Beat women as a source of female

empowerment. Through their factual and fictional re-interpretations of history, Beat women re-wrote the Beat Generation and established themselves as literary subjects in a specific socio-cultural moment of history. Besides serving as an introduction to the work of some of these authors, as well as providing an overview of their social and political background, the chapter emphasized the position of – mainly first-person – literature as a source of power for individual women and oppressed collectives.

In this third chapter I move from autobiography to poetry in order to inquire into the way female Beats use and incorporate mythology in their works, both through the feminist reinvention or appropriation of ancient myths or through the reinterpretation of their personal lives in mythological terms. To do so, I analyze, primarily, Joanne Kyger's *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965), Diane di Prima's *Loba* (1998) and Anne Waldman's *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* (2011), attending to the different uses each author makes of mythology and mythological characters and motifs. Written in a time span of more than forty years, the three poetry collections share some characteristics in their appropriation of mythology, but also bear different traits as to their use and implementation within a feminist agenda. In this respect, besides analyzing the collections individually, in this chapter I also take into consideration the position of the collections within the second and third Feminist Waves, to show whether or not their works are influenced by feminist discourses.

III.1.1. Feminist Approaches

“We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” 19)

The revision of classical myths has been – and continues to be – a recurrent strategy and a source of inspiration in the poetry and fiction by both male and female authors. However, studying the way female characters are portrayed in classical myths might conclude that the myths as we know them leave little room for female subjectivity and empowerment. As Ken Dowden writes in *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, “Greek mythology is by and large a man’s mythology, describing a world from a man’s point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men, [...] and they seldom have scope for action on their own initiative”. (162) If women in mythology are often

depicted in secondary, inferior positions – eternally fulfilling supporting roles based on rigid female stereotypes – one might call into question the utility of mythology for female writers and poets. In other words, why do women invest their time and efforts in a field that has predominately left them outside of its scope?

Without hoping to offer a definitive answer to such a question, for the scope of this study it may suffice to say that, be it because they felt attracted to the actual or potential strength and power of goddesses and other influential mythological female figures, or because they felt the urge to fill out the blank spaces with positive female roles in myth, or because they consciously wanted to revert the cultural archive to empower female subjectivity, female poets and writers have been actively engaged in the revision of classical myths. This movement, as the example of Kyger, di Prima and Waldman will show, while rooted in the past, is also projected into the future. In her article “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1972), Adrienne Rich stressed a collective need of revising old narratives: “Re-Vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.”¹⁴⁹ (18)

Writing in the early 1970s, Rich’s feminist consciousness impregnates the text, drawing attention to literary revision as a mechanism to free women from patriarchy.¹⁵⁰ While revision is desirable for both sexes, in Rich’s essay it seems especially urgent for women. In her own words, “this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.” (18) Besides the call to action for feminist revisions of literary texts, this essay is also relevant because it points to the difficulties which arise when women try to find a free space to write when they are – inevitably – part of the patriarchal society they want to break loose from.

¹⁴⁹ Rich writes a review of di Prima’s *Loba*, calling it “[a]n epic act of language, a great geography of the female imagination” (front cover).

¹⁵⁰ In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar refer to the process of literary revision as “a uniquely female process of revision and redefinition [through which female authors] managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards.” (73)

In any case, the act of revision, through which women are given the means to revert the negative stereotyping recurrent in patriarchal mythologies, becomes a way “to deconstruct supposedly archetypal images of the feminine to reveal how these – far from being ‘timeless’ entities outside the processes of human development – are reflections of the symbolic order through which cultures are produced.” (Babbage, *Re-visioning Myth* 22)

Writers and poets such as Elizabeth Barret Browning, Hilda Doolittle, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood, Louise Glück, or Edith Wharton have all reinterpreted mythological characters or themes through their works. Similarly, critics such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Estella Lauter or Diane Purkiss, have also been concerned with the relationship between feminism and myth from very different perspectives – for instance by studying the position of women in ancient Greece,¹⁵¹ or in classical mythology,¹⁵² to name just two aspects. Although the approach to myth and its utility to feminism varies significantly, the majority of positions understand, as Sarah Pomeroy does in *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (1975), that “[m]yths are not lies, but rather men’s attempt to impose symbolic order upon their universe.” (1) As such, myths become important texts for the study of the socio-cultural or political position of women in, not only the past, but also the present.

Nevertheless, while the majority of feminist critics and poets might agree with the idea that “[t]o be fed only male images of the divine is to be badly malnourished” (5), as Christine Downing states in *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine*,¹⁵³ an analysis of the different approaches to myth and feminism shows that the issue is not exempt from controversy. The early years of the so-called Second Wave Feminism already witnessed an interest in the role myth had played – or still played – within the lives of women in two of its most influential texts – Simone de Beauvoir’s

¹⁵¹ See Sue Blundell’s *Women in Ancient Greece* (1995), or Ellen Reeder’s edited book, *Pandora: Women in Classical Greece* (1996).

¹⁵² See Eva Cantarella’s *Pandora’s Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (1987), or Jane Cahill’s *Her Kind: Stories of Women from Greek Mythology* (1995).

¹⁵³ She adds that in this scenario, women, “are starved for images which recognize the sacredness of the feminine and the complexity, richness, and nurturing power of female energy. We hunger for images of human creativity and love inspired by the capacity of female bodies to give birth and nourish, for images of how humankind participates in the natural world suggested by reflection and the moon’s waking and waning” (5).

The Second Sex (1953)¹⁵⁴ and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The former investigates, especially in the section "Facts and Myths", the way in which biology, psychoanalysis, historical materialism and mythology have been used by men as discourses to ensure the subordination of women; as such, Beauvoir denounces female inferiority as a cultural construct, rather than a biological predisposition. In much the same way, Friedan exposes the myth of the American middle-class happy housewife as a culturally-based false belief in women's supposedly material, emotional and intellectual conformity – a discourse initiated and perpetuated by men to guarantee their hegemony. A few years later, the Goddess Movement would use the same premise to go back in time in an attempt to erase the dominance of a male-centered myth in favor of pre-patriarchal, matrifocal, societies and cults. Historically a product of the Second Wave Feminism, the Goddess Movement nurtures loosely from feminist archeology – which critiques androcentrism in history and anthropology – in order to justify female power. Despite the apparent connection between Beauvoir's and Friedan's approaches to myth and that of Goddess worshippers, the feminist value of myth has varied depending on the personal and political stand adopted by each author.

Rather than focus on the tension between different approaches to myth and feminism, the following analysis of Kyger's *The Tapestry and the Web*, di Prima's *Loba* and Waldman's *The Iovis Trilogy* – three texts covering a time span from 1965 to 2011 – deal with the subject by analyzing each author's particular approach, as well as the literary and theoretical contexts in which they wrote. By analyzing the texts individually but also contrastively, I hope to shed some light onto the Beats participation in the historical and literary development of the appropriation of myth by feminist artists.

III.2. Beat Myth

Before delving into the analysis of the three epics, to situate my study within a theoretical and literary background, in this section I conduct a review of literature of previous studies on the uses of mythology in Kyger's, di Prima's, or Waldman's work. For a topic that has enjoyed considerable vogue in the last thirty years, it comes as a surprise that not many studies have focused on the function of mythology within the work of the women of the Beat Generation. Despite the lack of comprehensive –

¹⁵⁴ First English translation by H.M. Parshely.

individual or collective – studies on this subject, there are a handful of articles that deal with different aspects of female Beat writing and myth.

Michael Davidson, in *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (1989) studies the role of women – including figures such as di Prima, Kyger, Helen Adams, among others – within the literary and artistic activity that took place in the West Coast. Focusing on the “appropriative stance” (179), which he sees as “specially important within the San Francisco Renaissance, where the forum for poetic debate often involved questions of power and cult loyalty” (179), Davidson offers a general analysis of Kyger’s poetics. Discussing the immediacy and autobiographical nature of her poetry, he moves onto Kyger’s use of mythological themes and characters, which he believes “serve [Kyger] to ground the present in a larger narrative.” (189) In his brief but pertinent analysis of *The Tapestry and the Web*, he places the latter as an example of Kyger’s “synthesis of myth and personal voice” (189). While the work was “written outside a specific feminist discourse” (190), he regards it as a subversion of the masculine literary world Kyger was part of.

Linda Russo also examines *The Tapestry and the Web*, in this case, in the context of the epic genre. For Russo, Kyger’s collection is an act “of imaginative intervention into epic invention, animating female presence, remaking the gender ideologies and histories transmitted from generation to generation in epic form.” (“To Deal with Parts and Particulars” 179). Highlighting the fragmentary aspect of the poems, the author stresses Kyger’s poetics as a strategy to escape masculine categorization. Like Davidson, Russo stresses the mixture of “layers of both personal and mythic history” (182), and Robert Duncan’s influence on Kyger’s approach to myth. In her article, quoting from Duncan’s *Fictive Certainties*, she writes: “Her inclination toward myth was also encouraged by Duncan, who accorded its mystic powers: ‘The mythic content comes to us, commanding the design of the poem; it calls the poet into action, and with whatever lore and craft he has prepared himself for that call, he must answer to give body in the poem to the formative will’ (1985, 13).” (187) In addition, just as Davidson, Russo is cautious not to read *The Tapestry and the Web* as a feminist text, but does acknowledge that it “anticipates the revisionary project that characterizes a feminist poetics shaped by the second-wave women’s movement.” (188)

In “Joanne Kyger, Beat Generation Poet: ‘a Porcupine Traveling at the Speed of Light” Amy L. Friedman offers an overview of Kyger’s literary career up to 2004, situating her poetry in the context of different artistic spheres in the 1950s and 1960s. Although not specifically focusing on *The Tapestry and the Web* – as Russo’s essay did – Friedman does emphasize this collection as the moment in which Kyger found “her poetic ‘voice’” (74). Similarly, she highlights Kyger’s revision of the epic and transformation of Penelope into different versions that allow her to explore “burgeoning female creativity” (80). Taking into consideration Davidson’s previous analysis, on account on Kyger’s use of myth, Friedman states that, “instead of utilizing reference to myth to shore up a sense of cultural survival and endurance, Kyger stamps Penelope’s story with a personal narrative of female artistic power and perspective.”¹⁵⁵ (81)

As far as di Prima’s *Loba* is concerned, although the collection is often mentioned as one of di Prima’s major works, it has not attracted that much scholarly attention. An early exception to this trend is Ann Charters “Diane di Prima and the Loba Poems: Poetic Archetype as Spirit Double” (*Beat Indeed!* 1985), where she reads parts I-VIII of *Loba* as proof of maturation of the poet’s work.¹⁵⁶ In her essay Charters connects di Prima’s interest in mythology with the influence of Robert Duncan. The Black Mountain poet’s use of myth and spiritualism, Charters argues, “were the intellectual ground [...] for DiPrima’s awakening to the mythological content of her experience.” (108). In addition, she reads *Loba* as a female parallel or feminist twist of the American Indian coyote, “a tribal persona that is unpredictable, contradictory and explicitly masculine, a ‘trickster hero’ in Gary Snyder’s words (5)” (111).

Anthony Libby speaks briefly of *Loba* in his overview of the poet’s career; referring to di Prima as “one of the heroic precursors of second-wave feminism” (46),¹⁵⁷ Libby sees the poet as “male defined both personally and aesthetically” (47) because of the very masculine areas in which she moved. Mainly focusing on di Prima’s *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward*, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, *Dinners and Nightmares* and

¹⁵⁵ This idea could be extrapolated to the three texts I study in this chapter which, rather than approaching myth and history as an absolute truth, they expose the narrative nature as well as the power hierarchies on which they are based.

¹⁵⁶ In her words, [w]hile the surface of DiPrima’s early writing is a record of the flow and shift of her interests (emotional, political, philosophical, practical), the deeper mythological level of meaning of her poems in *Loba* reflects her maturation beyond anything she has written before.” (108)

¹⁵⁷ “Nothing Is Lost; It Shines in Our Eyes” (*Girls who Wore Black*).

Revolutionary Letters, Libby's essay – published in 2002 – mostly leaves *Loba* out his analysis. A passing comment to di Prima's epic establishes it as “based on a spirit of solidarity, not opposition, primarily solidarity with women, though she still challenges our general conception of what is appropriate for a feminist and a poet” (66), unfortunately, Libby does not elaborate upon this idea or comment on the implications it may have.

Gillian Thomsen reads di Prima's work – mainly *Loba* – as “proposing new forms of signification by reconsidering the body, female sexuality, and normative gender roles” (1-2).¹⁵⁸ In her article she interprets the animal and human characteristics of *Loba* as a defiant stand against western philosophy (3), highlighting the ambivalence with which di Prima represents femininity. Although I agree with Thomsen's view of the *Loba*'s fluid nature – “the *Loba* resists definition, she is fluid, foraying between different and often seemingly contradictory modes of signification” (8) – as my analysis shows, I do not concur with her idea that *Loba* exists “in a place outside of culture” (8); quite the contrary, I read *Loba* as a product of her culture, arising from its conflicts and offering a solution to them.¹⁵⁹

Finally, Peter Puchek has studied Anne Waldman's epic in two essays. In the first one, he focuses on Waldman's early poetry and her connection with both the Beat Generation literary circle and the second-wave feminism. He stresses Waldman's Buddhist influence in writing, with a “practice of surprising the mind through attention to the body and karma rather than ego”¹⁶⁰ (228) – a position that is relevant to *Iovis* and that entails a deviation from ego-based traditional masculine epics. Focusing primarily on *Baby Breakdown* and *Fast Speaking Woman*, he dedicates the last part of the essay to *Iovis* – only Books I and II had been then published – which he sees as deviating from Beat influences into an approach “reminiscent of modernism: classical mythopoetics” (241). Puchek aptly positions Waldman's epic in its revisionist approach, an action that falls primarily on her use of language – “Consistent with this postmodernization of Beat writing, *Iovis* disputes Virgil on linguistic grounds.” (242)

¹⁵⁸ “Representations of Gender and the Body in Diane di Prima's *Loba*” (2011).

¹⁵⁹ In this regard di Prima's approach to myth resembles Lévi-Strauss definition of myth as an imaginary resolution to real social contradictions.

¹⁶⁰ “From Revolution to Creation: Beat Desire and Body Poetics in Anne Waldman's Poetry” (in *Girls who Wore Black*).

In a second article Puchek investigates more thoroughly Waldman's use of the page, language and rhythm in her epic. Paying attention to the inclusion of personal detail, which he links to the influence of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, he states that, "Waldman's 'my history and myths are personal' continues H.D.'s reclamation project and furthers the overturning of male modernist insistence on poetic myth's impersonality and alleged objectivity" (43).¹⁶¹ In addition, he analyzes "the poem's rich and strange visual textures" (46) – reading the page as the body – through which he interprets the poem as "a semiotic text" (46), as if the obscurity of the text might favor a semiotic, rather than semantic reading. Using Julia Kristeva's terminology, Puchek analyzes the centrality of sounds, rhythm, colloquial language and sexuality in Waldman's epic as a way of foregrounding an "infantile" poetics Waldman uses to dismantle dominant – masculine – structures. In the last part of his essay, he emphasizes Waldman's use of myth as a counterpoint to a negative "politicization of myth" (58) in favor of "readings of creation myths for their power to suggest positive self and world transformation" (58).

Other critics have pointed towards the connection between some of the texts I study. Friedman has analyzed di Prima's *Loba* as a space in which "di Prima ranges through female myths to evoke models of potency¹⁶² – Kali, Lilith, The Huntress, Guinevere – and appropriates also masculine power in her quest."¹⁶³ (237) She then connects di Prima's interest in myth and archetype with Waldman's *Iovis*, where the poet "uses poetry and prose to explore and confront notions of the male godhead" (237). More recently, A. Robert Lee has linked Kyger's *The Tapestry and the Web* as female revision of the traditional masculine epic. Through this movement, he writes, Kyger "allies herself with other long-poem female authorship, whether H.D.'s three-part *Helen in Egypt* (1961) or the ongoing woman-epics of di Prima's *Loba* sequence (1978 –) and Anne Waldman's *Iovis* (1993–)."¹⁶⁴ (53)

In this chapter, I build on this body of work to analyze the uses of myth, as well as the – feminist – techniques of revision and appropriation in *The Tapestry and the*

¹⁶¹ "Semiotics and Creation: Anne Waldman's *Iovis* and 'Body Poetics'" (2003).

¹⁶² In my reading of *Loba* I consider the effects of this "potency" as both positive and negative, something di Prima seems to be aware of.

¹⁶³ "'Being Here as Hard as I Could:' The Beat Generation Women Writers" (1998).

¹⁶⁴ *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics* (2010).

Web, Loba and *The Iovis Trilogy*.¹⁶⁵ From the vantage point that the last two epics are now complete,¹⁶⁶ in this study I expand this body of work by offering, on the one hand, a more detailed analysis of the individual texts and, on the other, by stressing the similarities – as well as the points of departure – of the approach adopted by each poet. Linking the three collections through their investment in “personal myth”,¹⁶⁷ as well as through their efforts at decentralizing the masculine power attributed to epic and mythical discourses, I hope to explore the mythical in the poetics of Beat women writers in order to evaluate the feminist, political and poetical relevance of their epics.

III.3. Joanne Kyger: *Tapestry and the Web*

Published in 1965, Joanne Kyger’s *The Tapestry and the Web* is, chronologically-speaking, the first of the three texts which makes use of mythology analyzed in this chapter. The collection is composed of twenty-seven short poems in which the author, mainly through the character of Penelope, draws from ancient western texts such as Homer’s *The Odyssey* to construct an alternative version of female endurance and fidelity.

In Homer’s text, while Odysseus embarks in a twenty-year long journey– first fighting the Trojan War and then returning home – Penelope is shown struggling to remain faithful while inventing schemes that would help her postpone taking another husband from her long list of suitors. As such, she embodies the “archaic ideal” wife described in *Women in the Classical World* (1994); as Elaine Fantham, Helene Peet Foley et al., write, “the Homeric woman [...] was meant not only to produce and raise heirs but also to preside over her household by weaving and watching over the domestic slaves and goods.” (33) Hence, while *The Odyssey* also relates Penelope’s actions, in so far as they are read as preserving Odysseus’s status and power, she is left in a secondary, passive position. For these reasons, Penelope has come to be representative of female respectability and marital faithfulness, something that is present in traditional iconographic representations of her: sitting down in an awaiting pose, she puts her hand

¹⁶⁵ Other studies or analyses dealing with these texts will be dealt with within the different sections.

¹⁶⁶ This might not apply to *Loba*, which di Prima still refers to as “in process”.

¹⁶⁷ Sophia Heller, in *The Absence of Myth* speaks of the loss of a collective or ancient notion of myth, which has been now substituted by the “personal myth”: “Transformed to a metaphorical and conceptual level, myth has lost its former status as an objective reality; it no longer originates in the inviolable domain of Supernatural Beings and instead has become a method to be adopted or discarded at will.” (3)

on her face while crossing her legs, a position which symbolizes her sexual inactivity in the absence of her husband.¹⁶⁸



Figure 5. Typical sculptural representation of Penelope

In *The Tapestry and the Web*, Kyger builds from these conceptions only to destabilize misogynist preconceptions of femininity and the female gender. When I say “destabilize”, instead of more radically progressive action such as re-write or revise using a feminist agenda, it is precisely because Kyger, although definitely introducing and building upon feminist literary practices, opts not to erase or completely re-write Penelope’s subjugation to a patriarchal system. As Davidson writes, “Kyger writes from within those [patriarchal] stories as a woman who finds herself inscribed into a myth she wishes to interrogate in her own terms.” (*The San Francisco Renaissance* 192) Written from 1958 to 1962, Kyger’s reworking of Penelope predates the second-wave feminism – where revision and appropriation of mythical discourses would be a frequent literary strategy. Unlike Margaret Atwood’s Penelope in *The Penelopiad* (2004) – who transports the Greek heroine to the 21st Century – Kyger’s Penelope is still trapped within Homer’s epic, which does not translate into a compliant resignation. Nonetheless, as I hope to demonstrate, Kyger does reconstruct a different version of

¹⁶⁸ For a summary of the history of the representation of Penelope – and other female characters – in art see Diana Buitron-Oliver’s and Beth Cohen’s chapter “Between Skylla and Penelope: Female Characters of the Odyssey in Archaic and Classical Greek Art”, in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer’s Odyssey* (1995).

Penelope, exposing the processes that placed her in the position she is at in *The Odyssey*, as well as in her text. In the following section, I look at “The Maze,” the first poem in the collection, to situate Kyger’s *Tapestry and the Web* within the author’s approach to myth and her own poetics.

III.3.1. “The Maze:” Reevaluating Female Passivity

The poem that opens up Kyger’s collection, “The Maze,” introduces the reader in Penelope’s traditional position of waiting with the notable exception that, while in Homer’s *The Odyssey* Penelope’s expectancy is supposed to be self-imposed and embraced, in Kyger’s text it is described as a site of female imprisonment, as a physical and psychological oppressive state. The first person singular “I” who voices this situation helps create a powerful and dynamic – despite her physical confinement – image of her psychological collapse, by drawing the image of a woman on the verge of losing her mind as a consequence of her lack of freedom. The first two stanzas delineate her despair, establishing her longing for freedom:

I saw the
dead bird on the sidewalk
his neck uncovered
and prehistoric

At seven in the morning
my hair was bound
against the fish in the air
who begged for the ocean
I longed for their place (11)

These first two stanzas can be seen as representative of Kyger’s style throughout the collection and, to some extent, throughout her body of work. Using direct, colloquial speech, her lines move between clarity and obscurity.¹⁶⁹ At the same time, her poetry is also very visual, providing the reader with metaphoric snapshots whose meaning can be deducted from the juxtaposition of images, rather than made easily available at first

¹⁶⁹ In *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics* (2010), Robert Lee refers to Kyger’s style of register as “cryptic, often given to half phrase, and disjunctive in a manner at times to recall Gwendolyn Brooks.” (53) Alice Notley, on the other hand, describes Kyger’s poetry as “spiritual, natural, and transparent, full of that light” (*Coming After* 17).

glance. For instance, in “The Maze”, the image of the dead and prehistoric bird of the first stanza acquires a deeper meaning when the “fish in the air,” (11) struggling to live outside of the ocean, are introduced. These images of dead or stranded animals are tied up with the speaker’s “bound” hair, and her desperate state of oppression runs parallel in the text to these images to symbolize her wish to exchange places with the fish: “who begged for the ocean / I longed for their place” (11).

Although not yet specified as Penelope, there are certain references in the poem that direct the reader to Odysseus’ myth. For instance, in the third stanza Kyger introduces a masculine figure which could be seen as a symbol for Odysseus’s influence both in his presence and absence – “Behind the / tall thin muslin of the curtain / we could see his shadow” (11).¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Odysseus’s voyage is evoked as the speaker expresses concern over the state of the sea – she “checked the harbor / to see if it was safe” (11). However, Kyger uses this poem to introduce a key change in Penelope’s attitude and motivation as a character. For instance, while checking the state of the sea, that is, while acting in agreement with the female stereotypes in the classical myth, her mind strays from those dictates of female faithfulness and patience, as she was not necessarily praying for Odysseus’s wellbeing, but “rather hoping / one had gone astray / and flung itself upon the shore/for all to watch” (11). Kyger continues to add new nuances to the mythological representation of Penelope, disrupting the supposed calm state – both physical and psychological – of her twenty-year waiting:

If I should weep
they would never know
and so I walked
silently
shrugging off hands

¹⁷⁰ In a letter written to the American author Michael Rumaker, dated February 4, 1958, Kyger describes a dream that must have inspired this poem: “I was looking at the white muslin curtain in my bedroom and I feel asleep. When I awoke Sheila was mad – like Pip’s friend in GREAT EXPECTATIONS. Mrs. Havershaw – and had done awful things to the curtains. They were shredded in the most terrifying way – most of them missing – like some loose spider web, and fastened with the points of open safety pins to the ceiling and walls around the window. Complete horror possessed me. After a moment I was walking with some friends and I was overwhelmed by a great thirst. I drank one glass of water after another urgently. Then I would start to resume my walking I would find I had to still quench my thirst and would be forced to drink again and again.” (*Communication is Essential: Joanne Kyger, Letters to & from* 12)

in treacherous places

wanting to fall (11)

These lines depict the speaker's anxiety at the same time that they point towards her secondary position within the narrative. This position, however, is not used to portray a victimized Penelope, but to insinuate other possibilities made available to her, simply, because no one was looking. Kyger, this way, questions the stability of myth by insinuating that changing the focus towards what was left outside the main narrative can acutely affect a character's description and actions. Thus, introducing a theme she will deal with in other poems in the collection, "The Maze" illustrates Penelope's search for different paths outside the traditional reading of *The Odyssey*, as well as her wish to find herself "in treacherous places" (11) – a vague allusion to the possibilities that raise up when she is freed from her position as a faithful wife.

These psychological descriptions of a Penelope on the verge of losing her mind because of her lack of freedom come to an end in the last section of the poem, where her long captivity drives her to insanity. With pieces of the curtains she has destroyed "like some / insane insect" (13), she:

creates a
 demented web
 from the thin folds
 her possessed fingers
 clawing she
 thrusts them away with
 sharp jabs of long pins
 to the walls. (13)

Certainly, this vision of Penelope is very different from the one offered in Homer's *The Odyssey*, who majestically endures twenty years waiting for her husband and remains a rather flat character in the epic. In "The Maze," in the course of one short poem, Kyger has already shown a side of Penelope's progression – even if it is towards madness. The shredding of the curtains – symbol of her forced domesticity – is also connected to her ability as a cunning weaver. In contrast to Homer's telling of the myth, in this case the cloth does not reaffirm her loyalty, but exemplifies the oppression she is

suffering. Turned into an animal at the end of the poem, Penelope violently transforms – weaves – her anger into an example of female rebellion.

The poem can also be seen as an introduction to Kyger’s composition style, as well as to the author’s influences and position within the literary movements she was associated with. Getting back to the beginning of the poem, the physical parallel of lines in the poem such as “who begged for the ocean / I longed for their place” – with five words in each line – mirrors the poet’s breath and guides the reading, so that words and meaning cannot be separated from the space they occupy on the page. As such, reading *The Tapestry and the Web*, one is confronted with the web itself, as the words in the poem start weaving the stories, leaving a physical imprint of their path through the poet’s mind on the page – a trail of Kyger’s imagination and craft. See for example the way in which the words are arranged when the speaker gets into the maze:

Delighted

I went to it

and stood

poised

inside the

precise

entrance

like a long hallway

the tightly trimmed

bushes

held themselves

pointing each

leaf

and twig

in an unquestioning manner (11-12)

Narrowing the text to accommodate the maze on the page, Kyger is able to symbolize the oppression both by physically representing the narrow passages of the maze, but also by interrupting the natural rhythm or breath in lines like, “inside the / precise / entrance” or “bushes / held themselves / pointing each / leaf.” Nonetheless, the speaker seems not to participate in the feeling of anxiety one should expect being lost in a maze provokes. For her, “white gravel / caressed [her] feet” (12), and she “knew each corner / without pausing” (12) – which also points towards the idea that if the maze is read as the patriarchal myth she is trapped into, it is a space she knows only too well. Similarly, once Kyger’s lines leave the maze – not because she finds an exit but because her despair bursts open – the space on the page also opens up, delineating a broken structure that accompanies Penelope’s insanity:

She
 tortures
 the curtains of the window
 shreds them
 like some
 insane insect¹⁷¹ (13)

The importance of this poem lies not only in the fact that it introduces the theme of female oppression and captivity in her collection, but also because it served Kyger as an off-ramp into acceptance by her male counterparts. Robert Duncan’s recollections of Kyger reading “The Maze” on 23 February 1958 in his essay “Testimony,” attest to the powerful effect Kyger’s reading had on the audience:

As in the scene Sunday I see Joanne Kyger kneeling. There had been a chair, but she sits always on the floor...on her knees when the poem was read [...] In the Maze poem Joanne had read – I saw the bird / on the sidewalk / his neck naked / as in prehistory; this is how I read it, reciting it to Hal and Dory today. But Hal corrected me: *prehistoric* it had said. Slowly, to discover the design we must

¹⁷¹ Kyger’s Penelope tears the curtains in an ultimate attempt at breaking free from her prison. As Russo notes in “To Deal with Parts and Particulars”, like Jane in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), peeling the wallpaper of her room-cell and scattering it on the floor, the poem shows how the domestic confinement imposed on women in a patriarchal society leads to depression and mental illness.

find the exact word, the exact name. (quoted in *Robert Duncan: Ambassador from Venus* 183)

Duncan's words, besides documenting Kyger's inclusion in the literary scene, also draw attention to her poetics; as this anecdote highlights, Kyger's use of words is ruled by a necessity of writing "the exact word" to be true to the moment in the poem. Joanne Kyger, in addition, has also identified this moment as a rite of passage that marked her inclusion in the literary scene, which encouraged her to keep developing her writing. In her own words, "[t]hat was the first time I really read a poem to the group and they said, 'okay, you're in, you've made it, you've written a poem, you've come to a place where we accept this as writing'." (Linda Russo, "Particularizing People's lives" n.p.n.) The group Kyger is referring to includes authors such as Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Gary Snyder, Robert Creeley and Lew Welch, representatives of both the Beat Generation and the Black Mountain Poets. The interconnections with several literary movements might be relevant to the study of Kyger's poetics, which draw from these and other movements, but ultimately refuse to be pinned down by what she sees as mainly rather useless scholar devices.¹⁷²

In fact, while she is most often associated with the San Francisco Renaissance, Kyger's career overlapped with that of Beat writers on the West Coast (*The Beat Generation Writers* 209; *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature* 183) and, as such, she has also been read as a Beat poet. Besides sharing a few of the techniques and themes of Beat writers, it was probably due to her marriage to the poet Gary Snyder – who read at the famous Six Gallery reading in 1955, an event which brought together East and West coast poets – that scholars have often associated her with the Beat Generation. For instance, in Brenda Knight's organization of women associated with the Beat Generation – which I referred to in chapter II – Joanne is listed in "The Writers" category, placing her at the core of the Beat Generation literary scene. However, this is a label that Kyger herself, as many other authors linked to the movement, has contested and defied. In an interview conducted by Linda Russo in 1999, Kyger discusses the so-called Beat Generation as a "cultural media phenomenon", rather than a literary movement. Similarly, she argues that the problem of anthologies such as Knight's

¹⁷² In Kyger's own words: "It's useful for people in an academic way to have a label, to get a handle on it. I resisted the Beat label during the time I was associated with the Beat writers because they never considered me a Beat writer." (*Breaking the Rule of Cool* 140)

Women of the Beat Generation or Peabody's *A Different Beat*, is how they “put a bunch of women together that were not necessarily, or didn't personally consider themselves beat writers.” (n.p.n) In much the same way, Alice Notley, in *Coming After: Essays on Poetry* (2010), condemns the scholarly inclination to write about women writers in association to better-known male compeers. She argues that, “such labeling by association is frequently detrimental to women poets. Poetry movements are generally manmade; women seen in the light of such movements always appear secondary.” (25)

Regardless of the label we may want to impose on Kyger, these literary groups become relevant as far as they represent an important part of the author's lineage and literary influences. In Russo's interview, Kyger discusses how her early poetry was influenced by Charles Olson's “projective verse,”¹⁷³ which for the time being fulfilled her need of a “thoughtful, philosophic basis for where this new poetry was at.” In his manifesto, Olson emphasized the poet's need to use a method of composition based on intuition, where the syllable and the poet's breath were fundamental to the verse – “I take it, that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath” (241). Olson's ideas grow in part from Ezra Pound's dictates in “A Retrospect,” where he urged the dissolution of a poetic composition based on metrics, and William Carlos Williams' essay “The Poem as a Field of Action” (1948), where speech is given a liberating impulse against a constraining composition based on form. It is through Olson's “Projective Verse,” that Kyger “understood there was a breath and physicality to the line,” an idea she implements in *The Tapestry and the Web*, where there is a notable focus on articulation.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ In *Strange Big Moon*, Kyger wrote: “Olson's PROJECTIVE VERSE hits me like a whallop. Poetry is true stuff the way he writes of it. The *Head* by way of the EAR to the SYLLABLE. The *Heart* by way of the BREATH to the LINE.” (60) Similarly, Anne Waldman's “Eyes In All The Heads To Be Looked Out Of” – included in *Fast Speaking Woman: Chants & Essays* – honors the influence of Olson in her poetry, as well as her symbolic birth as a poet.

¹⁷⁴ In “Energy on the Page: Joanne Kyger in Conversation with Dale Smith” (1997), Kyger links her focus on articulation in *Tapestry* and poetics in general with Olson's “projective verse”: “You know how thoughts and words can drift through you but once you write them down, they've arrived. And when something beautiful arrives, you want to have enough coordination to transcribe it. You know, the HEAD to the EAR to the SYLLABLE. And the HEART to the BREATH to the LINE. Voice and Word.”

III.3.2. Uses of Myth: New Penelope?

In this section I look into the way – or ways – in which Joanne Kyger makes use of the Homeric myth and other sources to compose *The Tapestry and the Web*. By examining some of the poems included in the collection, I analyze the different strategies used by the author, both successfully and unsuccessfully, to offer a new rendition of Penelope and other mythical characters. These two aspects – the approach to myth and the reinterpretation of mythological characters – are not to be discussed as separate discourses, but as two closely related features through which Kyger opens up a space for the reevaluation of patriarchal truth.

Crucial to Kyger's collection is the foregrounding of Penelope as a character that has previously been essentially treated as secondary and/or complimentary of the main action performed by Odysseus. Part of her "Re-Visioning" – in Adrienne Rich's sense of seeing afresh – of Penelope, is concerned with breaking the feminine stereotype of the sexually passive woman. As a case in point, half way through her collection, Kyger includes an untitled short poem – in the form of a personal research note – which reads as follows:

Somewhere you can find reference to the fact that PAN was the
son of PENELOPE
Either as a result of a *god*
or as a result of ALL the suitors
who hung around while Odysseus was abroad. (29)

This poem chiefly introduces a revision based on Penelope's sexual freedom, placing her sexuality – notoriously absent in *The Odyssey* – at the center of her myth. As Amy Friedman observes, Kyger's Penelope is "more fueled by Eros than the nobly stoic spouse of Homer's epic",¹⁷⁵ (79) at the same time that she "re-evaluates the passivity of Penelope's patience for Odysseus" (80). Besides questioning Penelope's sexual passivity, this poem, together with "12.29 & 30 (Pan as the son of Penelope)," can be studied as examples of not only Kyger's re-interpretation of the position of women in classical myths, but also as the exposition of the delicate thread on which

¹⁷⁵ Amy L. Friedman, "Joanne Kyger, Beat Generation Poet: 'a Porcupine Traveling at the Speed of Light'," in *Reconstructing the Beats* (2004).

mythological knowledge functions. For instance, the use of the intentionally vague “Somewhere” as a source for the reference that the half-goat-half-man Pan was actually the son of Penelope benefits from the ever-changing and open nature of myths, whose oral tradition and popularity have facilitated change through appropriation and revision. These stories – or counter-stories – become alternative versions that resonate now in *The Tapestry and the Web*, and whose function is to destabilize rigid feminine conventions perpetuated through myth – in this case Homer’s version. In the classic reference guide, *Bell’s New Pantheon or Historical Dictionary of the Gods, Demi-Gods, Heroes, and Fabulous Personages of Antiquity, Etc.* (1790), Penelope is described mainly through Homer’s *The Odyssey* and other texts that, in keeping with the Greek epic, portray her as a faithful wife. Nonetheless, the *Pantheon* also includes “slander” (166) – as the author called it – against Penelope, questioning her loyalty and sexual demeanor: “Some say the reason why her gallants had not the last favour, was, because they preferred living well at Ulysses’s cost. Other authors pretend, that they really enjoyed her, and that the god Pan was the fruit of their amours; though some affirm that she conceived Pan, when Mercury, in the shape of a goat, cropt her virgin flower...”¹⁷⁶(166)

The *Pantheon*, with its now humorous, gossipy speech, might be one of the sources from which Kyger bases her arguments against a fixed interpretation of mythological truth. Other references to this version of the story include Servius’s commentary on Virgil’s *Aeneid*,¹⁷⁷ and Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*. Although other critics and commentators have stated that all these narratives mistook Penelope for the nymph Penelopeia of Arcadia – who is more often depicted as the mother of Pan by Hermes – Kyger takes advantage of the mixed origin and etymological misconceptions to expose the shaky foundations of myth and re-evaluate, at the same time, the validity of alternative versions. Hence, with vague, or even mistaken, references such as these in

¹⁷⁶ The text continues to offer references of authors who considered Penelope “a harlot, who, by her beauty, fired her lovers with licentious passion” (166), or those who affirmed she “prostituted her honour, and engaged in a wanton commerce with all her gallants” (166) conceiving Pan as a collective child-monster.

¹⁷⁷ Servius writes about Pan as the son of Penelope like this: “For when he [Odysseus] returned home to Ithaca after his wanderings, it is said that he found among his household gods Pan, who was reported to have been born from Penelope and all the suitors, as the name itself Pan seems to indicate; although other report that he was born from Hermes, who transformed himself into a goat and slept with Penelope.” (Servius in *Aen.* 2.44, quoted in Marilyn A. Katz’s *Penelope’s Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the ‘Odyssey’*)

mind, Kyger invites the reader to question Homer's text, a technique through which she is able to bend Penelope's story to her will. In the first stanzas of "12.29 & 30 (Pan as the son of Penelope)," Kyger entertains the possibility of Penelope's deceit:

Refresh my thoughts on Penelope again.
Just HOW
solitary was her wait?
I noticed Someone got to her that
barrel chested he-goat prancing
around w/ his reed pipes
is no fantasy of small talk.
More the result of BIG talk
and the absence of her husband. (31)

While in some poems the voice of the poet and the speaker – usually Penelope – fuse, alluding to a possible symbiosis, in this poem Kyger uses a detached and humorous voice which physically and chronologically separates her from Penelope. As someone who is confronted with two different versions of the same story – one told by Homer and the other just by "Someone" (31) – the poet imagines the Pan-as-her-son as a more plausible scenario for Penelope. Despite the terrible pains she must have suffered giving birth to a half-goat – "And what a cockeyed lecherous offspring. What a birth / THAT must have been. Did she turn away & sigh?" (31) – and despite the obstacles it presents – "And where did she hide her impudent monster?" (31) – Kyger believes this version of Penelope is probably closer to reality than Homer's rendition or, at least, does not discard it as "slander." One reason why Kyger chooses to entertain this idea might be the fact that in *The Odyssey*, as she puts it, Penelope is "a flat dimension character of beauty / keeping one task in mind and letting nothing *Human* touch her / – which is pretend." (31) Kyger sees in this poem, and in *The Tapestry and the Web* in general, beyond this flat dimension; for her Penelope "knew what she was doing," (31) which places her in an active position and in control of her own life.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ In this respect, Marylin A. Katz's *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in The Odyssey* (1991), focuses on the narrative inconsistencies – narrative disjunctions and textual disguise in her own terms – in Homer's text which allow for a potential different outcome of events. Hence, although Penelope has been mostly praised for her faithfulness, other critics and poets have read inconsistencies in the text as examples of feminine deceitfulness and adultery.

As the italicization of the “I” indicates, *The Tapestry and the Web* represents the poet’s own vision and re-writing of *The Odyssey*. This position is also justified in the poem “Iliad: Achilles does not die,” where Kyger highlights the role of Homer in the construction and validation of the myth by alluding to his personal choices when telling the story of the Trojan War. For example, while other accounts narrate the death of Achilles, Homer ends his tale with Hector’s funeral, leaving Achilles or Troy’s fate open. In Kyger’s words, Homer concludes by, “[I]eaving him alive abruptly that way / & the burial & the keening / for the other at the end of the dry plain” (42). Similarly, Kyger also stresses the open-ended position of Helen at the end of the epic – “& no more of Helen / who takes her back? soft as / a throw of silk”(42). Just as in “Pan as the Son of Penelope” she questioned the validity of myth by exposing several contradicting accounts, here she does so by bringing to the fore Homer’s own narrative decisions and even personal opinion. The latter seems to be the case with the representation of Paris – “how Homer dislikes Paris” (42) Kyger writes – who in the *Iliad* is cast as unskilled and coward based on, according to Kyger, Homer’s personal dislike of him.

By alluding to the tension created by other narratives which have contested the representation of Homer’s Penelope in this poem, as well as Homer’s treatment of Paris and Achilles in *The Iliad*, Kyger contextualizes her use and appropriation of mythological sources within a tradition of revision.¹⁸¹ In the rest of this section, I look into the ways in which Joanne Kyger develops the Homeric myth, paying special attention to the position of Penelope and women in her poems, and the different strategies she uses to portray different situations – ancient and contemporary – of female oppression.

Even though “12.29 & 30 (Pan as the son of Penelope)” flirts with the idea, not only of a sexually active, but also of a Penelope plotting against Odysseus’s safe return, this is the poem that most radically reinterprets the Homeric myth in Kyger’s collection. The majority of the remaining poems, referring both directly and indirectly to the myth,

¹⁸¹ Other feminist approaches to Penelope and the *Odyssey* have also encouraged the uncertainty that lies behind Penelope’s actions and thoughts – for instance the patience versus infidelity plot. As Richard Heitman writes in *Taking Her Seriously: Penelope & the Plot of Homer’s Odyssey* (2005), “[o]ne approach promoted by feminists in the last fifteen years partly avoids the temptation to put words in Penelope’s mouth. This approach, which has itself profited greatly from the work on *mêtis*, eagerly embrace the postmodernist virtue of indeterminacy. It does not insist that Penelope is always lying; rather, it holds that we can never be certain whether she is or not.” (7)

are composed around the notion of female passivity and subordination to male dominance, often expressing a yet unachieved state of freedom. For example, in “Tapestry,” Kyger returns to the nature and construction of myth, alluding to the process by which some things become part of myth, while others are ignored. As images immortalized in the tapestry, the poem includes:

The anticipation of one
grey hound
his front
legs raised

The faces of
five huntsmen
show
the legend (14)

These images, that as the title of the poem suggests, have been canonized as they were woven into a tapestry, most probably, by a woman, depict solely masculine experience. In a similar fashion, the weaver depicts “[a] million leaves / and flowers / placed into / life they / are urgent.” (14), creating a piece of art that reflects life outside her own experience. As the speaker – Penelope or a collective mythical woman – laments, while she is the one turning his story into history, “to drink I / must bow / down / before you” (14). That inferior position is what causes her to be left out of myth, or even the stories she weaves down:

The mother has
blest us and I
am surrounded
by the life
not of this
story (14)

Related to this notion – and in opposition to the approach adopted in the “Pan” poems – myth is at times represented as a discourse too established and fixed within

patriarchy to allow women to grow. In the poem “What new ways to look at stars,”¹⁸² Kyger depicts a Penelope looking at the stars and hoping to find a new design out of the destiny myth bonds her to. Citing Aristotle’s theories of the balance and order in the cosmos, as well as Democritus’ atomic hypothesis – the universe is composed of indestructible atoms and of the void between them – the speaker examines her present situation and her lack of power to produce effective change. As she states, “the offering is limited / the size of my hand cupped / is small to drink from.” (27) In this context of predestined lives, being part of the equilibrium of a universe populated with matter and bodies composed of unchanging atoms, the poem concludes, not with a solution or alternative, but with a cry for change:

Repeat and
repeat again
over
the long cry of the
bird at night
what new way to
change its song. (27)

Similarly, in the poem “Look the bird is making plans” Kyger goes back to theme of domesticity and female confinement introduced in “The Maze”, a topic that I will get back to in the next section, as it often serves as a link between the mythological references and the poet’s own experience in the collection. In this poem, the speaker’s house is occupied by a bird which, at first, is described as taking something which belongs to her – “poking at crumbs in the kitchen / using *our* toilet” (45). It is in this moment of reclaiming her property that she realizes that her house has turned into her cage. Using the – rather worn – bird-freedom metaphor, the speaker teases the bird, suggesting they exchange places: “Keep the house / I’ll / go bird you keep this place” (45). In similar terms, the house becomes a cage where the she/bird is “pushing & scratching to get out;” (45) an enclosed space from where the outside world is barely visible – “thru the cracks in the batten / where the light comes in after storms / & the weeds tear thru in August” (45). At the end of the poem, once the bird leaves, rejecting

¹⁸² In *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour* (2003), Bill Morgan writes that in “Potrero meadows, Joanne Kyger and Jack Spicer found a new way to look at the stars, by laying flat on their backs, somewhat tipsy, ‘with a rip in the seat of your leotards’.” (216)

her proposal, the speaker initiates – to continue with the bird metaphor – her flight. Half woman, half bird, she resolves to leave: “& you claw foot fix it / fix it I’m going.” (45)

All of these poems, “Tapestry,” “What new way of looking at the stars,” and “Look the bird is making plans,” allude to themes of female subordination and silence, either giving expression to women’s longed for freedom or by initiating the process of change. However, none of these poems offer alternative female models or draw directly from the Greek myth. Rather than re-writing the story of Penelope per se, the function of these poems is to articulate processes or states of female subordination present in *The Odyssey* and relevant – unfortunately – to the time in which Kyger wrote them and even to the contemporary reader. Even when Kyger writes more evidently about Penelope and Odysseus, as in the “The Odyssey Poems,” she does not follow the two previous variations of the myth – madness in “The Maze” and adultery in “Pan as the son of Penelope – but offers a more nuanced re-telling of the myth in which socio-cultural elements play with or against a feminist revision. As an entry in her published journals seems to indicate, what she wanted to do was to “penetrate (Penelope) the depth found within, actual feeling, go into. Not idealistically, not ideas of psychological sort.” (*Strange Big Moon* 43)

The two poems that more directly deal with Homer’s myth are “The Odyssey Poems” and “A Song in the Rope.” Both of them, though, play according to the rules imposed by Homer, refocusing rather than altering altogether the plotline. In “A Song in the Rope,” for instance, Kyger reenacts the scene with the sirens in Book XII of *The Odyssey*. Nevertheless, adopting a detached position as a person outside the Homeric epic, Kyger is able to judge Odysseus’ actions while traveling by questioning to what extent he was played by divine forces, and whether or not he had free will. Using the alluring song of the sirens, the poet considers the temptation Odysseus was exposed to while Penelope waited for him:

A song in the rope taut against the wind

A song in the wire taut against the wind

Needless to say this could have been his very course

He *did*

travel far away

from where she waited (32)

Far away from Penelope, and from his marital obligations – if he ever felt he had some – the many temptations Odysseus encounters could be interpreted as inevitable but also longed for.¹⁸³ Despite the supernatural powers the sirens' songs seem to have, that is, despite all the temptations Odysseus might be exposed to, the speaker suggests that there is always a way to avoid them – “a matter of riding out the storm” (32) – that is, if he wishes to. Following Circe's advice, Odysseus has himself tied up to the mast in order to listen to the sirens' song without physically being able to act upon it; but that, as Kyger states, might be the real danger:

Now wind is another matter
that is who he had to close his ears to

and worse at night the sound, I am You, I am You, Join. (32)

The wind in these verses might allude to the calm of the sea described book XXII of *The Odyssey* right before the songs of the sirens can be heard – “Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm came over all the sea, as though some power lulled the swell” (214) – but also to the temptations that are outside the influence of divine external forces, and that might lead Odysseus's ship away from Ithaca. The element of free will is reinforced at the end of the poem with the use of a first personal pronoun, embodying Odysseus himself, as the ship passes sirens' island:

I am watching what is happening now
it seems that water is being pushed from both sides of the boat
as we make our passage thru it.
We don't have to stop

And can hardly blame our follies to the breeze. (32)

Using Odysseus voice to make a point about human will power against supposedly supernatural temptations, Kyger simultaneously dismantles – or at least

¹⁸³ For a feminist reinterpretation of Odysseus see Lillian Doherty's *Siren's Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (1995).

casts a doubt over – the hero’s loyalty in the epic. Determining Odysseus’s free will becomes important in the context of other events that take place in *The Odyssey*, and that obscure his position as husband. For example, the seven years he stays imprisoned by the nymph Calypso in the island of Ogygia, enchanted by her songs and forced to be her lover and husband, are read differently when one does not “blame follies to the breeze” (32) and sees Odysseus as responsible for his own actions. This vision is not completely unsupported by Homer’s epic, as he tells it, Odysseus leaves the island not only because the spell was broken, but because he finally saw “[t]he sweet days of his life time / were running out in anguish over his exile, for long ago the nymph had ceased to please.” (85) Thus, in this poem, without modifying the basic components of *The Odyssey*, Kyger transforms the way they are often interpreted, opening up different readings found in the subtext of Homer’s epic, as well as in other texts that draw from the same myth – as it was the case with “Pan as the Son of Penelope.”

In much the same way, “The Odyssey Poems,” divided in six sections, uses Homer’s *The Odyssey* as a platform from which to deepen into Penelope’s story without radically changing it. Section I of the poem, entitled “The Plan,” opens with the line “Where ever you go I am with you.’/ and bring you back,” (53) which echoes the words God tells Jacob in Genesis 28:15 by which the Promised Land is reassured – just as the Israelites were to return to the promised land, so is Odysseus getting back to Ithaca. Hence, Kyger’s poem opens up in Book XIII of *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus is left asleep on the shores of Ithaca and upon waking up does not recognize his land:

lifting them asleep onto the land
 he has returned to
 and doesn’t know where he is.
 outside of San Francisco¹⁸⁴
 the long paths and eucalyptus
 are another country (53)

In addition, emphasizing Odysseus’ deceptive skills, describing him as “a liar / from the bottom of his heart” (53), the speaker goes on to describe his disguise as a

¹⁸⁴ This reference to San Francisco and its long paths of eucalyptus, that were brought from Europe via Australia around 1870s – the “other country” of the poem – is an example of how Kyger uses myth as a layout for her own experiences, a topic I will deal with in more detail in the next section.

beggar – “the way he dresses / in old clothes and moves like an old man” (53) – which takes us to the conclusion that “no one knows the real facts” (53) of his story, as lies and camouflage are essential to his strategy. In part II of the poem, Kyger depicts the reunion of Odysseus – still in his beggar disguise – with the old friend and swineherd Eumaeus, who has remained loyal to Odysseus, and tells him about the way the suitors are taking advantage of his riches and eating his food. Using quotes from *The Odyssey*, Kyger delineates the conversation between the two men and Athena’s words to Odysseus, which encourage the hero to get ready to go home and execute his revenge on the suitors.

Part III also opens with Athena’s words, this time to Odysseus’s son Telemachus, who goes back to Ithaca where the suitors are plotting to kill him – “He wonders whether he will be caught or get through alive” (55). As an *Odyssey* in-a-nutshell, Kyger continues to summarize the events told in Homer’s text without imposing noticeable changes to the plotline: Telemachus leaves Sparta, accepts presents from Menelaus and Helen – “great robe, embroidered by herself” (55) – sails to Ithaca and upon arriving visits Eumaeus. Even the image of the eagle carrying a goose – which Helen interprets as an omen that Odysseus is back and will kill the suitors – is represented in Kyger’s poem.

Part IV of the poem, subtitled “Possibilities,” takes us to Penelope, who all of a sudden has decided she will finally agree to marry one of the suitors. The subtle way in which Kyger uses the Homeric myth can be appreciated in the description of Penelope at this stage. Following *The Odyssey*, Kyger writes:

Still after 15 years or more she doesn’t know
and may go off with the likeliest and most generous suitor

the best of the lot comes from the corn and grass lands,
wise, and she gives him approval

But what’s on her mind? (56)

Alluding to Penelope’s hidden motivations for her actions at this point, Kyger refocuses attention into Penelope as an independent, powerful figure; rather than just waiting for Odysseus to come back and save her by killing the suitors, Kyger

emphasizes her potential for scheming and spurring Odysseus into action. In the poem, Penelope “stands against a pillar of the house, / watching and planning.” (56) She might be planning the death of the suitors, who are described as insolent and insulting, devouring her food, as in the following verses:

quit eating the coffee and cake and cottage cheese
 put the lid on the peanut butter jar
 sandwiches made of cucumber, stop eating the *food!* (56)

Using *The Odyssey* as a structure, in *The Tapestry and the Web* Kyger introduces clear references to the text – either by quoting from it or by summarizing the content – but also uses more ambiguous, or personal, references which foreground the position of the poet as re-teller of the story; as the one weaving and unweaving Homer’s text. For example, the lines, “you mark how high you can go / coming back to his opinion of her or hers of him,” (57) can work both inside and outside the narrative, as an allusion to Penelope’s and Odysseus’s designs for each other, or as the poetic voice’s commentary on its own degree of trust toward the mythic characters.

In part V of “The Odyssey Poems”, Kyger deviates from *The Odyssey* to disclose what Penelope was doing in her room while Odysseus and company killed the suitors and maidens. Stating that according to Homer’s text Penelope’s “one relief is to weep and sigh,” (57) this poem depicts a half dream, half nightmare, hallucinatory experience that takes place after Telemachus orders his mother to her room,¹⁸⁵ and Athena puts her to sleep. Deviating, thus, from the bloody scene of Odysseus’s vengeance and rise to power depicted in *The Odyssey*, Kyger chooses to focus on Penelope’s state of imposed distance from the events. The poem reads:

Am I to stay
 winding and coming back, goes out and sees, dreams
 are awkward things
 a cigarette falls behind the bed
 I *can’t* get out of bed (57)

¹⁸⁵ Sending her off to do things more relevant to her sex – even when the plot against the suitors could not have been done without her – in *The Odyssey* Telemachus tells Penelope: “Return to your own hall. Tend your spindle. Tend your loom. Direct your maids at work. This question of the bow will be for men to settle, most of all me. I am master here.” (402)

Unable to move because of the spell Athena has cast on her, Penelope struggles to distinguish reality from dreams – or maybe to understand the reality of dreams – as the image of the eagle is brought up again. This time, “an eagle takes a terrified dove,” (57) which alludes both to Penelope’s dream of the killing of her “pets” by Odysseus and as an omen the suitors have of their own death when plotting to kill Telemachus. Kyger’s use of disconnected dream-like images, together with the allusion to dreams as “awkward” things, complicate a simplistic reading of *The Odyssey* by insinuating Penelope could also be mourning the death of the suitors:

she pushes
where where are the walls,
out of the window the poetry, dishes broken, things torn up, please
please don’t weep anymore.
the suitors are sickened w/blood, look
how they decay, kill them all
an eagle takes a terrified dove (57)

The last section of “The Odyssey Poems,” offers a vision of Penelope as, once more, trapped in the same routine of waiting, as if things did not change at all after Odysseus’ arrival – “Here it is, the last day. and what has happened,” (58). Kyger highlights in this section Penelope’s position towards her place in the epic; taking it “as a matter of course” (57), that Odysseus’s will leave again soon to fulfill Tiresias prophecy.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, when Odysseus tells her to go to her room – just as his son did – she does as told – “up to your room now to wait a while he tells her / and she does what he says. / I guess it’s good to know where you’re going” (57). Not condemning Penelope for her faults, or her lack of rebelliousness, Kyger tries to understand the context of her imprisonment, stating that she thinks “she is happy now. / her household is restored” (57). Kyger’s feminism in this subtle revision, then, does not work by changing the rules of patriarchal structures to accommodate a radical – utopian –

¹⁸⁶ Kyger also stresses the fact that Penelope was asleep while her maids were killed – “12 ladies were hung by the neck” (57). Atwood in *The Penelopiad* was also interested in exposing the death of the maids. As she herself puts it in the introduction: “I’ve chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of *The Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn’t hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I’ve always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself.” (xv)

liberated woman, but by exposing a situation of imprisonment and subordination which is universalized to include also her own experience.

In this respect, Joanne Kyger might be pointing towards an early stage of poststructuralist feminism. Even though concepts of oppression/liberation are dealt with in the *Tapestry and the Web*, the fact that she avoids, in the majority of the poems, a radical revision of Penelope totally freed from her oppressor/s, can be interpreted as an understanding of the kind of feminism that necessarily operates within patriarchy. Thus, Kyger's Penelope might agree, as Toril Moi puts it, that "since we cannot escape power, we can only undermine it from within." (*What is a Woman? And Other Essays* 58) As Ronna Johnson and Brenda Knight have argued, Kyger's feminism in this collection is more subtly articulated than that of other female Beat authors:

Kyger's poetry manifests an interest in the burdens imposed and the perspectives permitted by gender and the feminine, as in her revision of Penelope's story in "The Odyssey Poems" (Tapestry 53-61). However, her gendered emphasis is more understated than the pronouncements of di Prima, or the insistences of Johnson, or the decrees of Martinelli. She takes an oblique way through women's experiences and perspectives and tells it slant in the Dickensonian tradition. (*Breaking the Rule of Cool* 134)

In this respect, in *Tapestry and the Web*, Joanne Kyger revises *The Odyssey* in much the same way that Margaret Atwood revised the Orpheus myth in "Orpheus" and "Eurydice" in *Interlunar* (1984). Both Kyger and Atwood provide the traditionally secondary characters in their myths – Penelope and Eurydice respectively – with a revitalized energy that places them at the center of the narrative. Just as Eurydice is no longer just Orpheus's beloved in Atwood's revision, Kyger's Penelope becomes much more active than her extremely patient and faithful counterpart in Homer's version, but they are still trapped within the patriarchal myth.¹⁸⁷ Joanne Kyger, as the analysis of

¹⁸⁷ In the first chapter of *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Feminist Philosophy* (1995), Adriana Cavarero also changes the focus of the *Odyssey* to foreground Penelope's position. While avoiding rewriting the myth per se, Cavarero reads Penelope's actions – her weaving and unweaving and the secluded space where she weaves – as a way to subvert her gender role. Similarly, in *Meadowlands* (1996), Louise Glück foregrounds the experience of Penelope but also avoids rewriting her as completely liberated. As Elizabeth Frost wrote in a review, "Glück gives us neither the patient Penelope of Homer nor the resourceful Penelope of feminist revisions. Her heroine is both long-suffering and self-punishing; her partner taunts and torments her" (1996).

these poems has shown, does not intend to undermine *The Odyssey* by tearing its structure and themes; nor does she rewrite Penelope as a character completely isolated from the narrative she was taken from. By following Homer's epic to include subtle deviations and changes of focus, Kyger manages to destabilize the role of women in the epic, at the same time that she validates courses of action outside the patriarchal domain *The Odyssey* represents.

III.3.3. Mythologizing the Self

How big was the distance of Troy
& the battlefield, the shoreline
of ships – does it stretch as far
as the city of Kyoto
(Kyger, "Iliad: Achilles does not die" 42)

In an interview documented in *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, Kyger describes reading Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as a moment that inspired her writing of *The Tapestry and the Web*. Published in 1949, Campbell's book follows the journey of the archetypal hero in mythologies around the world and strips down to their core related myths in several cultures; that core, reduced to a basic or fundamental structure, is what he called the "monomyth",¹⁸⁸ which functions as a myth that crosses cultural barriers and encompasses human experience. For Kyger, Campbell's use of myth meant the opening entrance to old narratives that could be used to tell other stories – both personal and collective. As she has put it, she "understood that it was possible to have this narrative, this old narrative that could go through your life that was common to all humans. And you saw your life in terms of that." (*Cool* 144) Penelope's myth, then, is used as a canvas and starting point from which to give form to her life and, by using a form that has been kept alive mainly through re-telling, she is using a formula through which the personal has the potential of being universal. In this section, I analyze the poems in *The Tapestry and the Web* in which Kyger's own experience features prominently both through the use of personal references that stand on their

¹⁸⁸ In Campbell's words: "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation – initiation – return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth." (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 23)

own, or by positioning herself and her own experience in relation to events or characters in *The Odyssey*.¹⁸⁹

The emphasis on the personal in Kyger's poetry, and in *The Tapestry and the Web* in particular, has been previously noted by scholars. For instance, Amy L. Friedman notes how in this collection, Kyger "revisits and revises Homeric epic myth, adding layers of personal, reflective imagery and references. The backdrop to the compositions of her poems gives a snapshot of the West Coast Beat scene" (*Reconstructing*, 79). Similarly, Linda Russo has stated that in *Tapestry*, "[t]hrough the figure of Penelope, Kyger's own life could be seen and worked upon a mythic frame".¹⁹⁰ (*Girls Who Wore Black* 187) Davidson made the link between myth and Kyger's experience more evident by arguing that as a female poet surrounded by masculine literary egos, she might be identifying with Penelope:

Underlying Kyger's poetics of immediacy are mythopoeic and theological concerns that serve to ground the present in a larger narrative. In many of her early poems she makes use of a mythical persona (Persephone, Penelope, Circe) through whom she may examine her own life [...] Kyger, in the guise of Penelope, is also "creating herself," to the extent that mythological sources that undergird the poem are mixed with references to her personal life. (*San Francisco Renaissance* 189-191)

Joanne Kyger saw another added value to the use of *The Odyssey* as a structure to represent her own experience; for her, it took her "out of the dangers of any confessional writing,"¹⁹¹ (*Cool* 144) which she saw as limiting for women as it trapped them within a "particular female identity" (*Cool* 144). This might have been especially

¹⁸⁹ Separating the analysis of *The Tapestry and the Web* into two distinct categories – uses of myth and personal myth – might be problematic because, as it is shown in this section, Kyger's personal myth functions at the same level of the classical myth, often using the latter as a structure from where to analyze what she sees as universal female situations. Bearing in mind this interconnectedness, the aim of this section is to emphasize the ways in which Kyger uses myth to explore the position of women in patriarchy, an impetus that both di Prima and Waldman share – as the following sections demonstrate.

¹⁹⁰ She similarly adds that, "[s]he could keep herself 'Outside' while dwelling 'inside' myth, using poems as a structure in which to observe her situation as an American poet/wife abroad at a distance that provided some perspective on the difficulties and dissatisfactions associated with her roles" (*Girls Who Wore Black* 187).

¹⁹¹ According to Alice Notley, "one of Kyger's unusual skills is to be personal and not confessional [...] the details are less in names than in the bite and color of experience-in-progress" (*Coming After* 20).

important to Kyger as a woman writing in a predominantly male literary environment. Using classical myth as a medium to give expression to her own experience, at the same time that she voiced proto-feminist concerns about women's independence and literary ambition, granted her the opportunity to be heard by her male counterparts, undermining the position of women within patriarchy by using its own tools.

All of the references to her personal life in *The Tapestry and the Web* and those mingled with the Greek epic correspond – roughly speaking – to the beginning of her literary career and marriage to Gary Snyder in the early 1960s. In this respect, a reading of *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journals 1960-1964*, offers valuable insight into the literary and personal circumstances under which *Tapestry* was written, which could be summarized as those of an aspiring writer in search for her voice and of a newly-wed struggling with her position within marriage. As Anne Waldman writes in the foreword to *Strange Big Moon*, at the time of writing the journals, Kyger “has yet to publish *The Tapestry and the Web*, hints and murmurs of which resonate through the poetry and thinking of the *Journals*” (viii).

These “hints and murmurs” take several forms in the journals, but often deal with Kyger's constant preoccupation with the form and content of her writing, as well as with the practice, process and actual time devoted to writing. For instance, the journals capture her early literary ambition and frustration – in March 1960 she wrote, “I wish I could explode / in print” (21) – together with the development of her poetics: “[a]nd in Zazen the rain: trying to listen / be free of the associative thought or be aware that I am thinking – impossible but twice to clear the ear. Holding your breath in your ear.” (19) More relevant to this section, the journals also attest to Kyger's commitment to the image of the tapestry and the presence of the weaver, which can be analyzed as encompassing female subordination – Penelope's waiting – but also female creativity and independence – tapestry as art and self-creation. In an early entry, she sketches a vague plan – which is described as being interrupted by other activities – to write a poem on tapestry:

Plans for things – like that first bath. Have you already done them with the plan
– at any rate you are kept from the experience and it is the spontaneity which is
near poetry or its source.

Tapestry.

something
 flowers
 love.
 and of course the flower does. (12)

Similarly, although not all the poems in the collection take this position, the journals point to a connection between Kyger and Penelope. In an entry written in May 1960, overwhelmed with her married life, she asked herself: “[i]s the woman who waits the woman who weaves?” (32). This question draws attention to the incongruities found in traditional representations of Penelope; while she passively waits – acting according to traditional conventions of femininity – she is also actively working on her craft, which may or may not work within the establishment.¹⁹² If the one who waits is also the one who weaves, then her poems can become her way out of a designated space. Entries such as this one make the metaphor of poem as tapestry explicit:

The weaving of ideas thru the poem. Chair is Gary’s new one. Also constant preoccupation in my mind of the chair Penelope or the weaver sits in –

[...] she waits.
 for him to return .the back
 of the chair cupped
 a hand a shell. (26-27)

As these entries suggest, Penelope’s story is not only relevant to the author as an isolated example of female creativity under patriarchy, but as a link to a contemporary situation for women and women artists. For these reasons, it comes as no surprise that many of the poems in Kyger’s collection use her own experience and a social background to deal with many of the themes analyzed in the previous section. For example, the short poem “Waiting,” works as a very brief update of the theme of female expectancy in *The Odyssey*:

Over the lilacs won’t he come home
 to at least rest tonight, I want to see

¹⁹² As I showed in the last section, Kyger is interested in showing both a Penelope that weaves and plans alternatives to the established myth – e.g. she begets Pan or places obstacles in Odysseus’s way – and also one that falls within traditional categories of feminine faithfulness and passivity.

the round car safe in the driveway, cinders
and the moon over head (48)

Occupying the position of a contemporary Penelope, the speaker waits for the man to come home and restore her household even if, just as the mythical Penelope, she knows it is only a temporary situation. This poem, engaging in a conventional interpretation of myth in which the speaker identifies herself with the character, is placed in opposition to poems such as “Waiting Again,” where there is a physical and psychological distance between the poet and the mythical figure:

waiting again
what for

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

Plucking threads
as if they were strings of a harp (33)

In this case the speaker questions the theme of waiting in the classical myth, and discards it as a non-valid expression of her experience – nothing the sea can bring to her will make her richer. Nonetheless, she does contemplate the weaving done by two women, the Goddess Athena and the mortal Penelope, an activity that runs parallel to their waiting and that is connected to an active use of creativity. For Friedman, this poem is an example of Kyger’s exploration of “burgeoning female creativity” (*Reconstructing* 80), while Johnson and Grace read it as an example of Kyger’s cool distant style – following the “Dickensonian tradition” (Cool 134) – and of her self-identification “with mortal and divine weavers” (134). Besides the connection between composing poems and weaving, this poem also shows Kyger’s freedom to focus on those aspects of the myth that are relevant to her. Although Athena, as Goddess of War and guide to heroes, features in *The Odyssey* as an important stratagem and initiator of action, Kyger is interested in aligning Penelope and herself to the powerful Goddess by portraying her facet as the weaver Goddess, not the Goddess of War. In addition, an

entry in *Strange Big Moon* points to Kyger's development of her poetics and the use of myth and characters; after quoting the poem, Kyger wrote in her journal: "The skill of revealing a story. *Constructing*. Dealing with us as if we were puppets to be picked up and added to a cast". (22) These lines speak to Kyger's interest in analyzing the process through which stories are created, a process especially relevant to the analysis of myth and the uses of myth in literature. By focusing on the weaving and not the waiting, she is renouncing stereotypes of female passivity in favor of the creative and productive woman/goddess.

In "The Long Poem," where dreams and the unconscious are explored as sites of poetic creativity, Kyger also fights against the representation of the goddess as passive and bound to domesticity. Frantically running away from a feminine presence – "waiting, lurking / in the underbrush/her mouth, / teeth" (21) – that pursues her, the speaker suddenly finds herself in a house-trap:

Sick
 I see the house it
 has no light she
 steps across the door.
 I have not come here to die
 We wage a war
 She has placed on the shelves
 honey and dried stuff for the winter
 and bound me down to my chair
 Yet I have not come here to die (21-22)

Through the parallel of death with domesticity, the poet exposes a mechanism of female imprisonment which is, in addition, so strongly encoded in society that it even turns women against each other – it is a war she is fighting with the female presence in the poem. The speaker's weapon against this image is her own words, which are used to free herself and counterattack constraining representation of femininity. Rejecting this vision in favor of her own creation, she writes:

I take nothing from her
 every thread is my own,

falls across my feet and
into the corners of the room
there is much to tell (22)

Once again, the poem-as-craft, as weaving words to tell stories of women, is given a prominent and powerful role. Through her craft, she effectively destabilizes the threatening female presence – “there is skill in my unfolding that frightens her / Who is the prisoner” (22) – which can be seen as patriarchal imposition of feminine standards. The notion of imprisonment born out of restrictive notions of femininity or by the perpetuation of conventional female roles is further explored in *The Tapestry and the Web*, often serving as a link between mythical and contemporary discourses. Such a process can be observed through the analysis of the poems “Tapestry” and “My Sister Evelyne.” In the former, Kyger zooms in on a detail in a woven tapestry which is part of the collection known as the “*Hunt of the Unicorn*,” consisting of seven tapestries dating back to the 15th Century and believed to have been woven in the Netherlands – currently exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Giving a quite accurate description of the tapestry – “Dealing with the detail / on the fragment of the fifth / Tapestry” – Kyger describes the maid:

[...] the maid whose head
is turned sideways her eyes
shifted upwards in what
seems
coquettish towards
the sound of the
hunter’s horn the
capture
then of the
unicorn. Her hair is uncombed
and hand
raised up in a lackadaisical gesture

meaning all's well.¹⁹³ (40)



Figure 6. Two of the surviving fragments of the Mystic Capture of the Unicorn

For Kyger, the maiden becomes a woven symbol of female imprisonment by masculine dominance in historical, religious and mythological discourses. Using the last four verses of her poem to break the detailed description she has given, she now uses her own perception to clearly see behind the maid's tired smile to portray an abused woman; "You can tell" she writes (40), "Puffeyes and the broken turned nose. / Searching / for bigger & better things" (40). Breaking the idyllic female description with a harsh reality of gender violence, Kyger points to the unexpected danger of the mythical representation of femininity. As John Whalen-Bridge aptly states, in this poem, "the literary topos of mystical experience is demythologized: idealized feminine models are presented as wreckage in the wake of an abusive man" (228).¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ The maid is, in fact, making a signal to the hunter to let him know the unicorn is ready to be captured. Unicorns were believed to be extremely powerful animals that could not be captured by force; but they would come willingly to a virgin maiden who would be able to tame them. As Margaret B. Freeman writes in *The Unicorn Tapestries* (1983), this tapestry depicts how the unicorn, "[e]nclosed by a rose-covered fence [...] with only a suggestion of wilderness in his eye, is fondled by the maiden, whose delicate hands rests on his mane. The maiden's pert companion signals to the horn-blowing hunter that the unicorn may now be captured." (13) The unicorn, representing Christ, comes to be tamed and made human through a virgin maid, representing Virgin Mary.

¹⁹⁴ "The Sexual Politics of Divine Femininity: TÄRÄ in Transition in Gary Snyder's Poetry" (2007).

A similarly dissatisfying and oppressive situation for women is given in “My Sister Evelyne,” a poem in which the author extrapolates and updates themes explored in her revision of *The Odyssey*, bringing them closer to her own experience. Both the contemporaneity of the poem and the author’s experience are established in the first lines, which read as the introduction to an entry in her journals: “Sarnath / Tuesday, February 13 / near the evening, 5:05.” (38) In the poem, the image of a child with a tantrum rolling on the ground reminds the speaker of her sister’s frequent outbursts as a child. The first part of the poem describes a tiring child in a constant state of distress – “every morning in Illinois / screeching / on the kitchen floor” (38); who is similarly upset when she is given a doll as a present – “black eyes crossed / in rage. / all of us waiting for gratitude”(38). Other memories which compose this poem depict her as passive and reticent, for instance, being carried by her father from the harness of her “green snow / suit straining, pink cheeks / chapped” (38); or sitting down so quietly at the speaker’s fourteenth birthday that they thought she was ill. These images of her childhood are contrasted with her adulthood, depicted in the last verses:

Louise is her middle name
a foul tongued determination
brought material rewards for her
an extra piece of meat, TV dinners served
in the dark, expensive shoes.
perfect teeth (39)

As Grace and Johnson comment, “My sister Evelyne” depicts the “imprisonment of white, middle-class women of the 1950s, dependent on wily arts for survival” (*Cool* 135) and, just as “Tapestry,” it voices Kyger’s concerns for the oppressive and narrow position women are often forced to occupy in society. In the first part of the poem, the constantly raging child is unimpressed with the situations she faces; quiet family breakfasts, dolls, school and birthday parties cause her distress. Kyger uses the projective verse to single out and emphasize words such as, “rolling,” “screeching,” “in despair,” and “in rage” – all of which would ideally stand in opposition to typical everyday situations of a white middle class girl. Seen in this light, the little acts of rebelliousness can be seen as early attempts to break free which were later silenced and turned into accepted modes of female “foul tongued determination” (39) to fulfill their

assigned role in society. In addition, Evelyne is portrayed as the recipient of other people's actions, so that her anger is seen as a (re)action to these – “when we gave her a new rubber doll / in despair” (38), “She had a plaid dress / that we took her to school in” (38). The “we” in this poem can be placed in parallel to the patriarchal societal constrains that placed the maid in “Tapestry” in a feigned position of obliviousness – one that Kyger saw through. Just like the maid in the tapestry, the screaming and kicking Evelyne might have been dreaming of “bigger & better things” (40). But they see themselves trapped in by the same mechanism of female oppression, showing that gender violence and negative female stereotypes are dangerous and fully current.

In other poems such as “Caption for Miniature” and “It Is Lonely,” Kyger makes use of a humorous, ironic speech through which she aims at deconstructing gender stereotypes. In “Caption for Miniature,” the poet draws from her personal experience while travelling in India with Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, to expose discrimination against women. The poem begins with the speaker being denied entrance to a temple – “he says you cant come in / hold the baby under your saree” (37).¹⁹⁵ Even if she came in search of spiritual enlightenment as her masculine fellow travelers did, her gender – reduced to her clothing and motherhood in this poem – acts in detriment to her ambition. As if to compensate for this prohibition, the speaker enumerates the different things she will do while waiting for them to get out:

and I'm going to sit up here and watch you
 in this purple lined tower of
 mine, and look at the fruit tree
 and watch all the red and yellow pears and
 cherries jiggle when it lightnings and
 after while maybe I'll have
 the chokidar bring up some tea and a plum

¹⁹⁵ In *Tracking the Serpent*, Janine Pommy Vega also depicts a similar act of gender-based discrimination when she is not allowed entrance to a temple. While Kyger copes with this situation by emphasizing the silver lining of the prohibition – what she can do instead of going inside the temple – Vega, after a long journey by foot in India, feels the need to enter the temple Pasupatinath to truly honor the Goddess – in this case the female side of Shiva – falsely believing that that way she would be “completing a circle.” (187) After having been denied access – for being a westerner and a female – she finally realizes that since the Goddess is everywhere and it is impossible to confine her to a space, there is no need for her to go “hammering on the doors of any temple, where she might be celebrated but more than likely wasn't.” (188)

and a whole bunch of candy and stuff (37)

Trying to turn tables on her situation, the speaker focuses on the silver lining of her subordination, ordering the men to “just better stay down there / and get all crummy and muddy” (37). However, as the colloquial – almost childish – style seems to indicate, her words are more the result of an angry outburst than the description of a desired or favorable situation for women. As the title of the poem suggests, this might just be the subtitle to a representation of women in small scale, rather than the product of a fully liberated female body and consciousness.

In much the same way, in “It Is Lonely,” Kyger uses humor to escape imposed domesticity and traditional gender roles for the feminine sex. Getting back to the theme of waiting she draws from Penelope’s position in *The Odyssey*, Kyger focuses in this poem on her life as newly-wed in a foreign country¹⁹⁶ – Japan – where she often found herself alone while Gary Snyder practiced Zazen.¹⁹⁷ Describing her life at home, she states, “It is lonely / I must draw water from the well 75 buckets for the bath” (35). This somewhat burdensome situation is reversed as the speaker relates how she carries out this task:

I mix a drink – gin, fizz water, lemon juice, a spoonful
of strawberry jam

And place it in a champagne glass – it is hard work
to make the bath

And my winter clothes are dusty and should be put away
In storage. (35)

Through the use of irony, and by avoiding doing household chores, the poet counterattacks – just as she did in “Caption for Miniature” – an adverse, repressive

¹⁹⁶ To her new status as a married woman, the fact of being in a foreign country is added to her discomfort. The last two verses of the poem point to a feeling of alienation from Japan: “Outside outside are the crickets and frogs in the rice fields / Large black butterflies like birds” (35).

¹⁹⁷ In an early entry in *Strange Big Moon* she writes, “It is difficult being here such a short time to be left alone for 13 hours at a stretch for 3 days out of the week not yet understanding the system of transportation and being such an ass I haven’t realized and prepared for such a position [...] Also I wish I weren’t married at all I feel trapped.” (10)

situation for women. Even if the result is not completely satisfactory, the poem becomes a statement of her desire for freedom, boosted by her own determination to refuse the role assigned to her by society: “Have I lost all values I wonder / the world is slippery to hold on to / When you begin to deny it” (35). In an entry written in her journals, dating Tuesday 5.17.60, Kyger refers to the well from which she drew the water for the bath and reflects on how her personal life affected the composition of her poetry:

Drawing water from the well for the bath Monday night I became aware of what I was doing in the sense of how it affects me in poetry: water – Not the water of the ocean it is the water of the earth. Gary says women are always associated with water, and holes and mystic entrances.

The well is essentially a woman’s thing. And the well as *KNOWLEDGE*. Well I don’t know. Well I don’t know. (*Strange Big Moon* 34)

As a traditional element symbolizing creation and destruction – life and death – water has long been associated with women in literature, its depths identified with the allegedly mysterious and obscuring nature of women, but also with the acquisition and flow of knowledge. In this entry Kyger seems to acknowledge the way in which everyday life shapes her poetry; drawing water from the earth – not the ocean – grounds her experience to her location and also to the subterranean flow of water – carrying knowledge – from place to place. Still, as the entry shows, the poet is uncomfortable with the fixed associations vocalized by Snyder as an embodiment of the masculine tradition. In the poem, the water she draws from the well is not a source of empowerment but an opportunity to overturn feelings of confinement associated with domesticity.

In “The Persimmons are Falling,” the poet also draws from her experience in Japan to address issues of domesticity. Written in December 1963, a few months before her marriage to Snyder collapsed and she returned to the United States, the poem associates the fate of rotten fruit the author has not taken care of, with her own aging and death. In addition, the poem is haunted by a tension born out of the speaker’s rejection of domesticity or her inability to either fit into conventional gender roles or find suitable alternatives for her as a woman and a poet. For example, the beginning of the poem situates the speaker’s failed fulfillment of her “domestic duties”:

The persimmons are falling
early and rotten from the tree.
No time to attend the garden.
Where I go like a dandy
is to the living room
and right at the heart of the matter. (50)

With the image of the dead persimmons, the speaker delves into the concept of domesticity in an attempt to free herself from its grasp, before she too falls ripe to the floor: “A bad crop of persimmons eaten with bugs / this year, a good one last. / And the wrinkles. / melting into the nice earth / giving it another child.” (50) Worried about the passing of time, and people’s tendency to “settle down like ripe wheat” (50), the speaker relates a dream in which her preoccupation revolves around the concept of domesticity as an intimidating, unfamiliar space:

There reoccurs a dream
of a large mysterious house, of women in turbans
gigantic attics of rubbish
a long staircase, mysterious inhabitants
of closed off suites, marble fountains,
sneaking through the house
in the back way, I can’t take over. (50)

As a place totally unrelated to her, occupied by strange people and with rooms unknown to her, the house is not a safe haven – a place where her full personality can be explored – but a trap that will only see her wither and die. Although the speaker tries to “take over” the house, “going up the staircase, knocking on the doors” (50), the poem does not offer a ready solution, but rather leaves the speaker with the notion that this house – her confinement and fear of premature physical or spiritual death – are her own constructions: ““You’ve built this vast house, now explore it.”” (50) Another way to look at this poem is by using the metaphor of “body as house” or “mind as house,” which was frequently used in 19th century English prose.¹⁹⁸ In such a light, the poet’s

¹⁹⁸ Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* often make use of architectural metaphors to describe the characters. The mind, similarly, is conceived as a space which inhabits dreams and ideas, and it can be furnished or unfurnished.

unfamiliar house – “The great house has strange furniture I’m unfamiliar with” (50) – is “umheimlich”¹⁹⁹ in the sense that it is the opposite of what is familiar, and is portrayed as an oppressive force where the self cannot grow. The domestic sphere in this poem, as in other poems in the collection, limits the poet’s, as well as Penelope’s, development in life and art.

Finally, the personal also invades Kyger’s poems in *The Tapestry and the Web* in ways that are no longer related – or not just related – to the revision or reinterpretation of Penelope and *The Odyssey*, but that work as the construction of mythology itself: the life of the poet becomes the myth,²⁰⁰ her personal experience and voyages shaping its content and form.²⁰¹ Kyger has often been referred to as a “poet of place,” as one uniquely interested in representing the details of commonplace life. Kyger’s work, as David Meltzer puts it, “demands and awakens attention to the extraordinary ordinary, the so-called ‘everyday’; daybook moments written by a highly selective eye/I selectively and attentively annotating what’s before and beyond her eyes.” (*As Ever* xviii) In poems like “Tapestry” one can appreciate this movement of Kyger’s selective “eye/I”, which shapes the content – what she sees – but also how she sees it – the movement of the line on the page:

the eye
is drawn
to the Bold
DESIGN ----- the
.Border.
.California flowers.
nothing promised that isn’t shown. (28)

¹⁹⁹ Ernst Jentsch definition of uncanny as intellectual uncertainty would be closer to Kyger’s house in this poem than Sigmund Freud’s uncanny, as pleasure is clearly removed from her uneasiness and lack of control of the house – what is in it, who is in it, and what happens in it.

²⁰⁰ This movement is much noticeable in di Prima’s *Loba* and Waldman’s *Iovis Trilogy*, as I demonstrate in the following sections.

²⁰¹ In the following extract of her journal she discusses the importance of studying past literature and of focusing on her own life: “Resolutions: In order to rise as a poet, the craft of poetry must be studied and known. Painful as it may be, hours each day should be spent scanning poetry sheets and volumes of the past. New conscious ground expansion for poems and ordinary proficiency both executed daily. The craft should fit like a glove. Exactly: from my *own* life, not sources from myth.” (*Strange Big Moon* 269)

Following the movement of the eye, the accentuated “DESIGN” of the poem draws attention to its content – the tapestry associated to Penelope’s weaving, her waiting and art – but also to the everyday details – like the Californian flowers which are Kyger’s rather than Homer’s. Using techniques such as this one, Kyger’s poems move easily between the contemporary and mythic timeframes, sketching Penelope’s story and the poet’s own experience through attention to details and place. Another example is found in “They Are Constructing a Craft,” where specific details in the poem take us to Wakanoura – a small fishing village in Japan Kyger and Snyder visited in the early 1960s – but also evokes Odysseus’s ship and voyage back to Ithaca. In the poem Kyger describes women working at the seashore picking and laying seaweed to dry as well as the construction of a wooden boat. The interconnection of her own experience and the mythological frame she is reading it through, is made explicit in an entry in her journals dated 3.28.60, showing that she kept the tapestry in her mind while travelling, and that it affected the composition of the poem:

these are thin rows planted by hand...
run parallel. no weaving.
Ladies gathering seaweed.
 ...at fishing village enormous craft
being constructed solely of wood. (Ulysses) (*Strange Big Moon* 28)

Although Kyger does not find a weaving pattern in the way the women arrange the wakame to dry, she does use her words to somehow weave their story – as part of her own experience – together with *The Odyssey*; with this turn, she not only re-evaluates myth through her poetry, but also uses her position as poet – weaver – to mythologize her own experience. Becoming Homer and Odysseus, she is the heroine traveling through a foreign land – “Watching us go by, we are strange” (34) – and also the one validating her experience through myth.

To conclude, Kyger’s overall position to myth shows how she uses the mythological frame offered by *The Odyssey* to bring to light female experience. Even if she chooses to work within patriarchy, Kyger subverts masculine expectations by using a disruptive, playful and elusive approach that ultimately aims at giving room to female creativity – which is felt as an ongoing action. In “From our Soundest Sleep, it Ends,” the last of “The Odyssey Poems,” Kyger admits, “[i]t has been difficult to write this”

here, as di Prima herself puts it in the author's note to the last edition, "[t]he Work is, like they say, in 'progress'. The author reserves the right to juggle, re-arrange, cut, osterize, re-cycle parts of the poem in future editions. As the Loba wishes, as the Goddess dictates." (viii) This note advances di Prima's poetics in *Loba* – a mixture between received poetics, stream of consciousness, but also detail to the form and shape of the poem – as well as the fusion with the Loba or Goddess at the level of content.²⁰²

Constantly addressing the Loba goddess, in its many incarnations and shapes, di Prima's poems in this collection – as in the rest of her work – are distinctly woman-centered, forming a feminist epic preoccupied with the representation of women in history and myth.²⁰³ The introductory poem "Ave," which stands on its own aside the two parts that form *Loba*, voices di Prima's concern over women's historicity and position in society, introducing her call for unity and female solidarity. Opening the book with the verse "O lost moon sisters," (3) di Prima invokes a multiple vision of woman formed by different descriptions that range from the mundane, everyday life situations to mystical representations of a female essence or female power represented in nature. Using parallelism and anaphora to create rhythm and emphasize the sense of belonging, the poet addresses all the women who wander scattered around the world:

jaywalking do you wander
spitting do you wander
mumbling and crying do you wander
aged and talking to yourselves
with roving eyes do you wander
hot for quick love do you wander
weeping your dead (3)

²⁰² Roseanne Giannini Quinn, in "Laugh of the Revolutionary" (*The Philosophy of the Beat Generation*), reads this note as an example of the way *Loba* resists literary categorization: "The secret handshake begins where di Prima sets forth a way of writing that destabilizes conventional ways of reading. We should not get too comfortable with any ideas of 'master' narrative here. We should anticipate that the pulse of the work can change its beat, if you will. Di Prima's she-wolf reserves the right to howl, not just as muse, but as mother." (22)

²⁰³ Di Prima's interest in myth, fables and traditional tales can also be appreciated in *Various Fables from Various Places* (1960), an edited book where she compiled – and in some cases translated – fables from Spain, Russia, Medieval Europe, England, among others.

These images of wandering, errant women on the verge of insanity resemble Joanne Kyger's image of Penelope tearing the curtains in "The Maze," a situation that could also be analyzed as the result of women under patriarchy – women unfulfilled and pushed to the periphery of society. Di Prima describes powerful/less women who "tower above [her]" (4) or who "cower on hillsides" (4), and continues to offer examples of female experience – including motherhood, abortion, gender violence, drug addiction, to name just a few – which are expansive rather than exclusive as far as the definition of woman goes. These concrete and situated images can partially be seen in opposition to a mystical representation of female consciousness embodied in nature and objects:

you are hills, the shape and color of mesa
 you are the tent, the lodge of skins, the Hogan
 the buffalo robes, the quilt the knitted afghan
 you are the cauldron and the evening star
 you rise over the sea, you ride the dark (5)

Together with these verses, the reference in the opening line to a past female community of women in tune with the moon, as well as the last verses in which the poet aligns herself with the same tradition – "I am you / and I must become you / I have been you / and I must become you" (6) – frames *Loba* within the specific (Mother) goddess, neopagan revival of the 1970s, and advances a tension present in the collection between a socio-politically specified – "in-context" – feminism and an essentialist, all-embracing approach to feminism.²⁰⁴ Before delving into this discussion, in the following sections I investigate different aspects that are relevant to the essentialist debate: firstly, I look into the different images of the Loba – representations of female experience – which are present in the collection, and which help form the ever-changing essence of the goddess. Secondly, I look into the way patriarchy and social conventions are tied in within the representation of the goddess, acting as catalyst and opposing force of her power.

²⁰⁴ The essentialist reading seems to dominate most critical analyses of *Loba*. Grace and Johnson, in *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, state that, "[i]n this poetic space, di Prima constructs representations of the goddess, the mother, the artist, and others shape-shifting into an essentialist female community." (86) Similarly, in the *Historical Dictionary of the Beat Movement* (Paul Varner), *Loba* is described as a "feminist epic poem [...where] *Loba* is not one character but the feminine within all the universe, but the dominant representation of *Loba* is as a she-wolf dichotomized between love and savagery, civilization and anarchy, raw nature and art" (191). A more nuanced description is offered in *The New Anthology of American Poetry: Vol.3*, where di Prima's *Loba* "encapsulates the varied images, experiences, and myths of womanhood." (285).

Lastly, I look into the specific use di Prima makes of established mythological, religious, or pagan female characters, analyzing them in a specific revisionist and feminist context.

III.4.1. Images of the Loba

In the more than two hundred short poems that compose *Loba*, Diane di Prima offers various – at times contradicting – representations of the female power/powerlessness inhabited in her she-wolf. Throughout the collection, the different portrayals, personifications, embodiments or pictures of Loba attest to the difficulty – or rather impossibility – of completely grasping her essence. In this section, I go through some of these images in an attempt to form a collage of female experience in di Prima’s epic through the common denominator of the Loba.

One of the first descriptions of Loba in the collection is related to her animal side, a characteristic that is sometimes approached as an animal disguise adopted by women, but also as an animal using the female form as a disguise. This fusion between animal/human, she-wolf/woman, is achieved through the continuous use of adjectives and verbs often applied to animals to describe women’s everyday lives. For instance, apparently a woman, when Loba smiles, she bares “her wolf’s teeth...” (11); and, in much the same way, when she walks “her paws are cut by” (11) the city’s paved streets. In some poems the metamorphosis into an animal seems almost complete²⁰⁵ – “See how her tit drags on the ground. / She steps on it. She *baaaas*” (13) – while in others she keeps both animal and human characteristics. In the following poem, for instance, she “hoots” like an owl but walks the streets in moccasins:

when she hoots it makes
the little grasses bloom
when she shuffles her soft
worn moccasins. her headdress
(horns made of corncobs)²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ In a section entitled “Some shapes of the Loba,” di Prima exploits her animal side describing her as “white crow” (41), “white bitch” (41), “dirty white dog” (42) and “Mistress Owl” (42).

²⁰⁶ References to corn and pueblo villages in this poem can be analyzed as an example of di Prima’s embrace of an primitivist impulse – shared by some goddess worshipers – characterized by a return to, what is considered to be, simple ancient cultures where women had more power.

rustled as she turned
 sideways in the flat light
 off pueblo walls.... (27)

Similarly, walking into bars in blue jeans and sneakers, the Loba dances with old women almost passing for a girl; as di Prima writes, “were it not for the ring of fur / around her ankles [...] there’s no one / wd ever guess her name” (28). This interchangeability of human and animal attributes is maintained throughout the collection, normally used as a source of physical, spiritual or sexual female power, and intertwined in the difference areas of female experience revisited in *Loba*.

The animal side is also present in the representation of motherhood, a central experience in *Loba*, as in di Prima’s work in general.²⁰⁷ On the one hand, motherhood is important to Loba in so far as it highlights the grandmother-mother-daughter genealogy that inadvertently makes the relationship between the goddess and the poet possible. In *Loba* there is a historical or spiritual union between the goddess – or her many incarnations – and women that is grounded in a hereditary process by which women become the heirs of her power. Besides this physical connection, motherhood is explicitly represented in various poems. For instance, in “LOBA IN CHILDBED,” di Prima describes childbirth as an empowering – physical and spiritual – experience for her Loba, and one that is embedded within a larger cosmology, as she “lay back, panting, remembering / it was what she *should* do” (30). Besides being something she should do, the poem emphasizes the Loba’s active, physical, role in the birth; that is to say, as something she *does*, rather than just goes through. Thus, labor is described in this poem as a physical effort in which her body and the baby’s swing into action:

she
 screamed, for him, for herself, she
 tried to open, to widen tunnel, the rock
 inside her tried to crack, to chip away
 bright spirit hammered at it w/ his
 soft foamy head (30)

²⁰⁷ In the first chapter, I discussed the way in which di Prima re-articulates motherhood as a central and necessary experience to develop her literary side to, in her words, live by the vision.

The references to natural elements, intertwined with the physical description of the mother and baby's bodies, endow the process of childbirth with a magical energy based on Loba's connection to earth and nature. This tradition shapes the portrayal of the child, who is described as "stone head monolith / lying in Columbian jungle" (31), or "line drawing bird soul / as in hieroglyphs or in/Indian drawing" (31). The mother's physical effort and pain are described in similar terms: "she cried out / bursting from the heart / of the devastated / mandala / skull boat grew wings / she fluttered / thru amniotic seas to draw him on" (30). The harmony between nature, mother and child, represented in their respective active roles in childbirth, is also dealt with in the poem "The Loba Sings to her Cub," where the baby becomes an animal finding his/her way out of her mother:

O my mole, sudden & perfect
golden gopher tunneling
to light, o separate(d)
strands of our breath! (33)

For her part, Loba – reincarnating her animal qualities – welcomes her child with a body anatomically designed to do so: "you lie warm, wet on the / soggy pelt of my / hollowed / belly, my / bones curve up / to embrace you." (33) This vision of an active childbirth, deeply connected to nature and the female body, is radically opposed to an "occidental" tradition that defines pregnancy and labor in terms of passivity and/or illness – women in hospitals assisted in labor. In "Nativity,"²⁰⁸ di Prima revisits the Bible to rewrite the passage where the Virgin Mary gives birth to Jesus. In the poem, di Prima depicts how Mary's natural instincts are suppressed, turning her labor into an oppressive, forced situation – an image radically different to the physical and emotional female experience Loba goes through in the two previous poems. Quoting before the poem the story of the Great Wolf Fenri²⁰⁹ from *The Edda*, in "Nativity," di Prima gives voice to the Virgin Mary to relate how her Loba instincts – "Dark timbers of lost forest falling into my bed. / My hairs stirring, not asleep" (107) – were soon suppressed.

²⁰⁸ "Nativity" is the third poem of part 6 in *Loba*, entitled "The Seven Joys of the Virgin Mary." I look at some of these poems in greater detail in the following sections.

²⁰⁹ In Norse mythology, Fenrir is the son of Loki, and was foretold to kill Odin, for which the Gods tried to chain him two times unsuccessfully until they used mythical elements to build the chain – readily: the footfall of a cat, the roots of a rock, the beard of a woman, the breath of a fish, the spittle of a bird, and bear's sinews.

Unlike the wolf Fenrir, Mary's bondage was real rather than mythical. As she herself puts it:

They fettered me
w/ leather straps, on delivery table. I cd not
cry out. Forced gas mask over mouth,
slave. I cd not
turn head. Did they fetter me
w/ breath of a fish? These poison airs? I cd not
turn head, move hand, or leg
thus forced. They tore child from me. Whose? (107)

Chained and drugged, unable to move or participate actively in labor, Mary is denied the physical and spiritual freedom associated with childbearing, a process which di Prima links to a forced separation from nature – “Seabirds cry at full moon. But I. Cd not,” denounces Mary. In addition, the poem extrapolates this situation to other women, so that Mary's labor in a manger in Bethlehem becomes any modern hospital's delivery area. After birth, Mary is surrounded by “[w]omen / who knew same outrage” (108), who saw their children “shackled & numbered” (108), who could do little but console themselves – “We breathe / in our rags to keep each other warm” (108).²¹⁰ This double vision of childbirth and motherhood – as a deeply feminine experience, or as a disconnection from their nature – can also be appreciated in di Prima's memoir *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*. In this text, di Prima's own experiences giving birth to her five children lead to each of these contrasting poles; on the one hand, labor is described as an intimately feminine way of developing physical self-awareness, providing women with a deeper knowledge of their bodies. As she writes in the memoir:

This of childbirth, of being opened *from inside out*, I thought, was how you truly lost your virginity. Torn open so the world could come through. Come through you. Not that semipleasant invasion from a man, excursus from *the outside in*. Now I felt the joy, the power, of being OPEN. Something unconquerable and deep about it. Place from which I live. Twice-torn. (190)

²¹⁰ In *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, a similar scenario is described as di Prima relates how she was “wheeled into an elevator and shoved onto a cot in a ‘labor room’ – where [she] was surrounded by six or eight screaming, moaning, or semi-unconscious women” (168-9).

This image of labor as a way of acquiring a deeper and personal power over your own body is, on the other hand, contrasted in the memoir with the description of some of di Prima's childbirths, which are closer to the one in "Nativity" than to "LOBA IN CHILDBED". For example, at one point she relates a scene in the delivery room awfully similar to Mary's experience in "Nativity": "I found myself strapped onto the delivery table, my hands and arms strapped down, and my body in the most unlikely position possible for producing a child: my pelvis and legs way higher than my stomach, my legs tied onto the stirrups of this contraption" (170). Just like Mary,²¹¹ and although she also felt nature calling and had told the hospital she wanted a natural birth – to be present and conscious at all times – she was denied the experience:

As Jeanne crowned and just as I was about to push her out, an invisible demonic being standing somewhere behind my head forced a gas mask over my mouth. I twisted my head as far as I could to get it off, I held my breath (all the while still trying to produce this infant). But to no avail. I finally *did* have to breathe, and the mask being over my face, I *did* pass out. At that crucial moment I was not allowed to be Witness. (170)

It might be as a reaction to assaults on women's bodies like these, when even a distinctively feminine experience such as giving birth is turned into an opportunity to oppress them, that di Prima uses her Loba as a gateway to produce inhibited – sometimes excessively violent – representations of female sexuality in some of the poems. The majority of these poems either exploit one aspect or attribute of the goddess or react towards masculine projections of femininity and female sexuality. For instance, in "THE LOBA DANCES," the Loba performs a brutal dance in which her sexuality acts as a destructive weapon, leaving a trail of "devoured" men behind her:

she

treads

²¹¹ The similarities between di Prima's description of her own childbirth in *Recollections* and the Virgin Mary's in *Loba* are many: they both want a natural birth but are anesthetized against their will – the words "forced gas mask" appear in both texts – in addition, they are both strapped so that they can hardly move, and even fed soup afterwards – "They fed thin soup & sour / reluctant milk" (*Loba* 107), "It took a fair bit of growling and general heavy-handedness to get something to eat, but they finally came up with some soup." (*Recollections* 170) The main difference will be that although di Prima's pregnancy is described as sought for – a conscious decision of her part – Mary's conception is, as I analyze in the following section, closer to a rape than anything else.

in the severe heads
that grow
like mosses
on the flood (18)

Illustrating an image evocative of traditional representations of the Goddess Kali – standing on the dead body of Shiva and wearing a necklace made of heads – di Prima typifies an aggressive sexuality as a source of female empowerment. Loba dances and moves leaving a trail of destruction and dead bodies – “ghoul lips of / lovers she / left / like pearls / in the road” (19) – and has a breath that “itself / is carnage” (19). Even if, like Kali, she destroys only to recreate,²¹² and the ashes she walks on “chant / a new / creation myth” (18), the closeness to the *femme fatale* archetype makes this type of feminist appropriation of sexuality stand in a dubious position in relation to the liberation of female body.²¹³ This complicated position is found in other poems where female sexuality often merges with demonic or monstrous images that are not, in addition, exempt of racial stereotypes. For instance, one of the various images of the Loba that opens the collection shows the nightmarish description of a “black, naked woman riding / a dead white man” (14); flesh-eater and surrounded by snakes – yet another symbol associated with female sexuality – her sexual power is constructed as rooted in nature – “Her hand touches the (wet) earth” (14) – rather than artificial or a duplication of masculine fantasies and fears about female sexuality.

Interestingly, there are some poems in which sexual violence and aggression are not expressed towards men, but towards women; in the majority of these cases, the

²¹² Life, death and sexuality are all qualities associated with the mother goddess, with the circle of life and her position as the destructor and creator of the universe. As Carol Christ comments: “The unity of birth, growth, death and rebirth...are the basis of the Goddess’ teachings. They are reflected daily to us in cycles of night and day, waking and sleeping, creating and letting go. Thus the Goddess is she who gives life and, when the form is no longer viable, transforms it through death. And then, through the exquisite pleasures of creativity and sexuality, she brings forth new life.” (Carol Christ quoted in *Goddess as Nature* 79)

²¹³ As a well-known archetype in literature, art and cinema, I make use of this concept loosely to address a certain type of femininity based on the idea of a dangerous sexual independence often associated with death and the fall of man. See Bram Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (1986) for a historical analysis of the concept and its representation in art and literature. Although the *femme fatale* has been considered a positive female stereotype by critics such as Mary Ann Doanne – see *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991) – in the majority of cases her sexual independence and strength lead to her destruction. Within di Prima’s *Loba* different versions of the *femme fatale* are both celebrated and rejected.

mother goddess, although conferring power to women, also appears as a threat – her power so intense that she might destroy them. In an early poem of *Loba*, her overbearing sexuality – represented in language of possession – violently surrounds “woman” who remains passive, either consenting or unable to react against her strength:

Hush, the old-young woman
touches you [...]
Her eyes
show waters parting a jungle, her arms
are vines around you, her tongue
is growing in your mouth. She
thrusts a finger deep into your cunt. (15)

Although this sexual union could be considered as empowering for the woman – as it sometimes is the case in *Loba* – the language of possession places the goddess’ sexuality in a conquering position that is dangerously reminiscent of patriarchal tropes. The threat of the goddess’ sexuality lies, then, in her ability to possess women – “Has she sunk / root in yr watering place, does she look / w/ her wolf’s eyes out of your head?” (15).

Even if approached as dangerous, or mysterious, the poet seeks the connection to the goddess through her sexuality, a discourse also employed by male alchemists in their search for the first matter, or creative force of the universe. In “AULA LUCIS” di Prima turns to Alchemy – specifically to the Welsh philosopher and alchemist Thomas Vaughan – to investigate the position of the goddess in relation to the elusive concept of the First Matter. As the *materia prima* from which heaven and earth originated – the womb of the world to some – alchemist philosophers and practitioners non-surprisingly associated women with such matter. Nonetheless, as di Prima’s quote from Vaughan²¹⁴ points to, that the first matter is studied as a female matter does not imply that it will empower women, as it is still used and exploited by men. In Vaughan’s text, the feminine first matter is potentially fertile, but remains unproductive – virgin – until fecundated by the masculine fire of nature; the sentence di Prima quotes – which I

²¹⁴ Di Prima entitles this poem “Aula Lucis,” from Thomas Vaughan’s *Aula Lucis, or, The House of Light: A Discourse Written in the year 1651*. The quote she includes to introduce her poem, though, is from Vaughan’s *Coelum Terrae, or, The Magician’s Heavenly Chaos*.

flesh / they are the milk of her breasts & the juice of her love / her orgasm shakes the darks worlds to their depths.” (193) This sexualization of the goddess is predominant characteristic of the Goddess Movement, whose worshippers celebrated her body and powerful sexuality as a trait of female independence. In *Take Back the Light: A Feminist Reclamation of Spirituality and Religion*, Sheila Ruth romanticized the goddess’s sexuality in much the same way as di Prima did:

I love to imagine the Goddess sexing. I see Her marvelous great body, all sinew and steel, electrified with pleasure, curling and stretching, reaching for touch. She howls and grunts, and the world shakes. She climaxes, and the stars shoot around the heavens like Chinese sparklers, colors swirl, lightning bolts fall, and all the animals run for cover. She laughs and is delighted. (151)

By the same token, goddess worshipers’ often rely on a sexual discourse as a tool to link women with the goddess through their sex. In Ruth’s words, “[d]one for the joy of it, in good spirit, sexing is a merging with divinity and a meditation of Life [...] Sexing is Life acting in us and through us [...] its pleasure is the gift of the Mother for doing her work.” (157) In “SECOND DAUGHTER: Li (BRIGHTESS),” di Prima also links different generations of women through their body and sexuality. In the poem, the older woman welcomes and instructs the young girl into womanhood, letting her know her lineage – “I have not grown old suddenly before yr eyes / have not the courtesy to be decrepit / small” (163) – and situating both of them in the same continuum:

I have dances still to dance – do you dance?
 how the lights
 dance in you, eyes & skin
 & bright of yr hair
How yr anger dances!
See how my skin
 like yrs
 takes on its sheen
after lovemaking
 see how we glow! (163)

In any case, the frequent use of violent imagery, close to the *femme fatale* archetype, in the context of a feminist epic might seem – at least on a closer look – counterproductive. Long associated to men’s downfall through her exuberant and luring sexual attributes and schemes, the *femme fatale* has come to represent the negative outcome of women’s liberated sexuality, acting both as fantasy and nightmare in the masculine unconscious. In Jungian theories, the *femme fatale* is analyzed as one of the negative, archetypal, female personifications within a man’s anima. Although other representations of femininity might also be represented in the anima – like the mother or the virgin – Jung invested more time in describing the negative side of the anima as “nixie”, or a magical or mythological female incarnation, “who infatuates young men and sucks the life out of them” (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 25). In addition, although described as, “a natural archetype that satisfactorily sums up all the statements of the unconscious, the primitive mind, of the history of language and religion,” (25) the anima is closely linked to social and psychological constructions. Feared by men because of her sexual independence and aggression, this sexualized archetype has also been analyzed as a direct attack on traditional female values such as motherhood and domesticity.

It is because of this opposition to societal control that feminists have seen in the violent sexuality of the *femme fatale* archetype – or the monstrous goddess – an alternative site for female empowerment.²¹⁵ However, the nature of the archetype as a masculine projection, turns it into a double edged weapon. Hélène Cixous, in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) uses the myth of Medusa – that Freud had turned into a symbol of the fear of castration²¹⁶ – to stir in women the need to turn around the image men have projected on them. Instead of believing “the false theatre of the phallogocentric representationalism” (884), that is to say, instead of keeping on reproducing and confining themselves to the images already created for them, women are to represent their bodies in new ways, even if using the same patriarchal tropes. Despite the potential

²¹⁵ In relation to the *femme fatale* in film noir, Creekmur refers to the love-hatred relationship with such characters and feminism. In his words, “even the feminist critique of the misogyny of film noir, most often embodied by the *femme fatale*, has often acknowledged the attraction of female characters who challenge rather than affirm social norms, even if they are punished for their transgressions.” (“Cinephilia and Film Noir” 73)

²¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, in “Medusa’s Head” (1940), interprets Medusa as “the supreme talisman who provides the image of castration – associated in the child’s mind with the discovery of maternal sexuality – and its denial.” (273-274)

of ascribing a feminist agency through figures such as the *femme fatale*, the dangers of duplicating masculine imprisonment – of falling back into the “phallogentric representationalism” Cixous talked about – are still many.²¹⁷ In *Loba*, Diane di Prima is concerned with several embodiments of the fallen woman or *femme fatale* and, in what follows, I look into her portrayal of the demon Lilith to analyze the way in which di Prima reconciles the patriarchal imaginary with her feminist concerns.

Historically a product of Jewish mythology, Lilith’s influence on literature and art has not diminished over the centuries. Both as a winged and fanged demon and as an attractive seductress, she has inspired and terrified both men and women. It is in Jewish texts such as the Talmud and the Kabbalah where Lilith gained her own mythology, and it is on these texts that the majority of revisions are based. That feminists have seen in Lilith an image of female rebellion and independence comes as no surprise when analyzing her origins:²¹⁸ as the first wife of Adam, created as his equal from earth – and not so evidently as his property as “rib-built” Eve – she refused to be sexually and physically dominated by Adam.²¹⁹ Believing they were equals, “[w]hen Adam wished to lie with her, Lilith demurred: ‘Why should I lie beneath you,’ she asked, ‘when I am your equal, since both of us were created from dust?’” (Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* 223) Seeing that her relationship with Adam would continue on similar terms, she left the garden, renouncing to the alleged paradise it provided. Away from God’s and Adam’s grasp, she indulged herself in promiscuity with demons near the Red Sea in an eternal exile, bearing countless children-demons – more than one hundred each day according to some sources. Hence, Lilith stands in a representational ambivalent position; she stands outside patriarchy as a sexually independent woman, but also within

²¹⁷ In “Laugh of the Revolutionary”, Quinn does a thoughtful reading of di Prima’s *Loba* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* within the theoretical framework of Cixous’s *écriture féminine*, drawing attention to the way in which di Prima writes or inscribes the female body into these works.

²¹⁸ In *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar link the monstrous woman to the figure of the writer woman, as they both turn away from established roles for people of their sex: “If becoming an *author* meant mistaking one’s ‘sex and way,’ if it meant becoming an ‘unsexed’ or perversely sexed female, then it meant becoming a monster or freak, a vile Error, a grotesque Lady Macbeth, a disgusting goddess of Dullness, or (to name a few later witches) a murderous Lamia, a sinister Geraldine.” (34-35) In addition, they use Lilith – who dare to speak God’s name to free herself – as an example of “just how difficult it is for women even to attempt the pen” (35).

²¹⁹ In *Women Remaking American Judaism* (2007), Riv-Ellen Prell observes how, Lilith “was powerful, dangerous, and destructive, and hence an ideal role model for the first generation of Jewish feminists — journalists, poets, writers, and activists — who were drawn to an image that embodied the demand for equality”. (18)

patriarchy as she is demonized and suffers the consequences of her freedom. As the painter Siona Benjamin observes:

Lilith has been called and has represented a mother of demons, slayer of newborns, corruption, indulgence, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and the seductress of men. Lilith has made a return in feminist history many a time as an iconic symbol that represents the oppressed, both as a goddess and as an example of female strength, power, and mystery. (*From World to Canvas* 16)



Figure 7. *Lilith with a Snake* (1886) by John Collier

In *Loba*, di Prima dedicates a whole section to Lilith – “Lilith: An Interlude” – which includes seventeen short poems in which she constructs a polymorphous image of Lilith based on the different narratives she is frequently connected to. In the poems, di Prima reacts to these narratives in various ways: celebrating her sexuality and violence, representing a pitiful, decadent, image of Lilith, turning away from her example, or moving her representation from physical towards cosmological domains. In some of the poems, di Prima presents a vampire-like creature associated with bats and similar animals – “She flies over partitions on the / wings of a bat [...] She bites your foot” (85). The carnality on which her story usually insists is also exposed as part of her cultural and historical creation in *Loba*. Hidden – trapped – in the texts that support her,

she keeps luring men and women with her sensuality, eternally offering her body: “Delicious the flesh she offers, like succulent / rare meat from the spit, her eyes / glint thru sacred, ancient letters in yr study” (88).

Her position as the second wife of Adam, or as the dark side of a dualistic representation of femininity – like the angel of the house/fallen woman; or angel/whore – is also tackled in one of her multiple descriptions as the poet addresses her as “the bolstering Other, backside / of the coin” (92). As Eve’s other – or the other side of the coin of a masculine construction – she is to be found, “where guts of earth burst out in coal, or diamond; / it is flesh, it is flesh, it is Lilith.” (92) Her status as an archetype is further emphasized by the short poem di Prima includes as a preface to this section and that is attributed to an “Imaginary Jungian Scholar” – a figure that appears elsewhere in the collection. Through the eyes of this made-up scholar di Prima foreground’s Lilith’s traditional western representation as a dark, sexual force; mating with the archangel Samael – the angel of death in the Jewish lore – they “emerge from the abyss / red & white & / intertwined / like the nadis” (83). By pointing towards Jung’s theories, which helped freeze Lilith as a dangerous seductress, or as the archetypal negative image of the masculine’s anima, di Prima exposes the representational aspect of her many images. Another image, still related to her attributes as sexual predator, is her characterization as a succubus demon, “raping” men in their sleep to collect their sperm and breed more demon babies. Beginning the poem with “or” – again, emphasizing the many possible representations – Lilith:

takes yr shape, she bites
yr old man on the shoulder while he sleeps
he freezes, hears yr heavy corpse
roll out of bed beside him, she whirls
in holy incense meant
to hold her in abeyance (87)

Other “or-poem” relies on texts like the Zohar to show Lilith’s hermaphrodite nature as the female side of the primordial man, Adam, later to be separated into two beings. Although performing a polyvalent sexuality, her strength still resides in her/his seductive power; this “soft / hermaphrodite” (87) being, “holds you against his chest / you suffocate; yr cunt / pulses w/ weird, green hunger you wd not / acknowledge” (87).

In other poems Lilith embodies a much more contemporaneous representation of female experience, one that could fit into the negative consequence of the rebellious “beat” life for women. In this case, Lilith:

sleeps on sheepskins in yr dining room
shoots smack into her arm, murmurs soothingly
of the glorious vegetable soup
she will make, tomorrow
the velvet pillow
under her head is torn, the lice
writhe in her eyebrows. (89)

Juxtaposing decadent imagery – heroin addiction, lice – with domestic elements – soup cooking, velvet pillows – this Lilith might stand for a modern paradigm of the dangers of falling back into confining mythical archetypes. At the end of the day, Lilith is still reduced to her sexuality and forced to use violence: “You unpin / her rhinestone brooch, slip the fringed piano shawl / off her skinny shoulders, she sinks her teeth / in yr wrist.” (89) None of these images, then, seem to agree with the author’s personal need for examples of female empowerment, who laments Lilith did not offer a more valid role model for her: “Oh Lil!! You promised me secrets of mushroom & fern / elf language of mosses, you swore / that I’d hear your blood sing” (90). For those unfulfilled promises, the speaker turns away from her example and, in doing so, refuses to be imprisoned by the same representational constraints that held Lilith prey in her sexuality:²²⁰ “I’m biting at yr leash, I’m plotting / a way out of yr cage, Ma Lilith” (90).

The way in which di Prima portrays – or *mis*portrays – Lilith’s sexuality, making use of the different historical representations produced over the years and responding to different political or religious interests, can be extrapolated to the way she portrays her Loba. Rather than solely succumbing to the masculine projection of a sexually fierce and deathly dark woman, or even just celebrating her sexual independence, notwithstanding the limitations her anger and violence carry with it – as it sometimes

²²⁰ The poem “Lilith of the Stars,” which closes the first book in the collection, revisits the Lilith trope to show a different vision of a markedly less carnal Lilith: her position within astrology. Even though bodyless and, one would assume, sexless, this Lilith “not made for earth” (159) is still constructed through metaphors of death and destruction. It seems that not even as a celestial body is she able to escape her archetypal representation. As di Prima puts it, “She is, in fact, the archetypal / foxfire of the stars” (158).

has been the case with feminist appropriations of the *femme fatale*, I believe di Prima is using the elusive and incorporeal nature of the goddess in order to expose the inadequacy of the different representations. Shattering the belief in stable, socially constructed, categories, it is easier to believe in the image of the Loba di Prima offers in “APPARUIT” – a “sweet woman [...] not straining / or excusing herself or defiant / striding angry / not pushed out of shape” (266). The only image di Prima seems to be content with is that of a warrior and a poet who gives shape to herself, finally escaping the previously shown definitions that often work on dualistic and oppressive contrasting poles:

her voice is not milk & honey
it is not harsh, it is a voice
her voice she writes

whatever suits her she moves
where she pleases she casts
a variable shadow (267)

In a strategy similar to the one used by Joanne Kyger in *The Tapestry and the Web*, di Prima destabilizes the patriarchal representation of female archetypes through myth by using a multiplicity of images that both conform to and resist that same representation. Through Lilith’s various images, as well as the rest of female characters that inhabit Loba throughout the collection, di Prima rejects the stable and essentialist view of the “Eternal Feminine,” or a stable masculine representation of femininity. Simone de Beauvoir was highly critical of what she believed to be a patriarchal myth that confined women to an oppressive position in society; believing in the Eternal Feminine, for Beauvoir, “would mean acknowledging the existence of a specifically female nature – that is to say agreeing with a myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state. For women it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full-scale human beings.” (*All Said and Done* 458) Di Prima’s expanded category of “woman” can be interpreted as her denunciation of the representation of an eternal feminine in myth, a position against the patriarchal need to contain women within a fixed definition. With this move, di Prima deviates slightly

from traditional goddess worshippers, who as Emily Culpepper denounced, tend to reduce women to a different kind of myth:

It is easy for the Goddess as generic to become not just a catalyst for insight but also as a veil that covers up, erases or insufficiently differentiates important issues. When this happens, Goddess theology can have a flattening-out or dulling influence, giving us too pallid a picture of the richness of multiple female realities [...] The archetype was receiving more attention than real women were. (61-62)

Despite the many incarnations the Loba assumes throughout the collection – these are just a few – di Prima’s book has typically been described as exemplary of the unifying or restorative feminine essence. For example, Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote that, “[i]n the twentieth century, Woman has liberated herself from the pedestal upon which she has been ‘set up,’ mostly by men. *Loba* enthrones her again, only this time it is done by herself.” (*Loba* back cover) Referring to the collective category of “woman” – which he writes in capital letters – Ferlinghetti’s words point to a reductionist approach in which di Prima, as the poet speaking for women and about women, gives form to an alleged shared female essence. Advertisement copy editors at Penguin must have felt the same way, as they blurbed the book as “a visionary epic quest for the *reintegration of the feminine*” (my emphasis, back cover), which also points to an essential, uniquely feminine of way or being a woman. Even di Prima herself has pointed out in interviews towards this reductionist view: “So now when people say ‘What is *Loba* about?’ I’m able to say it’s about the feralness of the core of women, of the feminine in everything. In everyone.” (Peter Warshall, “Tapestry of Possibility” 22) Despite all these allusions towards an essentialist vision of femininity, the way in which *Loba* addresses the multiple cultural and historical constructions of women, together with the insistence on exposing patriarchal power in the representation of femininity, complicates the essentialist discourse so often associated with the cult of the goddess. In the following section, I investigate the position of patriarchy within di Prima’s *Loba* to shed some light into the position of her she-wolf goddess within feminist discourses.

III.4.2. Goddess in a Patriarchal World

For a collection so evidently concerned with depicting female power and liberating women's spirituality and sexuality it is, to say the least, unusual that the first book opens with a poem that addresses Loba through her relationship with men – “If he did not come apart in her hands, he fell / like flint on her ribs [...] if he was not / daisies in her soup he was another / nettle in her hair” (11). This position, however, might be relevant in light of the feminist agenda that underlies *Loba*, which I argue creates a point of departure from a dominant understanding of the Goddess Movement feminism. In *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (2011), Karlyn Crowley analyzes the complicated relationship between New Age practitioners – including Goddess worshippers – and feminists, drawing special attention to the way the latter have rejected such practices as apolitical. To this effect, Crowley chronicles the aftermath of a women's conference that took place in Boston in 1976 as the beginning of the “split between the spiritual and the political in the feminist movement.” (151) More concretely, she quotes from “Through the Looking Glass: A Conference of Myopics,” an article written by two journalists for the second-wave newspaper *Off Our Backs* (151). In their article, they described the spiritualists – the group they distinguished from the more political feminists – as follows:

The spiritualist camp was composed of those women who more or less felt that women could do nothing to effect change in the system of patriarchy and, therefore, the future of the movement should be in the direction of withdrawal to worship the Goddess, practice magic, return to the Female Principle, reject anything associated with patriarchy, and cultivate psychic powers. This group of non-monogamous, non-smoking, vegetarian, antilogic, spiritual right-on sisters...far outnumbered the politicalists, and thus exercised control over the content of the conference. (152)

This implicit attack on spiritualists and Goddess worshippers does not stand alone in feminist criticism; Kathryn Rountree in her article “The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate” (1999), refers to the relation between feminism and the Goddess Movement as “[o]ne of the thorny issues for feminist within the academia” (138), summarizing some of the feminist critiques as follows:

Spiritual feminism has been seen as an ‘apolitical cop-out from feminist struggles’ (Spretnak 1982: xxii), a counter-productive feminist utopianism (Binford 1982), as embracing a damaging, essentializing connection between woman and nature (Ortner 1974), and as fostering passivity, self-absorption and submission in women by substituting a ‘tokenized derivative of the [sic.] christian God’ in the form of a Great Mother Goddess (Daly 1985:xviii)²²¹

Just as the variable and multiple images of the Goddess-woman-Loba defied an easy classification into essentialism, di Prima’s *Loba* resists the apolitical critique that reads Goddess Movement’s texts as utopian, inwardly tuned and ignorant of the external social and political circumstances under which women become oppressed. That is to say, they are accused of being apolitical for taking patriarchy for granted and for, simultaneously, copying patriarchal patterns by forging matriarchy as a substitute on the same basis. *Loba*, on the contrary, while containing instances of matriarchal, pre-Christian culture,²²² makes sure to clearly name Loba’s oppressor, exposing many instances of patriarchal domination over women and hoping to effect some change. In this section, I look into some of the poems that address and denounce patriarchy, both by exposing mechanisms of female subordination and by calling women to arms.

In “FOR CAMERON” di Prima is concerned with the present subordinate position for women, which in this poem takes the form of domesticity; asking “How was woman broken?” (152), she proposes the compliance with the housewife role as one of the ways to imprison and control women. Women fell “out of attention, / Wiping gnarled fingers on a faded housedress. / Lying down in the puddle beside the broken jug” (152). In addition, marriage is shown as having replaced traditional sources of female power, forcing women into containment:

How did we come to be contained
in rooms? Which room

holds the jewels which buy us
& for which we have

²²¹ An expanded view on this issue can be found in her book *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-Makers in New Zealand* (2004). See chapter 4 “Feminists and the Goddess”.

²²² In the next section I focus on some of these references.

other uses? (152)

The “other uses” women might have for the jewel – stone – that is now a sign of their captivity, are related to a pre-scientific era in which women’s role as healers and mystics positioned them in an advantageous position in relation to nature’s resources. At the same time, and instead of blaming women’s “loss / of early fierceness” (152) solely on the historical predominance of a patriarchal institution – one that made women desire the stone for its economical advantages rather than its power – di Prima seems to be accusing women – herself included – of complying with this position. The political change implied by the poem is evoked through the denunciation of different actions taken as insufficient: “It is too easy to write this. / Write of the grey / in straggling, thinning hair”, (152) and “It is too easy / to grind our teeth in our sleep.” (152) In “THE LOBA OLD”, the action needed is portrayed as a war against the established cosmology, one that has “the First Man chanting from the edge.” (55) Realizing that the masculine divinity will only put her again “at the foot of the gallows” (55), the Loba plans her attack: “I will vomit up the stars, I will shatter / the sun & moon. This cosmos, gilded cage, / I’ll burst apart.” (55)

In other poems the poet looks at the erasure of female experience as one of the consequences of living in a cosmos where the ruling energy is felt as masculine. In “In Whose Dream,” a series of questions direct the reader’s attention to an external, masculine, power responsible for the construction of female experience. The speaker asks, “Who raised her from the streets, who / bought her on auction block; in whose / vision was she lashed on an empty boat” (135). This external presence shapes women’s representability – entities upon which meaning can be imposed – ultimately limiting their access to power by forcing a cultural and political subordination: “Who tore thin wraps or cape, who / taught her shame; who was condemned / to go like her on all fours?” (135). A similar process is found in “THE LOBA LONGS FOR REMEMBRANCE IN THE BARDO,” where the speaker once again exposes the malleability/subjectivity of historical discourses and the power of those who are able to transmit them: “Shall we say that the streets were littered / w/ half-eaten food / dry leaves, debris of plastic & paper” (263).²²³ In addition, her questions deal directly with

²²³ In the documentary “Diane di Prima Beat Legend” (dir, Mitch Corber, 1998) a recording of a reading that took place on March 29th, 1998, at the Walt Whitman Auditorium in New Jersey, di Prima read,

the representation of female experience which, in this poem, represents a time of oppression that the poet wishes to document: “Shall we remember the half-mad whores / who walked on them [...] Shall we / recall the quarter moons of that era / their desperation / the hopelessness of the wind” (263). For the poet, then, remembrance of women’s subjugation becomes a necessary measure for the development of a female history – in order to learn from the past, one must expose the mechanisms through which women have been historically subordinated.

As a poet and a woman, it comes as no surprise that di Prima is concerned with the way literature and poetry excludes women from literary subject-matter.²²⁴ In “THE LOBA RECOVERS THE MEMORY OF A MARE,” di Prima appropriates the rhythm and structure of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl for Carl Solomon” to create a short²²⁵ version in which female experience is pushed to the foreground.²²⁶ In both interviews and her autobiographical works, the discovery of “Howl” often features as a crucial moment for the young Diane di Prima; as a moment when she found a sense of poetical community – as I mentioned in the previous chapter through her own words in *Memoirs* and *Recollections* – and an encouragement to pursue her literary ambition. Robert Holton states in his article “Beat Culture and the Fold of Heterogeneity” (2012) that, “[d]i Prima’s first attendance at a reading of ‘Howl’ functioned as a ritual of congregation, and she understood immediately the implications of this seminal work for the forging of a collective heterogeneous identity.” (19) In any case, it seems that by the time she wrote *Loba*, the representation of a notoriously masculine identity that conformed, in Ginsberg’s words the “best mind of [his] generation” (*Howl and Other Poems* 3), might prove insufficient to adequately represent the lives of women; female experience lost the battle to masculinity in the heterogeneous merging process.

among other poems, excerpts from *Loba*. In between poems, she states that some of the poems in this collection were inspired by and written to “the women of the night, women of the streets that hanged out” outside her doorsteps in a very poor and rough area she lived in for 17 years in San Francisco.

²²⁴ The same concern was central to the use of literary memoir and autobiography that I analyzed in the first chapter, which shows the importance of representing female experience in the arts and history.

²²⁵ Even though the poem is short – 3 pages – it is not as short as Gianni Quinn believes it to be in her article “Laugh of the Revolutionary,” (2012) where she mistakenly states that the poem concludes in page 125 with the line “just out of reach” (125).

²²⁶ In “*HOLY 21st Century*” (included in *Outrider*) Anne Waldman expands Ginsberg’s last section of “Howl”, including both things holy for her – “Every Woman’s a holy dakini! Matriot acts holy!” (187) – and unholy – “Abu Ghraib unholy! / All hooded torture un-holy! All bodily sadistic harm un-holy!” (188). Lenore Kandel, in *Reconstructing the Beats*, is also said to be influenced by “Howl.”

Just as Ginsberg does in “Howl”, di Prima compiles a list comprising examples of decadence and triumph; only this time it is women those who struggle to survive – as artists, mothers, spiritualists, etc. – in or outside of America. These are women:

who walked across America behind gaunt violent yogis
& died o-d’ing in methadone jail
scarfing the evidence

or destitute in Fiji wiring home for comfort
destroyed among oil lamps Morocco seeking dead fingers
old man in Afghani jail / pregnant barefoot & whoring
 who did we pray
 who did we pray to then (125)

Together with some of the dangers Ginsberg’s men experienced in “Howl” – jail, charges for drug consumption, overdose, forced or voluntary exile, etc. – di Prima’s poem also makes room for completely female experiences – or for experiences that often affect women – such as unplanned pregnancies or forced prostitution.²²⁷ Similarly, the poem deals with the dangers of illegal abortions,²²⁸ whose secrecy took many lives: “laid out flowerless in abandoned basement / blue stiff & salt injection / just out of reach” (125).²²⁹ All of these instances of female experience are seen as counter effects of the revolution; the dangers of falling back into a similarly oppressive situation while hoping to lead a “freer” life, also include women who find themselves used and sold by those who were to save her: “wrote lipstick ‘save yourself’ on tin rail of furnished / room bed / eloped w/ white slaver & died Indiana of unmentioned griefs [sic]” (126).

However, di Prima also includes successful stories – or at least not fatal – of women who manage to survive the revolution, finding peace and love in their friends-

²²⁷ Brenda Frazer’s example comes to mind in this regard. As I commented on the first chapter, that was one of the reasons why she is considered to have led – at least during that period of time in Mexico – the live of a Beat.

²²⁸ An issue that was also articulated in the memoirs studied in the first chapter. Abortion is seen as a downside to the sexual revolution and, as di Prima wrote, just “[o]ne of the unsung, unspoken, ways women risked their lives.” (*Recollections* 230)

²²⁹ Saline or instillation abortion, a method developed in the 1930s, is performed with the removal of the amniotic fluid with a needle and the injection of a saline solution that kills the second-trimester fetus and induces labor. It has been criticized due to the unnecessary pain it causes the fetus and the risks – physical and psychological – women suffer.

invaded apartments: “in love again peaceful scrawled candlesmoke ‘there is/salvation’ triumphant on borrowed ceiling/while friends coughed in the kitchen” (126).²³⁰ Similarly, motherhood is also more or less happily integrated with alternative lifestyles of women “who left tapestries, evidence, baby bottle behind in Vancouver / & hitched to Seattle for the mushroom season” (126). All of these experiences are meant to draw attention to the situation of women and, as she uses a structure reminiscent of Ginsberg’s, they also expose masculine obliviousness to – or conscious erasure of – female experience. In addition, because of the contemporaneity of di Prima’s women in the poem, it could be analyzed as an example of the inadequacy of the critique based on a Goddess feminism that deals only with a utopian past. The many references to contemporary America or other places around the world, as well as to the actual dangers women face – abortion, drugs, starvation, etc. – show di Prima’s concern and investment in a feminist poetry that takes into account the present situation of women. Only the sporadic references to the mare – “eyes of a doe / who has been hunted” (125) – link female experience with the mystical power of the Goddess in this poem, who is, in any case, built in reaction to women’s situation, not the other way around. The references to the Loba remembering she was a mare are employed to encourage women to keep on walking; both the woman with “the babies wrapped in a scarf” (127) and the Loba/mare with “her ankles fragile / [but] unrooted” (127) face the danger they are exposed to in the present and walk into the future, rather than retreating to a utopian world devoid of patriarchal threats.

Even in the poems in which Loba stands alone as an incarnation of “woman” understood as a category, the threat of patriarchal violence is still analyzed, even though Loba finds it easier to fight back in this form. For instance, in “LOBA, TO APOLLO, AT THE FOUNTAIN OF HEALING,” Loba recalls instances in which women have been abused by men – confronting her pain in order to free herself from it. Some of the abuses reported include persecution and death – “were we not killed, out of jealousy, run thru / w/ a black lance, every moon? / did I not burn?” (147), as well as slavery and sexual violence – “was I not sold & my daughters broken? / I remember / yr teeth on my

²³⁰ This sentence might be a reference to Brenda Frazer’s *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* where, as I mentioned in the first chapter, Frazer relates a drug-induced experience as a revelation that made her write that sentence on the wall (136).

half-formed breasts / welts on my legs” (147). Directly addressing the patriarchal figure, Loba suggests the violence suffered still affect her creativity:

can you laugh, father
can you deny
mouthfuls of blackened blood
I spit out
each morning
to sing? (148)

Once this situation has been exposed, however, the Loba wishes to put an end to a discourse in which woman ends up always victimized – and thus unable to part with her pain. Spinning in place like a dervish, she now wishes to create a vortex that would help her – and women in general – get rid of the pain and rage that is associated with the female body, so much that it has been her “claim / to commonality of woman” (147).²³¹ In order to free the female body as an entity from the abuse it has been subjected to, one must stop living that body through remembered pain and rage. The idea is then to “[r]efuse / the remembering skin [...] to be born / in uniqueness.”²³² (148)

The strength women are to obtain from the Loba is highlighted in a series of poems in which Loba, gaining power from her ever-changing nature, successfully escapes patriarchal control. In “And Will You Hunt the Loba?” the speaker deems those who wish to hunt Loba as fools, stating that none of their techniques – “lance, spear or arrow, gun or / boomerang [...] nets of love” (29) – will work. In addition, the men’s intention, if the hunter/animal analogy was not clear enough, is further described in terms of the way they can profit from her:

Do you hope
to wrap you warm in her pelt
for the coming winter?

²³¹ In the poem “LOBA ADDRESSES THE GODDESS / OR THE POET AS PRIESTESS ADDRESSES THE LOBA-GODDESS,” pain and tiredness are also discussed as a defining female characteristic: “we wear exhaustion like a painted robe / I & my sisters” (134).

²³² This, of course, would only be an option in those cases in which women already enjoy a certain freedom. For women who still find their body abused on a regular basis, who are killed, traded and used as commodities in wars and other conflicts, this “get over with” strategy would be nothing but a utopia.

no light but her own (281)

Her position outside already established categories – gender roles for the female sex – and her description in the rather negative terms “greasy” and “terrible”, should not be understood as the acknowledgement of her dark essence, but rather as the celebration of her resistance against fixed definitions. This ideal position outside patriarchy, nevertheless, is not achieved magically through the power allegedly inherited from a female deity – Mother Goddess, Mother Nature, Loba or any other – but through a conscious fight against the mechanisms of oppression – and that is the reason why di Prima’s Loba dwells in a patriarchal world.

Although di Prima’s sexual politics are not as overt as elsewhere in her work, for example, in her “Revolutionary Letter # 66”, where the female body was explicitly used as a weapon against men,²³⁴ di Prima employs a very similar strategy in *Loba*. Rather than retreating to a utopian, matriarchal world, the exposition of an oppressive domesticity and of the physical and spiritual abuse women suffer due to their subordination intends to unite women in a healing process that is also a direct attack on patriarchy. As Chellis Glendinning states in “The Healing Powers of Women,” “[f]or women to heal ourselves is a political act. To reclaim ourselves as whole and strong beings is to say ‘No’ to the patriarchal view of women as weak and ‘misbegotten’.” (*The Politics of Women’s Spirituality* 291) Including the goddess’s power and healing properties for women within a specific context of female physical, spiritual and artistic subordination, di Prima’s *Loba* draws attention to the inadequacy of an essentialist, unique, representation of femininity and encourages, on the contrary, the development of each woman’s capacity for self-creation.

III.4.3. Mythology & Mysticism: Revision and Appropriation

“I have been a graveyard these last thousand years

²³⁴ The poem, dedicated “to the patriarchs,” reinvents women’s body as a site of revolution, rather than compliance and passivity:

My body a weapon as yours is
MY CHILDREN WEAPONS ETERNALLY
My tits weapons against the immaterial
[...] My cunt a bomb exploding
yr christian conscience (*Revolutionary Letters* 83)

I shall rise, like the full moon, from that cemetery” (“Litany” 48)

Near the end of part three in *Loba*, Diane di Prima composes – or rather compiles – a poem entirely based on a list of female names, apparently following no logical order and without commas to separate one from the other. Forming one big block occupying half a page, these women – “Belili Ishtar The White Lady Mother of All Living Cerridwen / Olwen Blodeuwedd” (54) etc. – stand for different representations of female power in the popular and historical imagination. These include goddesses, nymphs, monsters, and other fantastic creatures, from world mythologies, religions, folklore, or legends from different origins – Greek, Latin, Egyptian, Sumerian, Navajo, Japanese, Hopi, Irish, Welsh, Celtic, Etruscan, Indian, Hindu, Buddhist, Hebrew, Jewish, Christian, Yoruba, etc. Without elevating one over the other, the sum of names acts as a catalogue of pre-established female identities – some positive and some negative – that have been kept alive by men and women in the retelling of myths. Within *Loba* these women are also called upon, and their stories retold in different ways; either by invoking their presence in relation to the power of Loba, as incarnations of the goddess, or through the conscious rewriting of their story to challenge the way they are depicted. In this section, I look at the poems in which di Prima specifically revises some of these narratives in a feminist fashion. First by looking at Eve and Mary, di Prima questions a specific creational myth that has been historically employed to subordinate women, reducing them to sinners – Eve – or mothers – Mary.²³⁵ Secondly, I investigate the presence of the goddess within di Prima’s *Loba*, paying special attention to the construction of a mystical discourse that stands in opposition to more rigid patriarchal mythical and religious discourses.

Di Prima investigates the relation of religious discourses with the construction of feminine archetypes in – primarily – two sections: “Loba as Eve”, and “The Seven Joys of the Virgin”. The former is influenced by a lost text from The New Testament apocrypha – as such, left outside of the canonical Bible – from which just a few quotations by Epiphanius survive. To further complicate the study of this text, Epiphanius only quoted from the original gospel to condemn as depravation what he saw as a celebration of sex in the gospel. Di Prima uses one of the surviving quotes as a

²³⁵ I focus on the myths/stories of Eve and Mary as they represent two dominant archetypal female constructions within patriarchal discourses. As divine women, they offer a contrasting point to the mysticism and goddess worship that I analyze in the second part of this section.

preamble to the five poems in “Loba as Eve” – a quote she later breaks down in verses that inspire each individual poem. The quote is the following:

I stood upon a high mountain and saw a tall man, and another of short stature, and heard something like the sound of thunder and went nearer in order to hear. Then he spoke to me and said: I am thou and thou art I, and wherever thou art, I there I am, and I am sown in all things; and whence thou wilt, thou gatherest me, but when thou gatherest me, thou gatherest thyself. (Panarion, 26.3.1.)²³⁶

Though the lack of information relating the origin of this text makes the reading complicated, it is commonly believed that Eve is the witness and/or reporter of the encounter (Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 1* 360). In “Loba as Eve”, the poet also takes into consideration Gnostic beliefs which often interpret Adam and Eve as embodying two sides of a same person – Adam the soul and Eve the spirit. Diane di Prima, in her recreation of Eve, is making use of this dualistic nature through which speaker and receiver merge, hoping also to shift power hierarchies

In “*i am touh & thou art i*”,²³⁷ Loba as Eve writes herself as an omnipresence which embodies everyone and all things – as such, containing the male too. Dissolving the corporality of the divine masculine presence in the gospel, Loba contains his actions within herself: “your words / slip off my tongue, I am pearl / of yr final tears, none other / than yr flesh, though it go soft” (71). Similarly, in “*and where thou art i am*”, she inhabits all places, whether they are mystical – wind, stones, galaxies, etc. – or real – “held / by two hoodlums under a starting truck. / crocheting in the attic.” (72) Di Prima keeps dissecting the quote and expanding on its meaning in the poem “*& in all things am i dispersed*” (73), where she positions Loba/Eve as the creator/destroyer of the universe, as ““our’ / Materia, mother & matrix / eternally in labor.” (73) By using “our” in quotation marks, the author draws attention to the process through which she is revising the creational myth – as Hebrews and Christians will later do when turning Eve

²³⁶ Epiphanius used the Gospel of Eve as an example of Gnostic sexual rituals where semen – body of Christ – and menstrual blood – blood of Christ – were consumed and offered to the sky. In *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church still Matter* April D. DeConick discusses this distorted reading.

²³⁷ While in the quote preceding the poems she uses capital letters for “I”, “Thou”, “Me”, “Thyself”, etc., she erases all capitals, even the grammatically mandatory “I”, in the title of her poems. This option could be read as a rejection of established hierarchies perpetuated through religious texts.

into the downfall of man – willfully placing Eve as the mother goddess. In “& from wherever thou willst thou gatherest me”, man is shown as taking advantage of her power, sucking her energy – “suckle at my tits. Crucify / me like a beetle on yr desk” (74).²³⁸ Placing Eve as Loba in opposition to the sinful Eve of Christian discourses, her power challenges the authority of the representational imposition performed in the Bible: “I explode / your certain myth. [...] I spit oracles at yr door / in a language you have forgotten.” (74) Finally, in the last poem – “but in gathering me thou gatherest thyself” – the otherworldly state of Loba as “[b]lue earth [...] never on this earth” (75) is juxtaposed with the specifically bodily situated female sin on earth. In turn, “Loba as Eve” stresses the process through which religious and mythical discourses are altered to accommodate different beliefs or political interests; from the dualistic, mystical power of Eve as “creatrix” – from which women can more easily benefit – to the reductionist interpretation of Eve as the eternal temptress – “apple you eternally devour / forever in your hand” (75).

Di Prima’s interpretation of the Gospel of Eve merges Gnostic and mystic discourses, which she believes offer women more space for self-empowerment and self-representation than the traditional western religious discourse. In “The Seven Joys of the Virgin”, similarly, di Prima exposes the construction of women through religion – in this case, the offensive is launched against the Christian dogma. The title of this section alludes to the popular devotion and celebration of certain events in the life of Mary – widely represented in literature and painting – and which conventionally include the Annunciation, the Nativity of Jesus, the Adoration of the Magi, the Resurrection of Christ, the Ascension of Christ to Heaven, the Pentecost, and the Coronation of the Virgin in Heaven. Just as di Prima did in “Loba as Eve”, in this section she revisits each scene through the eyes of Mary, offering an alternative space where it is Mary herself, and not God’s messengers, who recounts the events.

The first event revisited is “Annunciation”, which describes the moment when the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and informs her that she will bear the son of God. The way Mary recounts how she experienced this event clearly challenges the external

²³⁸ As part of a discourse, Eve can easily be turned into a positive “creatrix” or mother goddess, or used as a scapegoat for the downfall of man – the embodiment of human sin she embodies in the Christian discourse.

imposition of “joy” as a suitable adjective to describe what happened – which in the poem is recorded as a violent rape²³⁹ rather than the favor of God. In her own words:

the tall man, towering,
it seemed to me
in anger, I was fifteen only
& his urgency
(murderous rage) an assault I
bent under. I saw the lilies bend
also. (101)

The poem keeps focusing on the adolescent’s fear and the violence upon which the angel – “[a] flat stone. Towering. / Murderous rage” (101) – acts.²⁴⁰ Although “They call it / love” (101), what Mary experiences in this poem is a super natural force that takes her to the ground, moving tiles and bending plants with the harshness of his voice. Significantly, Mary’s words repeatedly allude to how his words resounded in her body, more specifically, her womb – “Sound trembled in my gut, my / bowels spoke w/ fear [...] my bowels caught / w/ fear.” (101). Similarly unable to comprehend what was happening, all Mary remembers is the man’s repeatedly allusion to her womb – how it is going to be put to use:

He did not move, his voice
had turned to thunder, there was
no word to remember. but Womb
He spoke of my womb.
The fruit of my womb.

²³⁹ Mary Daly, in *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1990), reads the annunciation as an example of the patriarchal myth of the rape/defeat of the Goddess – a recurrent theme in analyses exploring Greek myth through Zeus’s frequent raping rampages. For Daly, this theme, “[i]n christianity [...] is refined – distinguished almost beyond recognition. The rape of the rarefied remains of the Goddess in the christian myth is mind/spirit rape.” (85)

²⁴⁰ In the introduction to *A Feminist Companion to Mariology* (2005), Amy-Jill Levine recounts an anecdote of how as a little Jewish girl the image of the Virgin Mary provoked an uneasy feeling on her. As she tells it: “When I was a child growing up in a predominantly Roman Catholic town in Massachusetts, my friends informed me that Jesus would return the same way he had come before – that is, a Jewish virgin would be his mother. Being the only Jewish virgin in the neighborhood, I might therefore become the messiah’s mother. Consequently, during much of second grade I was absolutely petrified that an angel would appear in my bedroom and say, ‘Hail, Amy-Jill’, and tell me I was going to be pregnant.” (1)

Sunlight & thunder. I had not
 heard thunder before
 in such blinding light. (102)

In “VISITATION: Elizabeth & Mary”, di Prima recounts Mary’s first job as the bearer of Jesus, which consists of visiting Elizabeth – also pregnant through divine intervention – and “recruiting” her and her unborn child to the Christian faith. In the poem, the women’s pregnant bodies are contrasted with the description of the dead, infertile, ground they walk: “Not small woolly grass / not furze / will cover us. (yr belly leaps & mine is still as stone) / Not the wild prairie grass / that hides / white antelope” (104). Their unnatural conceptions – “the babes / have melted all” (105) – are depicted as harming nature, and their babies as alien beings that grow inside them. Because of their imposed status as holy vessels, they now inhabit a dualistic position as bringers of faith and desolation; their babies represent the tension between the Christian dogma versus the worship of Nature: “all nations / calling as holy / bringers of desolation / calling us blest.” (106).

The disassociation with nature, especially in the larger context of *Loba*, emphasizes the idea that although both Mary and Elizabeth are portrayed as the living carriers of God’s faith, they do not participate in his divinity, acting merely as vessels. In her article “Divine Women”, Luce Irigaray investigates the passive, instrumental, position of women in Catholic religion, one that could very much apply to di Prima’s position in the revision of Mary’s life:

We are still and always guardians of the phylogenesis of the human race (with man, on the other hand, guarding its ontogenesis?), we are still and always between different incarnations, and devoted to the task of assisting man in his incarnation: a terrestrial and marine place for man’s conception and gestation, with the mother feeding him, guiding his steps, fostering his growth, aiding him to develop in relation to his established gender, his Man-God. (*Women, Knowledge, and Reality* 478)

Mary’s instrumentality together with the unnaturalness of her pregnancy is further explored in “NATIVITY”, the poem that depicts Jesus’ birth. In addition to the violence with which the labor itself takes place – as I already mentioned in the first

section – this poem emphasizes Mary’s physical and emotional distance from her baby. Describing Jesus as a beast, Mary is unable to answer the question, “What prince / fathered this mite? Silence / sticky as cheese” (108), and laments the events that made her “come, world-weary here to lay / this final seed” (108). In addition, a flashback to the moment she became pregnant returns to the rape theme by describing a masculine figure that appeared to her:

Horned & dancing, I did not
question. I lay on stone as in the oracle. He hissed, I answered
He danced between / stone pillars
no language in common. It was
coupling of fierce reluctant blood. And free. (108)

Through God’s command – the horns can be read as reference to his power – the Holy Spirit impregnates Mary, whose apparent compliance seems to coincide with the official versions in the Bible, where Mary does not resist the angel or the Holy Spirit’s words. This, in addition, has contributed to the perpetuation of her passive role, as Mary Daly notes, “[w]ithin the rapist christian myth of the Virgin Birth the role of Mary is utterly minimal; yet she is ‘there.’ She gives her unqualified ‘consent.’ She bears the Son who pre-existed her and then she adores him. According to catholic theology, she was even ‘saved’ by him in advance of her own birth.” (*Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* 85) Rather than just complying with the female passivity of a traditional reading of Mary, di Prima is exposing the powerful and domineering control mechanisms that operate in the patriarchal myth the Bible represents. If she “did not / question” (108) his actions, it is because she was literary unable to escape his power, or to exist outside his representational universe.²⁴¹ At the same time, by given Mary a voice of her own, she is able to challenge her supposedly willingness, even if it means ultimately leaving Mary in state of eternal victimization.

In a similar fashion, “FLIGHT INTO EGYPT” recounts Mary, Joseph and Jesus fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod’s baby-killing-spree. Without altering the official –

²⁴¹ Maurice Hamington, in *Hail Mary?: The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (1995), states that “[t]he Cult of Mary is a veritable Trojan horse for women’s sexual expression. Women can identify with her because of shared gender, and they can feel empowered because Mary is elevated to quasi-divine status. However, she ultimately panders to male domination, particularly in her sexuality.” (78)

read Biblical – unfolding of the event, the poem shifts the attention to Mary’s guilty conscience over the death of the innocent babies. Allowing Mary a little bit of black humor, di Prima sees her as pondering the possibility of having saved the wrong kid:

Pursued

by cries of 200 infants
 each of whom
 might have been the Christ.
 I do not know
 Which one I have carried away
 on this aging burro. (109)

After “RESURRECTION”, where Jesus “blasts / unhealing force” (116), the last poem in this section – “CORONATION” – completes Mary’s objectification with her coronation as the Queen of Heaven. To further deprive her of the body that was previously used as a vessel, with her coronation – similarly described in imposing terms – she is completely robbed of her corporality. While Jesus has returned to his body, she is stripped from it: “implacable son sets weight of metal / on my immaterial head / o *he* is actual, it is now I / become wraith” (117). Turned into an involuntary image of devotion, she becomes a statue that now yearns for “the grace of that girl / who bent to angels. / Flexible limbs of [her] flight / thru Egyptian desert” (118). Di Prima’s statuesque solidification of the Virgin Mary is reminiscent of H.D.’s *Trilogy*, where she revisits and revises religious and mythical narratives and characters in search for a unifying divine presence. Through the image of “the Lady” – who encompasses different mythical and religious traits – H.D. denounces the objectification of femininity in these discourses. In “Tribute to the Angels” she draws attention to the different representation of this female figure: “Our Lady of the Chair; / we have seen her, an empress, / magnificent in pomp and grace, / [...] / we have seen her head bowed down / with the weight of a doomed crown, / or we have seen her, a wisp of a girl / trapped in a golden halo;” (93) In her poem H.D. uses these and other representations²⁴² to

²⁴² Specifically referring to pictorial representations of the Lady, H.D. writes: “the painters did very well by her; / it is true, they missed never a line / of the suave turn of the head / or subtle shade of lowered eyelid / or eye-lids half-raised; you find / her everywhere (or did find), / in cathedral, museum, cloister, / at the turn of the palace stair.” (94) She is similarly trapped within carved doors – “you have carved her tall and unmistakable, / a hieratic figure, the veiled Goddess” (102) – or painted in stained-glass windows: “imprisoned in leaden bars / in a colored window” (103).

disassociate traditional depictions from the way the Lady appeared to her in a vision: “But none of these, none of these suggest her as I saw her” (96). Dispossessed “of her usual attributes” (97), in *Trilogy*, this female religious presence is allowed to create new stories, carrying a book with “the blank pages / of the unwritten volume of the new” (103).

In *Loba*, it is now that Mary has been solidified into the Christian myth, that di Prima allows herself to more radically revise Mary’s story, linking her transformation into a less tangible being with a newfound power reminiscent of mystical discourses. Just as the Loba benefited from an elusive, ever-changing nature, Mary finds that the “perks” of being a celestial being include a freedom of movement she did not have when she had a body – especially when it was so evidently not her own. Indeed, this poem ends with Mary’s determination to flee from her new position as Queen of Heaven, an action that conveys the conversion of her body into a symbol of feminine power inhabiting the universe:

O, I shall burst

Burst thru

Take now

milke of the stars

& rub it in my flesh

Like sabbath ointment

I will fly

Broomless, unarmed, unready

I will fly (119)

Unlike “Loba as Eve”, in which the double-meaning and elusive nature of the Gnostic gospel permitted a more open, gender-equal, reading, in “The Seven Joys of the Virgin” the rigidity of the Catholic discourse prevents the author from freeing Mary from her position. Just as Kyger’s Penelope who, although given a more flexible space for self exploration, still found herself entrapped in Homer’s patriarchal myth, Mary in *Loba* cannot resist the events – joys – she is traditionally praised for, even if through di Prima’s revision these are exposed as acts of violence. However, as this last poem has shown, di Prima does provide Mary with the power to escape the patriarchal imposition

that came to her on the form of veneration. The fact that it is only outside the canonical construction of Mary that she is finally granted some power should not be read as the celebration of an escapist, goddess-centered utopian universe. On the contrary, I believe di Prima's text functions within patriarchy – Mary was on the whole represented as a victim in the poems analyzed – only to show that women can – or rather have to – make use of the tools provided to fight back. After all, if Mary can escape at the end and find a different/feminine source of energy, it is only because she subverted the supposedly position of inferiority she was “crowned” into.

In the rest of this section, instead of looking at examples in which di Prima rewrites or revisits the story of specific mythical religious characters, I consider the way in which the Mother Goddess – or any of her incarnations – delineates a different kind of female myth, which in *Loba* functions as a freer space for female subjectivity. In addition, I take into account di Prima's different uses of myth, in order to investigate the relationship between the creative and literary renditions of the Goddess and its appropriation for feminist or political discourses.

The influence and presence of the Goddess in di Prima's *Loba* – most of which was written in the 70s – coincides chronologically with a growing concern voiced by groups of women over the lack of space for the development of a female agency not determined by the way it has been defined by men. As Thelma J. Shinn put it in 1986:

[i]n the twentieth century, faith in patriarchy and its myths has been seriously undermined. While those in power are inevitably threatened by any breakdown in cultural values, the oppressed members of society – women and minorities in the United States in particular – might find such a breakdown to their advantage as they see the stereotypes which have predefined their characters and their society disintegrating. (*Worlds within Women* 9)

The worship of the Goddess, closely related to the Second Wave Feminism, comes out from a period of growing political and personal dissatisfaction with the position of women in a world ruled by men. The Goddess, supposedly preceding the Christian construction of femininity that di Prima explored in the poems analyzed in the last sections, offered an alternative space in which women were connected to a feminine, primordial, creating force. In addition, with the work of anthropologists such

as Marija Gimbutas,²⁴³ the cult of the Goddess was articulated, not as an escapist fantasy of a world where women were powerful, but as a historical second-coming of a rightful female power. Jean Markale, in *The Great Goddess: Reverence of the Divine Feminine from the Paleolithic to the Present* (1999) similarly defends the existence of the Goddess by claiming that traditional power attributed to a male God – and, by extension, to men – has been nothing but a conscious misreading of actual evidence in order to undermine women’s historical authority. According to his reasoning, “[i]f we carefully examine the oldest archeological data and compare it with mythological motifs derived from the collective memory, which forgets nothing, we see that this deception is the result of a sociocultural disruption” (48). Leaving aside the actual historical truth behind the cult of a pre-Christian Goddess,²⁴⁴ interesting to my analysis of the poetical use of myth is the power Goddess worshippers often confer to myths and ancient stories as remembered or imagined by the collective memory.

In *Loba*, di Prima recognizes the Goddess’ right to power through poems in which the speaker channels her voice – “I have been a graveyard these last thousand years / I shall rise, like the full moon, from that cemetery” (48) – or by invoking her presence in poems such as “THE POET PRAYS TO THE LOBA”:

*Lady fling your bright drop to us, emblems
of your love, throw
your green scarf on the battered earth once more
O smile, disrobe for us, unveil
your eyes (49)*

²⁴³ As Lotte Motz writes in *The Faces of the Goddess* (1997), the “worship of the Goddess, so it is asserted, reaches back to the dawn of human existence; at that time she was the sole all-encompassing deity in which earth and all its creatures had originated, as formulated by Marija Gimbutas: ‘[I]t was the sovereign mystery and creative power of the female as the source of life that developed into the first religious experiences. The Great Mother Goddess who gives birth to all creation out of the holy darkness of her womb became the metaphor for nature herself.’” (24)

²⁴⁴ Gimbutas’ book, although it has proven to be very influential for feminists and other people interested in myths, has been greatly criticized in the archeological and anthropological fields, due to her alleged lack of sufficient evidence and the sometimes loose connections she makes between facts. One of this critiques is found in *The Goddess Unmasked: the Rise of Neopagan Feminist Spirituality* (1999), written by Phillip G. Davis. In the book he sets out to unmask the theological, anthropological and historical claims made by the Goddess Movement.

Speaking to the Goddess on behalf of women, the poet initiates through rite the search of an ancient divine power central to their independence, as it offers them the possibility of opening paths not marked by men: “All things are possible within the mother [...] The Roads not taken. / Opening to us / as She opens / shd we dare” (166). Worshipping a female Goddess empowers women in so far as she allows them to see themselves through her – have her as a role model – something that did not happen with a masculine God. Following this logic, if in a phallogocentric universe women lack a subjectivity of their own – occupying instead object positions – recognizing the Goddess through her female body would finally grant them access to an identity not construed in masculine terms.

In this respect, Luce Irigaray discussed the relationship between divinity and the development of masculine and female subjectivity in her article “Divine Women”, where God is interpreted as the model against which human beings see themselves. If such is the case, in Irigaray’s view, “as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own” (*Sexes and Genealogies* 63). Understood as the other which we use as mirror images – shaping our actions and ambitions – a masculine God actually prevents women from becoming women, forcing them to aspire to the masculine divine which is, to make things worse, a goal they can never achieve. As Irigaray puts it:

The (male) ideal other has been imposed upon women by men. Man is supposedly woman’s more perfect other, her model, her essence. The most human and most divine goal woman can conceive is to become *man*. If she is to become woman, she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of *her* subjectivity. (*Sexes and Genealogies* 64)

Although for di Prima the connection to divinity is not as explicit or theological as in Irigaray – she describes human beings’ destiny to “generate the human, the divine, within us and among us” (60) – in *Loba* she also stresses the necessity of recognizing and nurturing from a female divinity in order to achieve a female subjectivity uncontaminated by patriarchal impositions. This divine feminine, however, is not necessarily articulated as a regressive turn into the magical, rather, it means understanding the female god as “an other that we have yet to make actual, as a religion

of life, strength, imagination, creation, which exists for us both within and beyond, as our possibility of a present and a future.” (*Sexes and Genealogies* 72) Although Irigaray’s position is much more philosophical than the approach adopted by most Goddess worshippers – especially those who are keen to emphasize the legitimacy of her power – di Prima’s *Loba* stresses the necessity of turning away from a literal reading of the Goddess, into a metaphorical and psychological position which grant women with the power to continually construct themselves. The Goddess, as the woman who seeks her, appears in *Loba* in a constant state of evolution:

The Memory of far things
is the continuous presence
in which I discover my Self.

Winds of change
Bringing smell of the wheatfields
of graveyard, swamp. (241)

The capitalization of “Memory” and “Self” highlights the connection between the presence of the female divine and female self-discovery, which is an ongoing process in so far as the image of the Goddess keeps revealing itself to women in different situations – “She does not leave in her going, she arrives / continuously, / no epiphany / only Presence” (242). One way in which di Prima establishes the Goddess’s continuous change is by recurring to all-encompassing descriptions in which the *Loba* has different forms, inhabiting animals and natural elements, but also objects, sounds, abstract feelings, situations, etc. In the first of three consecutive poems describing *Loba* included in part three, she is “the wind you never leave behind / black cat you killed in empty lot, she is / smell of the summer weeds, the one who lurks / in open childhood closets, she coughs / in the next room, hoots, nests in your hair / she is incubus” (45). The negativity of these descriptions, which portray *Loba* as a rather threatening presence²⁴⁵ is slightly overturned in the following poem, in which she is described through nature and growth: “she is the scrub oak, juniper / on the mesa, she is Joshua tree / in your desert, she grows / in cracks in the pavement / she tastes of sage, tastes

²⁴⁵ In that same poem she is also “harpy on your fire-escape [...] deathgrip / you cannot cut away, black limpid eyes / of mad girls singing carols behind mesh” (45).

bitter / as chaparral” (47). Here, her bitterness is not related to death or insanity as in the last poem, but to her nature-derived properties – “she is born in tangled woodlands of kelp” (46). Contrasting with these depictions, in the third poem, the bombardment of images describing the Loba is replaced with the concrete representation of Loba as a dreamy girl in love:

She lay
on the straw mat
in the warm room
thinking about love, all the
afternoon, at least
remembering, not thinking
at all. (47)

Lying on the floor, “slightly absurd, headband askew” (47) with “a silly smile / on her lips, her legs / akimbo” (47), di Prima’s Loba resists easy categorizations. When you think she is to be seen through the negative stereotypes of women – as a hag, crazy girl, etc., as in the first poem – she renounces her corporality in favor of a communion with natural forces, animals and elements; but once again, she changes back into the very tangible image of a frivolous girl in a – rather than empowering – silly situation.

The Loba’s representational ambivalence and obscurity is even more evident in the poems in which she speaks for herself; using a highly spiritual and mystic discourse she appears transcendent, infinite, and yet available to woman through experience. In “LITANY”, the Loba uses the same anaphoric construction employed by the poet in her description of the Goddess:

I have been a fingernail in your skin
I have been a gold spike in the skull
I have hung, I have dropped from tress
I have dropped piecemeal from the strongest shoulder.
[...] Do you sweat, do you rack your brain?
I am the lump of wax in your ear
I am the music that you cannot hear
The song you do not remember (48)

On a basic level, this ineffable representation of the Goddess can be read as another strategy to fight a scientific knowledge often linked to a patriarchal institution. In the poem “THE CRITIC REVIEWS LOBA”, di Prima foresees the critics’ response to her collection, which is based on *Loba*’s alleged lack of historical and scientific knowledge and methods. The critic raises questions such as, “*Where is the history in this, & how / does geometry of the sacred mountain give strength / to the metaphor*” (138), or “*where are the dates, street names / precise equations? Must we accept / that star clouds burst with feeling*” (138). Within *Loba*, these questions, on the one hand, are felt as irrelevant to the nature of the poem and, on the other hand, they fail to comprehend the mystic source of energy of the Goddess. Just as the *Loba* managed to escape patriarchal violence through her many changes, the cult of the Goddess cannot be measured – seized – with a patriarchal knowledge. On another level, the use of a mystic discourse based on immanence/transcendence of the Goddess allies di Prima’s collection with feminist writers and thinkers that celebrated the figure of the mystic woman as an example of female empowerment and autonomy. As Toril Moi writes,

[t]hough not all mystics were women, mysticism nevertheless seems to have formed the one area of high spiritual endeavor under patriarchy where women could and did excel more frequently than men [...] Mystical imagery stresses the night of the soul: the obscurity and confusion of consciousness, the loss of subjecthood (*Sexual/Textual Politics* 136)

Embracing unconscious sources of knowledge, and rejecting masculine models for self-identity and representation, mysticism becomes a discourse from which the Goddess can empower herself. Both Beauvoir (*Second Sex*) and Irigaray (*Speculum of the Other Woman*) celebrated to some extent the image of the mystic, even if they claimed that in Western and Christian mysticism women still occupied a space created by men. As Amy L. Hollywood states, “Beauvoir’s reading of mysticism [...] is intended to demonstrate how even those women who seem to have transcended men’s positioning of them in the place of the Other are in fact still living out the romantic fantasy assigned to them because of their sex” (*Sensible Ecstasy* 127). Although Irigaray sought to bridge the gap between divinity and female subjectivity by supplanting the masculine divine figure with a female divinity, Hollywood claims in her book that both authors failed to comprehend the way medieval Christian mystics

disrupted the heterosexual masculine religious domain in which Beauvoir and Irigaray analyzed the mystic experience by treating “sexuality and gender as fluid entities, thereby disrupting the ideological constraints in which their texts are constructed” (207). Although the power of a fluid, androgynous, and/or hermaphrodite gender will be important in Anne Waldman’s *Iovis*, the Loba in di Prima’s collection works in an intermediate state between transcendence – Loba is “she whose face we have never seen” (193) – and immanence – as she manifests herself in the material world through different women, goddesses, objects, etc. In this sense, di Prima’s mystic discourse in *Loba* elevates – rather than erases – the female body and sexuality by making it a political site to fight for women’s independence. The female body is crucial to her representation of a divine power because through their bodies women connect to the Goddess, but the Loba goddess also transcends corporality. Through this conceptual dualism, women perform their independence through their bodies,²⁴⁶ but are also given the means to move beyond that, as reducing women to their body – as the example of the Virgin Mary shows – might make them vulnerable to patriarchal control.

The discussion about the tension between women and their bodies, and the presence of the (in)corporeal Goddess, leads us back to the way women appropriate her power; how they use her myth. In *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (1987), Carol Christ – in a chapter suitably entitled “Why Women Need the Goddess” – mentions some aspects of the Goddess’ symbolism women benefit from. These include, “the Goddess as affirmation of female power, the female body, the female will, and women’s bonds and heritage” (131). All of these aspects – relevant to di Prima’s *Loba* – are normally partially or totally constructed in Goddess worshippers’ texts, on the belief of the primordial myth of the Mother Goddess. Leaving the critiques of the apolitical nature of such texts behind,²⁴⁷ as I analyzed through the example of figures such as Kali, Lilith, Eve, or Mary, within Loba’s many incarnations and invocations of a female divinity and power, there is an underlining warning of the dangers of mythical appropriation. On the one hand, di Prima’s methodology can be studied as akin to the work of feminist archeologists, anthropologists, or simply goddess

²⁴⁶ Bodies that are, as I analyzed in the last sections, carefully inscribed within a socio-political context – the patriarchal universe they inhabit.

²⁴⁷ Last section showed how Loba’s ancient power is rooted in the present situation of women, and how the exposition of patriarchal control is necessary in order to situate women in the present, not in a utopian matriarchal past.

devotees, who both literally and metaphorically – through actual data or creative invention – seek to bring the power of the Goddess back. In this respect, the elevation of the Mother Goddess, can be studied as a revision of the patriarchal creation myth, a counter-story in which phallocentrism is substituted with an essential female power.²⁴⁸ This position is adopted in di Prima's text, mainly, through the mystic discourse that represents Loba as an ancient essence that can be summoned by women. On the other hand, as the last two sections have shown, in di Prima's *Loba* the goddess' mysticism goes hand in hand with a situated, contemporary, denunciation of the situation of women. This is, in part, because of the malleability and – feminist – political potential of mythic references. As Babbage asserted, "to turn to myth is not of itself to disconnect from history; to invoke mythic metaphor in exploring femininity is not to assert an unchanging or universal female self." (Babbage, *Re-Visioning Myth* 28)

III.5. Anne Waldman: *The Iovis Trilogy*

Anne Waldman's *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* (2011) is a 25 year long project divided in three books – "All is full of Jove", "Guardian and Scribe" and "Eternal War" – that is often described as a feminist epic. With Joanne Kyger's *The Tapestry and the Web* and Diane di Prima's *Loba, Iovis* shares the focus on female experience and the denunciation of patriarchal modes of oppression and violence. Similarly, as it was the case in the two previously studied texts, myth plays an important role in Waldman's poetry, where different mythical, historical or religious figures are invoked, mocked, or used as mouthpieces.

Although Kyger and di Prima also employed an epic mode in their collections, in *Iovis*, Waldman examines more closely the position of female authors who write within a markedly masculine literary framework. Thus, in the first section I consider Waldman's approach to *Iovis* as an epic text in the tradition of writers such as Pound, Olson, or Williams, among others, paying special attention to the articulation of female experience. After that I take into consideration the position of patriarchy within *Iovis*,

²⁴⁸ As Babbage writes, "[o]ne argument, frequently (if not always fairly) associated with radical and 'cultural' strands of second-wave feminism, has been to celebrate myth as a potentially feminine sphere and site of 'authentic' female experience. This position is frequently justified through assertion of an ancient woman-centred culture, long buried, that could be (at least partially) recovered through a process akin to archaeological excavation". (*Re-visioning Myth* 25)

focusing primarily on the author's use of texts and documents to expose the mechanisms of war and the construction of masculinity. In the last section, I investigate the position of myth within Waldman's epic in primarily two forms; as another discourse used by patriarchy to secure its power, and through the appropriation of specific mythical characters as sources of personal, poetical or political power.

III.5.1. Epic and Female Experience

“History – whose version? You have to ask”

(Anne Waldman, “Feminafest: Olson” 161)

The influence of the classic Greek epic genre, traditionally understood as an extended narrative poem, written in an elevated language, and focusing on the deeds of a hero, has left a literary trail in different cultures throughout the ages. From Homer's *The Odyssey* and *Iliad*, to Virgil's *Aeneid*, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, different authors have kept the genre alive actualizing it to serve the different historical and socio-political moments.²⁴⁹ Despite epics such as H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, or Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, to name a few, the epic continues to be seen as a predominantly masculine genre. In the introduction to *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic*, Bernard Schweizer notes that, “[b]oth in subject matter and in form, epic may well be the most exclusively gender coded of all literary genres; so much so that epic and masculinity appear to be almost coterminous” (1).²⁵⁰ This masculine tradition plays a very important role in *Iovis*, although the author also acknowledges the influences of female epics; in the introduction to Book I, Waldman situates her text within a specific modern epic tradition:

I honor and dance on the corpse of the poetry gone before me and especially here in a debt and challenge of epic masters Williams, Pound, Zukofsky, and Olson. But with the narrative of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* in mind, and her play with “argument.” I want to don armor of words as they do and fight with

²⁴⁹ The first chapter in Dean A. Miller's *The Epic Hero* (2002) offers a summary of the development of epic and tragic heroic narratives from ancient Greece, to the Romantic revival until the 21st Century

²⁵⁰ In *Rebecca West: Heroism, Rebellion and the Female Epic* (2002), Schweizer also commented on the predominance of male authors in the epic canon. In his own words, “Bakhtin maintained that epic represented ‘a world of fathers and of founders of families’ (13). In a similar vein, Jorge Luis Borges stated that ‘the important thing about the epic is a hero – a man who is a pattern for all men’ (64).” (7)

liberated tongue and punctured heart. But unlike the men's, my history and myths are personal ones. (3)

In this short paragraph, Waldman tackles on crucial aspects that will be relevant throughout the whole trilogy: the tension between influence and departure from epic masculine masters, the play with words and syntax as an alternative weapon to escape masculine control, and the representation of her own experience within the poem. In this section, I look at the way Waldman's *Iovis* functions as an epic text, paying special attention to its connection to history and her position as a woman writing an epic.

Unlike other texts which have been read as epics without necessarily having been written as such, *The Iovis Trilogy* is full of meta-narrative references to its composition as an epic text, concretely investigating which themes/characters are worthy of an epic literary treatment, and on what it means for her to be a woman writing an epic. The latter point can be observed through the dialogue Waldman initiates through her text with her masculine influences – namely Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky and Charles Olson. Specifically, the influence of these authors is particularly relevant to Waldman's use of the epic genre; *The Cantos*, *Paterson*, *The Maximus Poems* and *A* are representatives of a modernist approach to the genre that, both stylistically and thematically, significantly differentiates their texts from traditional epics such as Homer's or Virgil's. Extremely fragmentary and much less action-oriented, the modern epic is also characterized by the use a heterogeneous language and the lack of the foundational-national quality often present in classical epics. In *Iovis*, Waldman takes advantage of all of these traits to insert her specific female identity and experience by using a genre that, although traditionally very masculine, the modernist reinterpretation had turned into a more flexible and open space for female authors to appropriate. In what follows, I focus on the specific way in which Waldman appropriates, expands, or rejects both traditional and modernist approaches to the epic genre, arriving at her personal rendition of the genre.

The position of these and other masculine influences in *Iovis* can be linked to the presence of Virgil's *Iovis omnia plena*, the "All is full of Jove" that is recurrent throughout the trilogy and that even gives rise to the title of Book I. For the author, this sentence alludes to the presence of men in her life and work – which can be positive or negative – but also their tendency to possess or claim their power over people and

places. As Waldman notes, “*Iovis*, literally *of Jove*, is the possessive case, *owned by Jove* [...] [a]s well as about him, a weave” (2); As such, the masculine influence in *Iovis* signifies “both a celebration and a danger” (2), a complex movement that is exemplified in the treatment of the epic as a traditionally masculine genre.

Parting from the example set by masculine authors, Waldman uses imitation and mockery to actualize the epic genre and accommodate her own position and political concerns. For instance, in Book II, the Latin poet Virgil appears to draw the poet’s attention toward her poem as an epic text. In “LACRIMARE, LACRIMATUS”, Waldman reflects upon “*the appropriate ‘stuff’ for epic attention*” (529) and departing from the Latin author, who is described as a “*referee or reference point*” (529), she suggests the following as possible answers: “*War, gender, language?*” (529). Stretching the categories she has left intentionally open, in this section her aim is to use the epic genre in a different way, stretching the “stuff” the epic is made of, to build her poem on the suffering of those who are typically left out of the scope of epic accounts. As she puts it, rather than merely copying authors like Virgil, and focusing on the traditional male hero, one should “[d]o it differently! Tell the story of the tribe” (529). This last sentence can be seen as an example of the way in which Waldman both imitates and departs from the masculine epic example. Ezra Pound, in the jacket of section “Rock Drill De Los Cantares LXXXV-XCV”, a section where Chinese characters abound, describes the Cantos as:

the tale of the tribe...it is their purpose to give true meaning of history as one man has found it: in the annals of ancient China, in the Italian Renaissance, in the letters and diaries of Jefferson, the Adamses and Van Buren, in the personalities of his own time. The lies of history must be exposed; the truth must be hammered home by reiteration, with the insistence of a rock-drill.²⁵¹

Even if she deviates from traditional epics like Virgil’s by departing from the stories of heroes towards the Poundian “the tale of the tribe,” Waldman’s approach still falls uncomfortably in the masculine, modernist, epic. Taking advantage of the loosely defined “tribe”, Waldman widens this term to include the story of those “villagers” left out of the scope of both the classic and modernist epic tradition. With this in mind, she

²⁵¹ Quoted in Harvey Seymour Gross and Robert McDowell’s *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* (revised edition 1996) 149.

includes in her epic the “tears of the women of the gay men & women of the black men & women of / the black gay men & women of the white men & women of the white gay men / and women / tears of the children” (535). Unlike the journey of the warrior-hero of traditional epic, her epic shows the injustice and suffering of others in a journey delineated by “*the travails of weeping*” (529). As such, she distances her use of epic from Virgil’s “*arma virumque cano*” – “I sing of arms and of man” – to a “*lacrimare, lacrimatus*” movement that is notoriously wider in reach. With this move, in addition, just as she stretches the themes of the epic genre to include traditionally excluded stories, she also uses one of the official languages of epic to dismantle the warring connotations inherited from works like the *Aeneid*. Rather than eliminating “all the words / derivative of Latin” (543), what would only “harden on a harder edge” (543), Waldman uses both the epic and Latin in this section to “wash” the language from its connotations and patriarchal control,²⁵² a movement that can be extrapolated to her approach to the epic genre in *Iovis*. In an interview conducted by Matthew Cooperman Waldman defined the relationship of her epic with the classical epic tradition as a conversation that “is part of the lineage and also reclaims epic for a female imagination with new priorities. I sing of war, but not of its glory. I sing down war” (*Outrider* 90).²⁵³

In a similar fashion, within Waldman’s expansionist movement of the epic mode, one of the poet’s major changes is the shifting of focus from hero to heroine, a move that seems to be especially revolutionary when the author and the heroine are the same person. As an epic, *The Iovis Trilogy* conforms to the traditional notion of the telling of the journey of a hero – in this case a heroine – who travels extensively throughout the world during a long period of time – in Waldman’s case, a quarter of a century. From the very first pages of her book, Waldman stresses the autobiographical nature of her writing – her need to “speak out from within her personal narrative” (xi) – a movement that is specifically conceived to counterattack the masculine ego present in a traditional understanding of epic poetry. In this sense, the epic genre is used as a space from which to give form to her own journey,²⁵⁴ a technique that allows the poet to

²⁵² “wash them back, back, into bellissima bellicose Latin / sweet tongued, church tongued / or / tense sport & action / of my personal histories of heroes” (539)

²⁵³ “Rhizomic Poetics: A Conversation (Interview) with Anne Waldman” by Matthew Cooperman.

²⁵⁴ In Book III, Waldman specifically links the movement of her travels – walking – to the narrative characteristics of the genre: “This was an epic and a walk, Schoenberg / This was a female ‘self-referential’ (an epic and a walk)” (790).

represent not only herself – as woman, poet, mother, activist, etc. – but also to bring into the spotlight the life and work of other people who would normally go unrepresented.

For this reason, as it was the case with *Tapestry* and *Loba*, one of Waldman’s primary concerns is to portray the position of women within a world dominated by men – a position that can be extrapolated to the female writer who dwells in traditionally masculine literary genres. Waldman, born in 1945, a few months before the end of WWII, consciously positions herself within a masculine world dominated by war and violence,²⁵⁵ where her femininity is often reduced to clichés – hag, body to conquer, muse, seductress, etc. In addition, culturally and literary speaking, she also belongs to a highly masculine world, where divine presences like Zeus/Jove, or human – but still semi-divine – writers like Burroughs, simultaneously act as teachers and oppressors. In “DEAD GUTS & BONES” her epic becomes the medium through which she negotiates her position as a female writer:

Telling the story
telling the story on the hour
How to become a writer out of the rib of a man
How to spit out the man’s marrow to breathe free
How to stand on the ground & contend with his mystical hormones
How not to get sick in the midnight hour. (238)

Even if the author, and by extension any other woman included in her epic, is necessarily part of patriarchy – “born on the hem of war / arise out of father sperm” (50) – as a poet she can still use her literature to fight that position, and rewrite the exclusion of women from history, art, culture, and other realms.

An example of this can be found in the section “SPRECHSTIMME (COUNTESS OF DIA)”, where Waldman focuses on the figure of XII Century female troubadour and poet Beatriz de Dia and on the voice and rhythm of speech of female singers such as Mabel Mercer, Lady Day, Sarah Vaughan, Nina Simone, and Ella Fitzgerald. In the poem, changing from the plural “we” to the singular “I”, the poet moves from a collective position of female artists, to an individualized space for their own subjectivity. Linking all of these discourses in various media, the poet praises

²⁵⁵ The importance of patriarchy and war in *Iovis* is dealt with in the following section.

language as a catalyst with the potential to liberate individuals and collectives. The “tongue” becomes in this light the medium to expose social and/or personal injustice – “*tongue is salvation, tongue stands in for all-the-body / she tells the truth about matricide, about genocide, about rape / about torture/cleansing is not unfamiliar in her witness trope*” (620). Despite the potential of language as a site of – female – justice, as the repetition of the structure “Did we not say”²⁵⁶ shows, language, both in poetry or song, is not exempt of oppression. While poem and song can be used as platforms to represent individual or collective stories, there remains the question of whether their discourse will be accepted and heard or if, on the contrary, it will be denied and silenced. In the following lines, the poet shows one example of the masculine repression of speech:

her witness, a dram, a dream
= test her =
did it not happen because she lived to tell of it from outside the crematorium
Lyotard come in here & make your point again
about who is and is not witness

Fuck the arrogance of all philosophers [sic] in dream
what about life as it was behind a curtain (620)

These lines address Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983), where he analyzed how injustices take place at the level of language. In it he described *differend* as “a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (xi) and the example Waldman is using alludes to the case Lyotard makes about the gas chambers in Auschwitz:

To have ‘really seen with his own eyes’ a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died

²⁵⁶ “Did we not say it would be difficult?” (619), “did we not complain again to his page a torrent / torment of desire?” (621), “Did we not say, abandoned, how rude’s / the night in this town” (622), “Did we no walk down the poem because / it was open, available?” (623)

from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber. (3)

Although Lyotard is ultimately rejecting the ontological understanding of knowledge and experience as a unifying narrative – instead the world is comprised of events with multiple interpretations. His theory draws attention to negation of the experience of those who are forced to either describe their situation following someone else’s terms, or remain silent. By this double-bind, women are both victims and not-victims; if they complain about their lack of voice or space to articulate their subjectivity, and do so through a language – poems, songs, etc. – that is ultimately validated and judged by men, then their stories run the risk of being silenced, as they cannot be known in the same terms. Thus, if women are denied their own experience on the account that they cannot fully represent it – if there is no space for female subjectivity within a patriarchal discourse – they become, following Lyotard’s ideas, “wronged” in the sense that they have also been denied the possibility of presenting how they have been wronged.²⁵⁷ As the poet writes on behalf of these women, the problem might not be their lack of voice, but the power structure that controls language – “did we not say or was it not said properly?” (622). Similarly, Waldman complains about the different systems of oppression that erase voices and lives – which become eternally suppressed by a system that binds them to silence or death: “=how many plagued (you knew this was no lie)= / =or censored (slow death)= / =possibly strung out=” (623). Despite these dangers, and the discourses that deny their experience on the basis of the lack of representability, Waldman chooses to elevate poetry and the power of language as means of self-identification: “she who was remains in lines of poetry” (638). Language remains for her a tool to contest so-called realities, a place to reinvent not only oneself but also the language itself, “I will re=in=vent my roles / [...] / sleep in the margins of my writing / speak there too” (627). For Waldman, Lyotard’s theory lacks interest for women’s creativity and subjectivity as she bestows the poem/song with more power:

logic of Jean-Francois Lyotard might lie in interest

²⁵⁷ In Lyotard’s words, a wrong is, “a damage [*dommage*] accompanied by the loss of means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his or her liberties, or of the freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply of the right to testify the damage, or even more simply if the testifying phrase is itself deprived of authority.” (5)

of revelation

if she did not live to tell

once upon a time there was a genocide

once upon a time there was a crusade

once upon a time a friend betrayed her (640)

Being a witness and being able to tell your story, participate in the history of your time, become crucial elements in *Iovis*; hence, the poet's insistence on documentation acquires a deeper meaning in light of this discussion. As she states in the introduction to the last book – “Eternal War” – poets need to “[c]oncentrate on Archive of so many witnesses in this little net of cacophonous time, to leave a trace so that poets of the future will know we were not just slaughtering one another” (656). Language, in a genre so traditionally linked with the history and culture of specific regions, is elevated and given the agency to affect the entire world – or at least to try to do so.

Intrinsically linked to this idea, the appropriation of the epic genre is based on the elevation of literature – of speech – as a weapon to counterattack the subjugation of women to patriarchal control. Recurrent in the trilogy is the notion of language as a tool to liberate one-self and/or others, a global vision that in Waldman's poem is materialized in different strategies, such as exposing the situation of women and other collectives, or by playing with or mocking the style of the patriarch to fight from within. Through language, for instance, women gain access to a world that is, a priori, banned for them: “I am alone and delight in how speech / may save a woman / How speech is spark of intrusion” (22). At the same time, by shifting words and playing with their meaning, using polyvalence and homophones, Waldman creates a text that imitates at the same time that it deviates from the masculine example²⁵⁸ – even correcting their (in)voluntary mistakes or elisions. As a case in point, at one point in Book I, she quotes from the two-page “Preliminary Announcement of the College of Art,” a prospectus Ezra Pound wrote for an ideal university in which students would have “contact with artists of established position, creative minds, men (*sic*) for the most part who have already suffered in the cause of their art” (38, my emphasis). By subtly inserting the

²⁵⁸ By appropriating the ambiguity, use of homophones, mockery and other traits prominent in the modernist epic, Waldman is able to counterattack the centrality of masculine experience in these texts by reinterpreting the genre through her own position as a female author.

editing term “sic” – intentionally so written – Waldman revisits Pound’s words and exposes the exclusion of women.

In much the same way, she reinterprets the traditional epic genre by foregrounding her experience as a female writer. For instance, even if she appropriates the prophet-figure for the role of the narrator – “*She will imitate, play prophet & tell allegories on judgment day as only a woman might*” (4) – she still refuses to be caught up in the same game, opting for a fast, transitive voice that is difficult to pin down: “Epic’s parts in a woman’s poem made with urgency always breathe a transitive air, unwillingly to be subjugated.” (xv) Waldman’s urgency as a strategy not to be pinned down stems from a historically recurrent situation in which female creativity and art are continually suppressed by men in more powerful positions. This situation is described first hand by the author in “OUSTED”, where the poet is angry at the men’s negation of her literary value, and sees herself as akin to other extinct species, tribes and ancient civilizations, if men continue to “oust” her. She similarly highlights the lack of support – or overt condemnation – of her work by her male counterparts, who share a “*mindset that she considers myopic & alien*” (285). Once again, her language, memory, papers, documents, and the history she is collecting within her poetry, help her break out of her forced confinement:

rebel
sweet liturgy
write this
in pain
*
to the wronged:
can *shift that cave*
*
live & think
these actions

Interestingly enough, Waldman chooses to end this section with a letter in which *Iovis* is criticized in relation to its position to the epic genre. Reading Waldman’s piece in dialogue with the epics of Olson, Pound and Williams, the addresser of the letter writes:

You have declared these men/works as the ancestors of IOVIS, and your poem does have this architectonic puzzle aspect as well. But the pieces you use are not really like those in Olson or Pound; somewhat closer to Williams, and even Guy Davenport's fictions in *emotional* content. Because your pieces are overwhelmingly *personal history*, not political or geological history, as the others tend to use. (294, my emphasis)

Clearly differentiating between Waldman's "emotional" epic from Pound's and Olson's – in his opinion – more political poems, this letter can be read as an example of the way the academia keeps reading genre as gender.²⁵⁹ In the summary prior to the chapter, the poet sees herself as falling "*into doubt occasionally, scorned & maligned by the 'community,' who still after all the centuries hasn't learned a thing*" (285); the critics' inability to see beyond gender might be one of the causes of Waldman's self-doubts. In this respect, it is interesting to note the absence of Louis Zukofsky's epic poem *A* from the masculine – that is to say "political" – epic writers in the critique to Waldman's poem. Now studied as one of the most influential 20th Century epic poems, *A* could also be considered to fit into the "emotional" or "personal" category *Iovis* has been negatively included in. Indeed, the personal nature of Zukofsky's epic is the issue that Barry Ahearn stresses in the introduction to the 2011 edition of *A*:

What other poem offers us so much of the poet's daily life? The facts about Whitman one can glean from *Song of Myself* are surprisingly rare. What do we really know about Pound from his *Cantos*? Not a great deal, considering the length. [...] [With *A*] We sit at the poet's elbow as he writes, walk with him through the streets of Brooklyn, read his correspondence, and listen to the talk of his father, wife, and son. Zukofsky was quite serious in stressing the degree to which his poem was 'of a life' – his life. (vii)

Much like Zukofsky's, Waldman's *Iovis* is informed by the poet's own life, often including personal correspondence, as well as the voice of friends, relatives, students and other artists, whose dialogues help create a balanced mix between the historical, political and personal. The influence of *A* in *Iovis* is made more explicit in the section "ELEVEN FACES ONE THOUSAND ARMS", where Waldman refers to

²⁵⁹ This issue was also analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis, where I studied the way the memoir is regarded as a feminine genre – with both positive and negative consequences for female authors.

Zukofsky as “*the most complete in ‘A’ -12.*” (809), and opens the poem by quoting twenty-two verses belonging to the beginning of this movement – kept in its original form but for some comments in parentheses. In A-12, Zukofsky alludes to the story of the genesis to introduce – or welcome – his son Paul into the poem, whose presence and music permeate the movement in much the same way as Waldman’s son Ambrose does in *Iovis*.²⁶⁰ Despite Zukofsky’s focus on his family and personal life,²⁶¹ his position as one of the 20th Century grand male epic writers – together with Pound, Olson and Williams – has remained fairly unquestioned simply because, as the following analysis shows, the critique of *Iovis* is not based on Waldman’s appropriation of the genre, but solely on her gender.

Indeed, in the passage that follows the quote from A-12 in *Iovis*, Waldman points to her own position as a female poet writing about and from within her own culture and history. Initially questioning the role of gender in literature, she writes: “*I did doubt gender in any passing literary indeterminacy’s irony as an old page (scribed, layered by the night and candle, by the oil of resilience) did doubt itself as myself representing ‘person’ ‘poet’ and as person better dare to be part of the history of my time.*” (810) However, her gender does seem to affect the genre of her poetry, demeaning the strength of her epic and turning it – in some critics’ eyes – into a mere emotional – feminine and thus not political – reaction to the world. Claiming back the political position of her poem, she situates herself in the same lineage of those poets who were concerned with the state of the world, further validating *Iovis* as new and old problems arise: “*We were preoccupied with the problems of the city-states. Me too, me too. And Hiroshima? And Lebanon? New Orleans? Fallujah?*” (810).

Despite these similarities, the question remains whether a female poet – preoccupied as the men were with socio-political issues – is able to use the epic genre to the same effect. In “TO BLUNT THE KNIFE”, this aspect is specifically tackled in a

²⁶⁰ In the very first section, “ALL IS FULL OF JOVE”, her son is introduced as “*her guide [...] trickster, shape-shifter who both interrupts her & goads her on.*” (7) In a personal interview with the author, conducted in her family home MacDougal Street in New York (6th November 2014), Waldman specifically highlighted the role of Zukofsky’s son in his epic as an influence to her own approach to the genre. In her own words: “His son is so present in his work and I admire the willingness to include, because some poets are distanced from the poem”.

²⁶¹ In relation to the emotional and personal content in A-12, Ahearn notes that “‘Out of deep need’ this movement begins, pointing to the origin of the writing in emotional need” (xi).

letter in which a student²⁶² taking a class on Charles Olson – taught by Robert Creeley – celebrates the epic’s ability to show, “how one goes about bringing one’s BEING into the poem, how to write something that’s big enough to fit it all in, how to locate, geographically, on the ‘moving map’ (Cocteau’s phrase) the complex intersection of mythology, history, and personal fluctuations in life.” (370) The specific gender-construction of the genre is called into question once the addresser relates how Creeley failed to consider *Iovis* an epic poem on the basis of Waldman’s poetical ego – merely understood as the incorporation of her autobiographical persona on the poem through personal letters and details. Bearing in mind that the male epic writers were also personal,²⁶³ the addresser is right to denounce that “what was at stake here was not ego but gender” (370), and the fact that while masculine experience is often seen as political, female experience is merely discarded as emotional, or too personal.²⁶⁴ Nonetheless, as this one-thousand-page poem that took twenty-five years to complete attests to,²⁶⁵ Waldman was true to her original quest of representing the world through her feminist epic, created as a space that would value her experience and position as a female writer.²⁶⁶

This is attained through the representation of the poet’s “walking the earth”; As such, the poem is constructed through and by her many travels –“DC Baltimore Philadelphia New Haven Newark New York / Boston where we prayed / what did I see when I was when” (811). Similarly, her epic creates as a map of

²⁶² The sender is Kristin Prevallet, a poet, essayist and performer.

²⁶³ Together with Zukofsky’s already mentioned “A-12”, “The Pisan Cantos” are often analyzed as the most personal of all the cantos in Pound, written while in jail in Italy and with a very limited access to books; In much the same way, neither Williams in *Paterson* nor Olson in *The Maximus Poems* escape their own personas and feelings in their epics, whichever personified city or historical character they chose to speak through.

²⁶⁴ Comments like the one analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis by Norman Mailer on the distinction between masculine and female rebellion, attest to a recurrent devaluation of female experience, one that ultimately affects their writing and the way they approach literature.

²⁶⁵ As told jokingly in a personal interview, and although size should not matter in poetry, it was important to her to have a “bigger” book than the men did.

²⁶⁶ In *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women* (1997), Lynn Keller discusses the gender/genre dichotomy in the case of the epic, or long poem. In her view, the canon has contributed to the lack of female epics with a narrow definition of the genre especially articulated to exclude women: “For those troubled by the infrequency with which works by women figure in discussions not only of the long poem but of contemporary poetry more generally (except when the discussions are explicitly feminist and gynocentric), a broad application of the term long poem has strategic advantages: then the respect and status accorded to effective long poems is not reserved solely for a single type, such as the epic or the lyrics sequence.” (4)

the world²⁶⁷ which, at the same time, aims at affecting/improving that same world. In “WHY THAT’S A BLADE CAN FLOAT”:

The poet has by now travelled a distance, spanning mental universe, moving cross country, moving cross town and comes to rest with her box of scraps, notes, journals, memorabilia, letters, unfinished versions, her major task continuing unsettled at her feet. She spreads the documents about her, and bows her head. She feels a burden to sustain the plan. The society is crumbling around her (278)

The “box of scraps, notes, journals, memorabilia, letters” (278) and other documents this quote refers to, can be read as another intersection between Waldman’s use of the epic genre and the male masters’ – specifically, regarding the position of the epic towards History. In this regard, Ezra Pound’s often quoted definition of the genre as “a poem containing history” has drawn attention to the relationship between historical and poetical discourses, even if the terms of the relationship are far from clearly stated. As Gary Grieve-Carlson notes, “a poem that simply ‘contains’ a passing reference to an incident or person from the past does not ‘contain’ history in any particular significant way; moreover, it would seem that a poem that ‘contains’ history in a serious way need not necessarily belong to the ‘epic genre’.” (*Poems Containing History: Twentieth-Century American Poetry’s Engagement with the Past* ix) Notwithstanding this definitional hitch, Pound’s words have often prompted the analysis of the different historical or cultural documents which form his long poem. Quoting extensively from other poems, biographies, economical or historical accounts, all of these documents point towards a very tangible and literal interpretation of the epic as a poem “containing” – making room for or giving form to – history. In *Iovis*, Waldman seems to follow this example in her approach to history, often juxtaposing different texts – sometimes offering the reference but at times also fusing it completely with her own words – and creating a collage image of the world. Here, once more, the critique included within *Iovis*, in which the addresser acknowledged the “architectonic puzzle

²⁶⁷ In the prologue to Book II the poem is addressed as an opportunity to rearrange the world: “Create your own country: to make the energies dance. Then rearrange the chairs, books, molecules, garden, tend lively phones & phonemes. Scramble the parts writ on buses, planes, on random scraps, on top of newsprint, sung into a machine, screamed into the void – now gather herein to create ongoing orderly chaos.” (342)

aspect” (294) of the poem, but judged the “pieces [as] overwhelmingly personal history, not political or geopolitical history,” (294) becomes relevant. In the final part of this section, I look at the way in which Waldman uses the different documents that are part of *Iovis*; by analyzing the nature and specific use within her epic, I hope to shed some light onto the genre/gender discourse that seems to be at play here.

To fuel the beginning of the discussion, a first group of letters does conform to the “overwhelmingly personal” category referred to above. These include letters written by friends, colleagues or relatives, addressing different social, artistic, personal or political subjects and falling more or less comfortably into the themes and style of the section they are placed into. Within the personal history of the author, one can include the letters written by her grandfather and her father, whose presences becomes particularly important within the book – and that date back to the early 1900’s, passing through the WWII years in which her father served in the army, and to the late 1980s when her father died. As one of the most important men in the author’s life, the letters from her father help situate the poet within an already established patriarchal society,²⁶⁸ and within an already functioning war culture. Indeed, in the section “ANCESTOR, ANCESTOR”, written on account of her father’s death, he is described as “*integer of poem, with stories from war, his own particular quirky anarchy, seafaring Protestant ancestry*” (439), and elsewhere as a “*correspondent to the poem*” (188). In addition to using letters written by or to his father to delineate the themes or emotional pitch of her poem, Waldman also includes letters that expose the very research process she followed. For instance, in one of the letters her father helps her dig out her family history by recollecting, and explaining, correspondence between his parents:

Dear Anne,

I remembered when you wrote to me about the past that I stuck away some letters I recovered from 501 E. Main Street before the house was sold. I’ve numbered them in the upper left hand corner from I to II so you’ll know which ones I’m referring to in my comments. They’re all from my father to my mother beginning from 1902 to 1908. (192)

²⁶⁸ The very first section opens up with these lines, “[t]he poet positions herself in the cosmos, already filled with the sperm of Jove who, ‘peoples space’” (7).

Unable to write or speak “beyond / a daughter” (195) or to “protest / flesh” (195), Waldman embraces her personal history – approaching it through a quasi-scientific rigor and making it part of the History of her epic. Despite the personal nature of these letters, within the broader structure of *Iovis*, they become part of a greater objective; that of unearthing “*unsung heroes, migrating, restless wanderers*” (188), whose lives become important not because of their personal connection to the author, but because of their position as belonging to a history that might not be as unchallengeable as it claims to be.

Within this movement, one can include a collection of letters in which the life and work of contemporary poets are brought to light and praised. As a case in point, one letter laments the scant visibility of Bob Kaufman, the poet often associated with the Beats, who had recently died when the letter was written. Informing Waldman about what he considers to be “something terrible [...] happening on the homefront” (199), the addresser grieves over this specific form of poetical/artistic violence – “there are dimensions of censorship and one of the worst is silence and neglect” (200). Other figures brought to light in *Iovis* include the artist and writer Joe Brainard²⁶⁹ – “When he lived he made exquisite things / That is enough” (554) – or her “*compañera-poet*” (597) Bernadette Mayer.

Intrinsically linked to this use, there are some letters which give voice to people traditionally left out of epic discourses. An example of this is a letter written by a female-to-male transsexual who relates his story and the “offense / humiliation” (247) he had to endure when a pregnant old friend avoided seeing him because she was “afraid she would have such a shock the baby in her belly would get ‘bewitched’ and become abnormal like [him]” (247). Another story that exposes the situation of oppressed collectives is that of a gay aspiring poet who relates his youth and teen years – including suicide attempts. The letter shows the stigma of homosexuality in the 1980s, where “to admit ‘gayness’ [was] to say you [were] a carrier of a disease that seems endlessly invincible,” (53) but also highlights the power of poetry and creativity to

²⁶⁹ In the section “THERE WAS A TIME AN ECLIPSE”, where the poet writes of Brainard’s life and work after he died of AIDS, she offers a description of his craft that is quite similar to what she is doing in her epic: “What this artist could do so well was notice the forgotten ‘stuff,’ see it as sacred or amusing, and reclaim it, reenacting it in new contexts, restoring its intrinsic vitality through magical poetic combinations” (557).

initiate a healing process. Through writing, the young poet states, he “relived all the pain, the shame, the fear, and the love [he] had ever felt.”(54) In addition, the addresser relates how his poems “helped [him] to tell [his] parents [he] was gay” (54); just as Ginsberg had used his poetry – specifically *Howl* – to come to terms with his own feelings and sexual orientation, almost thirty years before, Waldman’s inclusion of this letter shows that the social stigma of homosexuality was still very present, and that poetry can still be used as a vehicle to achieve personal freedom.²⁷⁰

Although these letters can be considered to be more or less private, personal and as such not political – if we were to use the logic of the critique analyzed before – their inclusion within *Iovis* stresses the author’s wish not only to make them public, but to actually have them affect the world – raise consciousness, expose injustices, enlighten people on specific issues, and so forth. Nonetheless, in case there were any doubts regarding Waldman’s use of documents and her political intention, the author creates the alter ego “Anne-who-grasps-the-broom” – a recurrent character throughout the book – whose letters directly address and tackle political, environmental, or social problems of her time through a metaphor of “cleaning up the world.”²⁷¹ For instance, “Anne-Who-Grasps-the-Broom-Tightly” (14) writes a letter, addressed to the then president of the U.S. Ronald Reagan, encouraging him to take advantage of a meeting with Gorbachev to “limit the nuclear arms race” (14). Later in *Iovis*, transformed in to “Anne-Who-Grasps-the-Broom-More-Tightly” (30), she writes to the then president of Zaire Mobutu Sese Seko to demand the release of Tshisekedi wa Mulumba, who had been imprisoned for criticizing Mobutu’s regime and who is thus described – according to Waldman – as “a prisoner of conscience, held solely for his nonviolent exercise of

²⁷⁰ Judging by the writer’s words related to the lack of interest from publishing houses about his poetry, homosexually works as a social, but also cultural stigma: “This is the third time i have sent my poems out, the first two times were to big companies. that was in December (no word yet). i guess they’re not into anti-conservative, pro-homosexual poetry by effeminate manic-depressive fifteen-year-olds (uncommercial i guess).” (54)

²⁷¹ In an interview conducted by Eric Lorberer (1998), Waldman explained the origins of this metaphor: “‘Grasping-the-broom-tightly’ comes from the Shakers. They sang a wonderful song, and they would sweep as they sang: [AW sings] ‘Tis a gift to be simple tis a gift to be free tis a gift to come down where we want to be / Turning turning will be our delight til by turning turning we come down right.’ It’s like the old Zen adage, sweep the room as long as it takes. So ‘grasping the broom’ becomes a metaphor for cleaning up the world. A lot of activities enter the poem, whether it’s writing letters for Amnesty International or living like a homeless person on the Bowery for a few days. At least there’s an attempt to be a kind of ‘witness’ and tell about it, to (ritually) help restore balance. But the tension is always there in the ‘tightly’ held broom.” (n.p.n)

fundamental human rights.” (30). Similarly, “Anne, Grasping-the-Broom-Tighter-Now” (72) asks the President of the Republic of Guatemala “to order investigations of human rights violations in Guatemala [...] and to bring those found responsible for political killings, ‘disappearances,’ and torture to justice.” (72) In addition to the many appearances of Anne and her broom, the author’s son also voices some of the political concerns of his mother, writing, for instance, to President Reagan to praise his effort to “cut down the number of weapons made every year and to ban the use of chemical weapons” (216); or to Skybox International Inc. to complain about their “not biodegradable or recyclable” (255) packaging, offering some alternatives that would be environmentally friendly.

In addition, the letters also act as alternative versions of history – set out against the “official” version – and regarded at times as more valid, as they might be uncontaminated by the “mechanism of concealment” of war. A letter written to the poet’s mother sums up the month of April lived in Greece during the war; even if it represents an unofficial historical account – written by a relatively powerless person – it still offers her the opportunity to speak “of what the newspapers may not have told you [Waldman’s mother]” (823). Later in the same section, crossed as if discarded – but still visible – the poet draws attention once again to the importance of archiving and valuing these pieces of history: “This was part of the seen / unseen project / Lest you not forget the binaries / Lest you not forget counter-memory / Or hybrid, or family history” (831). Recreating history by including different sources becomes the strategy employed by the poet to free humanity of its cyclic nature; as she puts it, “=Montage as resistance= / =Reinventing forming as we see things=” (834). As these examples show, the fact that the author chooses to represent history through letters and documents of her “personal history”, does not mean that her concerns are private, and of no political consequence.²⁷²

In this sense, Waldman’s approach to history is closely related to Walter Benjamin’s concepts. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History” he criticized historicism as a construct built on the stories of the “winners,” and encouraged revolutionary historians to look at the neglected corners of history, “to brush history against the grain”

²⁷²As Clemens Spahr writes in “Holding up the ‘Poetry Front’: Anne Waldman’s Politics of the Aesthetic”, “[t]he letters and fragments which are inserted into the collage ensure a broad referential basis upon which the speaker can form and transform her self into a politically committed personality” (149).

(Thesis 7) and focus, instead, on the defeated of the past. Similarly, Benjamin's notion of a new way of writing history through montage – “to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.” (*The Arcades Project*) – as he does in *The Arcades Project*, can be extrapolated to Waldman's project in *Iovis*, where she approaches patriarchal history from different texts, fragments, quotes, citations, and so on, which problematize a linear conception of history. Employing this “Montage as resistance” (834), together with the personal correspondence,²⁷³ the author also quotes extensively from newspapers articles that often engage in the major themes of *Iovis*, such as the recurring nature of war, or the exposure of political, social or cultural injustice. For instance, in the section “AEITOLOGICAL ONES”, the author builds a whole paragraph using headlines or sentences from articles published in *The New York Times* – the majority from June 5th 1990. Paste into the same conversation, the scraps help create a global conversation about war:

Bush and Colombian President to assess drug wars today, Canada premiers try to save pact, Dubcek rebukes Slovak protestors who rebuked Havel, Japanese feel quite ready for a visit from Gorbachev, White House sees aura from summit, in Europe few are cheering, Summit failed to narrow dispute on Afghanistan, Santiago: Allende's widow meditates anew... (191)

Creating a complicated political dialogue – reminiscent of John Dos Passos's “Newsreels” sections in *USA Trilogy*²⁷⁴ – the different headlines map the course of war,

²⁷³ Waldman's approach to montage in her epic is influenced by William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*. The use of different texts – especially the inclusion of personal letters – which Waldman sees as ways of “investigating the legend, the history, the location” (personal interview, November 2014).

²⁷⁴ In his trilogy *USA*, John Dos Passos had already blended together similar documents in the “Newsreel” sections. These, as Juan A. Suárez writes, “are collages of found texts, including snatches of songs, journalistic prose, political speeches, headlines, and ticker-tape news releases.” (“John Dos Passos's *USA* and the Left Documentary Film in the 1930s: The Cultural Politics of ‘Newsreel’ and ‘The Camera Eye’” 43) Through these collages, as Waldman does in *Iovis*, Dos Passos exposes the way the media employ language to manipulate and deceive; as Suárez writes: “Some headlines in the newsreel segments, for example, scream blatant half-truths, while others convey the damaging effect of the printed word: ‘Readhaired Youth Says Stories of Easy Money Led Him to Crime.’ (150)” (59). Bob Kaufman, in *The Abomunist Manifesto* also included a similar section, this time, with made-up headlines. In the “ABOMNEWSCAST...ON THE HOUR...” section, he uses irony and satire to draw attention to the specific socio-political concerns of the time, such as, as Preston Whaley Jr. writes, “consumer explosion,

at the same time that they expose the interrelation of global conflicts, which are often manipulated by the media and presented as independent issues unrelated to national politics. A similar technique is employed in “TO BLUNT THE KNIFE”, where the author condemns the so-called wars in the name of God and complains about Jove – read as the Patriarch in command – who “turns a blind eye / *basta, basta*” (363). In this case, Waldman pastes together two articles published in *The New York Times* in 1993; the first one, entitled “Racial Power Keg in Nation” relates the arrest of eight white supremacists who were planning a massacre at an African Methodist Church in Los Angeles. Quoting literally from the article, Waldman writes that “[d]uring a search of five residences, numerous weapons were seized, including machine guns, as well as Nazi paraphernalia, including swastikas & portraits of Hitler” (364).

Hoping to complicate this discussion, this article is pasted together with one entitled “Street Guns: a Consumer’s Guide” – written a few months before the previous one – in which the author gives advice on buying a gun depending on people’s needs or taste. By cutting and pasting these two articles, the poet creates a new text in which Americas’ culture of violence is exposed and linked together with the hypocrisy towards the thousands of annual deaths by gunshots. As an example of the consequences of this paradox – the condemnation of armed, violent, groups and the encouragement to purchase guns for personal use – the poet includes an excerpt of a real story in which a sixteen-year-old exchange student on his way to a party on Halloween – dressed as Saturday-Night-Fever John Travolta – was shot to death by a man who allegedly thought the boy was trespassing with criminal intent. This accident – which also took place in 1993 – stimulated an inconclusive discussion about gun control in the USA, that “Anne-Pacing-the-Floor-More-Vigorously-Now” also joins to request that the President “reassess the easy availability of guns in this country and in doing so help prevent the thousands of similar incidents...” (365) – a petition she sends to some friends who unfortunately reinforce the vicious circle by answering, “No way! You kidding? I need a gun in this world.” (365).

To conclude, in this respect, the figure of the poet fuses with that of the archeologist, or the historical researcher, who complicates simplistic discourses by

the booming war economy, threat of nuclear fallout, Cold War imperialism, and systematic racism.” (*Blows like a Horn* 55)

stressing their interconnections in an attempt at revealing the multi-layered quality of reality. As she writes in the foreword to the whole tome, her poem became a recourse to expose the “colors of concealment” of the subtitle of *Iovis*; writing became a “[c]ontinued examination – investigating, gathering, tasting, participating in all its hues – became [her] further practice.” (xiv) With the use of documents and the inclusion of her personal experience, the author deconstructs the foundations of the epic as a masculine genre, in which women are only allowed to participate if they deny their own experience and position as women – both as writers and as social beings. For this reason, while building her epic with documents that somehow represent an alternative historical and political discourse, she is cautious as not to impose her vision as an unquestionable truth – a position she would link to the authoritative Jove. In “WHAT’S IN A NAME?” the poet studies the etymology of her son’s, husband’s, and her own name and, as she puts it, “*swims in the associations*” (136). Willfully playing with her not very rigorous research methods, she links her name to the Greek *anus*, meaning “old woman”, and her surname to the Old English *wal*, which she translates as “to be strong”, and *wald* – meaning “power, rule” (136). Assuming both the position of an old woman and of a powerful queen/king, Waldman questions her own authority as the author of the epic. While the power of language and poetry is a recurring theme within *Iovis* – an issue which was equally important to Kyger and di Prima – in Waldman’s epic it is explicitly dealt with in terms of their potential power for good and for evil – as a tool that can both underpin *and* undermine patriarchy. At one point in *Iovis* the poet asks, “What do words do?” (147). Among the answers offered we find several that highlight their revolutionary power – “They call out and fracture” (147), “They create arsenal” (147) – but also their easily malleable nature – “Words create an arsenal beyond necessity / They harp on and communicate fear” (147). More than a definitive answer, *Iovis* stresses – as Charles Olson did in *The Maximus Poems* – the importance of “finding out for one self”²⁷⁵; the documents which form her epic attest to the poet’s personal investigation, to her wandering the world.

²⁷⁵ Waldman herself drew attention to this connection in a personal interview with her (November 2014).

III.5.2. Patriarchy and War: Dismantling the Machinery

“The idea for *epikos Iovis* was to shoulder / abdicate patriarchy” (xi)

“I will stop all bullets now. I will study war.” (721)

Unlike Kyger’s *Tapestry and the Web* and Diane di Prima’s *Loba*, whose texts were mostly concerned with female experience – both in a celebratory fashion, or in the exposition of their victimization – the scope of *The Iovis Trilogy* reaches further to also include masculine experience. This, in addition, and unlike other feminist texts – which far too often devalue and reduce masculinity and men to monolithic oppressors – is studied from a much wider and socio-historically informed perspective. As stated in the introduction to the three books, where the author wrote that, “[t]he idea for *epikos Iovis* was to shoulder / abdicate patriarchy” (xi), in this section, I concentrate on the implications of Waldman’s paradoxical aim – accept/reject patriarchy – whose different interpretations take the author to investigate the notion of patriarchy from various perspectives.

Firstly, as a poem written to her son, who acts both as a guide and receptacle of her words, Waldman is greatly concerned with, not only denouncing the crimes of patriarchy, but also with exposing the mechanisms employed by patriarchy to ensure its longevity, its passing from generation to generation. In this respect, the voices of her son, students, young boys, and older men relating stories about their childhood, become critical texts used for their deconstructive potential. Continuing her role as a researcher – through the juxtaposition of poems, excerpts from letters, recorded conversations, and so on – the poet creates a mosaic of “man” which is used to draw the readers’ attention towards the cultural and social construction of masculinity. Such a strategy can be seen in the section “HEM OF THE METEOR”, where sexuality, violence, and education are intertwined as social themes, and tackled from different perspectives. For instance, an excerpt from a letter narrating a boy’s first sexual encounter with a prostitute foregrounds the cult of – masculine – sexuality:

First sex, a dark room in Nogales, Sonora, like Jack lost it in a whorehouse, five dollars even, 16 years old, sixty miles south of Wilmot Avenue, Tucson. Taxi driver laughed, “Zona Roja! Sí!” And the father pimp chuckled, guiding my friend & me [...] The bra took me awhile. And I could not believe how luscious

her skin was, women were for me, this was good, I climaxed immediately, felt proud and cold and nervous about syphilis... I did not love her, had this odd respect for her... (34)

The culture that venerates the masculine lost of virginity with a prostitute as a rite of passage into manhood is traced back in this poem to the hem of Zeus's robe, understood as the area of influence of his "*orbit of sexual prowess*" (33) – as the author herself puts it in the summary for this section. Just as the myth of masculine sexuality is traced back to Jove, and later perpetuated through the father-son relationship, Waldman also questions the intersection of men and violence, which is similarly exposed as a cultural construction already inherited from myth: "Sing how you men are weapon-prone / How you are prone of heat & battle / Sing Odysseus, men are weapon prone" (36). These verses are interrupted with a personal letter in which a friend relates how deciding not to eat a hamburger at the airport in Rome on December 27, 1985, saved his life – as he escaped a terrorist attack by a few minutes carried out by Abu Nidal Organization (ANO), in the name of the liberation of Palestine. This text is followed by quotes – in the original Yucatec Maya language and an English translation – of *The Book of Chumayel*, on Maya history and philosophy, which relates the Spanish conquest from the point of view of the natives – "Not what the foreigners arranged when they came here: / then shame and terror were preferred" (37). A few verses later, another history/story is abruptly introduced: "[t]hey are speaking, two 8-year-olds / in the garden / center stage" (39). With this move, Waldman turns the poem into an improvised theatrical act where two children playing "war" discuss the seriousness of their wounds, weapons to use, and the key question: "Who's the en..en..en.enemy now?" (39). Not coincidentally, they drop names such as Allah, Jesus and Buddha, or the almighty dollar bill, which serves the author as a link between war, religion and economic profit – an issue which is addressed extensively in other poems in the collection. The way violence and war are ingrained in the cultural and social construct of masculinity from early childhood, is also exposed in a list of real 1980's arcade games which recreated war scenarios and essentially consisted of shooting and killing an extraterrestrial, or any otherwise-defined, "Other", presented as the enemy. These include:

he shows me Wonderboy, Flicky, Dis Tron, he plays Falcon, Kidniki,

Radical Ninja, Galaga, Gimme A Break, Spy Hunter, Ring King,
Hat Trick he shows me he shows me he shows me
Twin Cobra, IKARI Warriors, After Burner, Danger Zone,
Toobin', XYBOTS, Rampage, Silk Worm, Shinobi, Guerilla
War, Xenophobe (43)

The seemingly organic thematic progression from the myth of Jove's sexual and physical power to a contemporary culture that consistently reduces masculinity to, or associates it with, fighting, aggressiveness and war, is one of Waldman's greatest concerns in her epic. Specifically, the link between the cult of masculinity and war is a recurrent theme within *Iovis*, which the poet addresses time and again in an attempt to break the spell – so to say – and liberate masculinity from these associations.

As a case in point, in "GROTTE", the poet's travels through the South of France are interrupted with an excerpt from an article entitled "Hunting the Bad Boy, America's Brave Young Guns Face Flak and Fear", focusing on the role of the U.S. Marine Attack Squadron 542 in the events that led to the Gulf War after Iraqi's invasion of Kuwait. The article, published in *People Magazine* in 1991, discusses the technical characteristics of the aircrafts and the personal circumstances surrounding their pilots. Specially striking in the article is the way in which the pilots are described in terms of a "boy-gang", or group of fraternity boys, who have a blast while flying their deathly weapons. As the author of the article writes, "the self-styled Young Guns whose frat-boy nicknames belie their deadly calling: Rebel, 6-Pak, Scar, Strut, Turbo, Spud, Flattop, Vapor." Quoting different lines from the original article, Waldman highlights the apparently innocent and light-hearted sense of community of these pilots:

*Weather permitting, the squadron flies roughly 40 sorties every 24 hours.
Between bombings, the men laugh, lunch on bean soup and apples, brief again.
And get ready to punch the sky ... "We're like a motorcycle gang, or a roving
pack of dogs," says Captain Tom Rutledge, call sign Strut, a muscular 29 who
does just that. (259)*

The article further reveals the thin line between game/reality, play/war that Waldman is so interested in, as the soldiers are said to "pass out mock business cards announcing their specialties as 'Bar Brawls, Brush Wars, Small Wars, Big Wars and

Star Wars”’. The way the article popularizes and glamorizes war – comparing one of the soldiers to Tom Cruise or mentioning Demi Moore’s brother as a member of the squadron – is contrasted with some of the pilots’ comments; their main concerns being related to the emotional detachment they feel – as aircrafts pilots – toward the damage they cause, as well as their own vulnerability as soldiers risking their lives on war.²⁷⁶

Keeping up the archeological excavation of historical facts and personal stories, Waldman uses *Iovis* as a critical space for the deconstruction of war and violence, a process that is, in addition, purposefully didactic.²⁷⁷ In the section “AMBROSE: NAM”, the poet’s son’s inquiry about the Vietnam War rekindles the need of demystifying the way war is justified by the media. As she puts it, “[n]ever a war so obsessively captured, recorded, uncensored in living rooms across the land. How much more vivid than Nintendo war.” (573) Knowing war through an information already processed through the “mechanism of concealment”, the boy runs the risk of believing the glamorized idealization of war through “[m]ovie illusion, swell of music, action.”²⁷⁸ (573) Mixing lyrical parts with historical paragraphs dating back to the Chinese domination in the year 200 BC, together with poems and monologues of different people directly or indirectly affected by the war – from poets to a homeless war veteran ranting at the Statue of Liberty²⁷⁹ – the poet hopes to instruct the boy on the origin and consequences of the Vietnam war. The collage she builds for him makes available different dialogues and “points of entrance” into the issue that may not be offered by the U.S. official

²⁷⁶ “Beguelin explains what it’s like to be so far removed from the carnage he causes. ‘ You don’t hear the screams, you don’t see the arms and legs flying,’ he says, slowly shaking his head and imagining the horror. ‘Dropping bombs is a very impersonal thing. I don’t envy the 19-year-old grunt who has to shot somebody and seen his eyes.’” (n.p.n.)

²⁷⁷ *Iovis* was, as the poet has often pointed out, written as a history lesson to her son. In an interview with Mathew Cooperman, Waldman traces the origins of *Iovis* back to the mid-80’s when she became a mother: “being a relatively new mother (Ambrose was born in 1980) I was having ideas and visions about the terrifying world from the point of view of this pulsing, palpable, very new life in my arms. And the queries and speech of the child. And a sense of interruption that occurs all the time. Ambrose in a way was the Muse for *Iovis*, and continues to be.” (*Outrider* 90-91)

²⁷⁸ Elsewhere in *Iovis* Waldman points to yet another way in which war is advertised, making it the business of honor, pride, so that it becomes attractive to young men. In her own words, ““Hence the euphemisms of calling a battle ‘a party,’ hence / a plethora of badges, medals, & hence the memo Air Marshal / Arthur Harris wrote to Portal, chief of the British air staff / at the time of the Normandy invasion, complaining ‘grave injustice’ / was being given to his bomber crew if all the attention & publicity / centered upon the army & navy” (71).

²⁷⁹ The homeless man’s words also allude to the misrepresentation of war by the media: “Oh said woky / No more Hollywood / Cowboy o ya! / Hollywood no more / No more cowboy / No more Chinese movie / I didn’t see the movie I see the war” (582).

version. Closing the section with a quiz for her son, the poet emphasizes the didactical aspect of her poem: her desire is not just to analyze history, or, in this case, study war, but to affect its course by changing its recurrent nature. Waldman's politics, heavily influenced by Buddhist concepts, are actualized in an aesthetic approach in which the social and political realms become the base of her poetry.

As the title of the third book – “Eternal War” – suggests, much to Waldman's sorrow, war, and the physical, psychological and/or cultural violence that war causes, act as the unifying metaphor running throughout the entire collection.²⁸⁰ The following picture – with which the author opens her book – seems a reminder of the perpetuity of war through patriarchy:



Figure 8. Author with her father at Washington Square Park, NYC, 1945

The image of the few-months-old baby playing with her father's military uniform, symbolizes within *Iovis* the inheritable, cyclical, system through which the culture of war is perpetuated. Having been “born” into war, her later commitment to the

²⁸⁰ The notion of the “Eternal War” is supported throughout the book with myths, stories and historical facts that highlight a vision of a repeating history of violence, domination and war. An example of this is found in a letter included in “SIGNATURA RERUM” where the addresser explicitly draws attention to the parallelisms between U.S. ex-president George Bush and Hitler's politics: “Please do not think I blame Americans in general for the war. The Bush takeover was so text-book-like, I mean like a textbook for fascists: You help to create certain conditions, which then serve you to fully come into power. It's very much like Hitler's takeover. It's so disgusting, because it shows that old strategies apparently still work, and *history is so very fast forgotten.*” (784, my emphasis)

poetic investigation and denunciation of war crimes – against humanity and the environment – represents an escape out of the mechanisms of concealment.

In different sections of *Iovis* Waldman investigates the notion of the eternal war and the role of knowledge, historical investigation and moral justice, as the necessary actions to counterattack its wrongdoings. For example, in “WAR CRIME”, written after the September-11 attacks, the poet gets back to New York, to a world ruled by paranoia – “Who are you? Citizen? Terrorist?” (713) – and studies the mechanisms of war in two different sections: one in prose and the other in poetry. In the first section, the notion of documentation and analysis of history is highlighted as crucial in order to put an end to the eternal war. If we look at the history of war, as the poet advises we should, we would find that, “[c]olonialism leads to war, take the text down from the shelf, brush up your victim mentality. You go nuclear, you go ballistic, Israel. Take out the spyglass, the pings of strife. That card is played.” (714) In this context, the image with her father is brought back, signaling once more to the early presence of war in her life and its consequences on the way she sees – or has seen – men: “The babe on her father’s knee, she got fooled that men are heroes. He was standing taller than she.” (721). Now that her eyes are opened up, through her poetry she wants to go back in time to eliminate war – “Let me relive the 20th century and never war no more. Never war no more.” (721) In the poem that follows this prose section, the author’s thoughts return to the same picture to challenge the naïve idea of fighting a “just” war, and of doing it for the well-being of others – in this case – herself. In her own words:

he was – John Waldman was – advance “wire” man

good for the asking

wire in my heart to his, Lieutenant

wire the scheming eye, night vision

a German lullaby, *gute nacht*

he held the child. Doing it for her, new world full of love

& no more Nazis (723)

Condemning such justifications – the “antithetical hallucination / that one fights for justice in love / that one fights for justice at all” (724) – she calls for a much-needed

time to expose the atrocities of war, a time to judge the crimes that have been committed in the name of love, religion, wealth, etc. Within this position, Waldman also includes a self-critical impulse that seems to be especially relevant in countries that share a history of active participation in war. For instance, a self-critical attitude is felt as a moral necessity to overcome the hypocritical position the author believes Americans run the risk of taking. As she puts it:

Citizen of the U.S. of A. needs to be perpetually vigilant as investigator of the dark acts and mechanisms of war, needs to call out perpetrators, and those who deny accountability or go into throes of amnesia when faced with the harm they inflict. As citizen, culpable as taxpayer, as one who votes and frets about our children coming home from war crazed and suicidal. (xiv)

Directly linked to this idea, in “DARK ARCANA: AFTERIMAGE OR GLOW”,²⁸¹ Waldman focuses on the need to revisit the demons of war in order to achieve a sense of release. To do so, she travels to the North of Vietnam to study the aftermath of the Vietnam War twenty-five years after it took place, bearing in mind her position as an American and the daughter of a soldier. Composing her poem as a kind of emotional/political journal of her wandering through the country, the repetition of the structure “what is it like” helps her shift the perspective to different people who were affected by the war, or to actions or emotional states brought by the war. She questions what it feels like, “to be / old American soldier” (847), “to resemble a child” (848) “to be a destiny of the victor-to-be” (849) “to be bestial” (855), “to be dead” (870), “to be colonial” (847), etc. After this exercise in empathy, at the end of the poem, Waldman addresses her fellow Americans and urges them to free themselves of the demons of war, an action intrinsically linked to the exposure of crime wars. In her own words:

Dear American: no patent on life

reverse your crimes in the altered rice-tree-corn world!!!!!!!!!!!!

(secret bombing of Cambodia)

²⁸¹ This 30 page-long poem was published separately in 2003, included photos and a cover by Patti Smith, who accompanied Waldman on her trip.

repent your afterimage
repent your glow. (877)

Alluding to the bombing of Cambodia Nixon authorized without the approval of U.S. Congress, which caused hundreds of thousands of casualties and displacements within the Cambodians – and was kept hidden from the American public eye for a time – the poem suggests that in order to get rid of the history of violence, one must first expose its atrocities, making sure they are no longer kept a secret. In this section, as in many others within *Iovis*, war crimes are exposed, and their victims sung and revered through poetry:

hill-tribe girl
maimed.
excoriated.
for collusion.
second-caste citizen of hoops,
of woven duds
of stuff & more collisions, hum
with the agitators
mercy mercy
& hawkish. (853)

Praying to both Vietnamese and Americans to give up any sense of retaliation or revenge – “don’t shoot / no romantic attachment to ‘dirty tricks’ past / please” (854) – the poet hopes that an unbiased knowledge of the past may break the cycle of war.²⁸² In addition, if we believe that, as Waldman writes in “SIGNATURA RERUM”, there is “[h]istory & one’s own sense of history” (791), then the poem can be analyzed as a space for the construction of oppositional histories that, in the celebration of their plurality, may ultimately overthrow an authoritarian approach to historicity – an approach that, in *Iovis*, is systematically attributed to patriarchy. Through her personal, poetical, analytical and scientific study of the history of war and masculinity, Waldman wishes to “take the prophecy back” (67), which she voices as follows:

²⁸² Nevertheless, and despite the “*Optimism prevails in spite of old karma*” (846) of the prelude to this section, the poet doubts the effectiveness of her approach; as she puts it, “time heels” (855), but not quite heals.

that sons would go to battle, that the fathers would send the sons to battle, that they do it again & again, that sons go willingly to battle but go with fear to battle, that the father is filled with fear, that they would kill with fear in battle again & again, that the American continent is doomed in battle, that the fathers of the continent that are not the real fathers but usurpers are doomed in fear in battle He ya ya! Heh Heh heh ya ya! (67-68)

One strategy proposed by the author to turn away this prophecy is by separating the education of children from the culture of war she has been exposing throughout the book. Such is the case in “WAR CRIME”, where the poet asks for the collaboration of – primarily – women to educate their sons in love and not war:

Women most of you O women unite. Rip those babes from wombs and hide them from the new homefront security measures, from the new draft law day, make them criminal investigators of the harm to the land, water, sky. To earth you shift your weight, restless upon. Open the mouths of the babes and feed them on love and a power to turn it around. Harm to none. (721)

However utopian or naïve this position may seem, it is presented as a counter-education to the masculine, war-dominated, culture which is, according to the poet, wrongly based on “the dismembering dis-remembering deeds of an out-of-control system, mismanaged, just same old robber baron grab mentality” (xiv). Despite Waldman’s outright rejection of this toxic cult of masculinity, she never opts for the substitution of patriarchy for a matriarchal society as a solution to this conflict. Just as di Prima and – especially – Kyger did in *Loba* and *Tapestry*, Waldman is particularly concerned with representing female experience as already shaped by patriarchy – summed up in the generative form *Iovis* she draws attention to on several occasions,²⁸³ and also in her position as a daughter of Jove. The allegedly subordinate position of “belonging to” or “coming from” the archetypal Godhead, does not translate into a passive, harmless representation of female experience, but it does affect the strategies women employ to gain their independence; that is to say, if women are necessarily part of the patriarchal system, they need to carry out their attack from the inside. As part of

²⁸³ “‘Iovis’ is a generative form, the possessive form of the word in the act of owning. Jove of Zeus or any procreative male deity is presumably filling up the phenomenal world with his sperm. He rules through possession, rape, and through the skillful means of the shape-shifter as well.” (135)

this position, as Waldman writes in “ALL IS FULL OF JOVE”, “[f]rom the psychological point of view (as a ‘daughter’) [she] need[s] to call him out, reveal him, challenge him, stomp on his corpse, steal his secrets.” (135) In this light, Waldman’s focus on masculinity and patriarchy in a so-called feminist epic becomes particularly relevant; “calling out”, “revealing” and “challenging” the patriarch, become the necessary steps to overthrow him, and using his tools – as a poet mainly through language and genre appropriation – is the loophole through which Waldman hopes to reverse or redirect patriarchy and masculinity. Through language, as the poet writes in the foreword to *Iovis*, she “wanted to be a name-giver, a *nomothete*, but honor the endless confusio linguarum. And the irreparable: *that which cannot be undone*. [...] Also abjure cultural pillage, colonization, the ‘take’ as in ‘on the take’ of the pillaging male. And mock him.” (xii)

An example of Waldman’s *nomothete* position is found in a section entitled “MARIOT ACTS”, where the poet plays with English words etymologically derivative from the Latin *pater*, such as “patriot”, “patriarch”, “paternalism” or “patronizing”, and mixes them with the Greek *pathos* – “to suffer” – such as “pathology”, “pathetic” or “pathogenic”. Opening the poem with words already discarded – crossed out – the poet plays with the meaning of these words at the same time that she critically approaches the negative connotations of their power. For instance, a patriot act is described as something that could “drive a citizenry crazy” (898), and as a “euphemism for torture, control, surveillance” (899). With “paterfamilias”, the poet stresses the dominance of men in their “political dynasties, endless rule...” (898). Inserting words derived from *pathos*, Waldman links the unrelated words by a simple equation: patriot equals suffering. In this light, the disease of patriarchy is addressed from the vantage point of the poet as maker, re-arranger of words:

~~+ Pathology? +~~

dark light, dark site

~~+ Pathological? +~~

it worsens...

~~+ Pathetic? +~~

caves in, you want to run and hide

+Pathogenic?+

continuity: protestant-white-man-privileged-toxic-ethos-I-fucking-hate-you! (899)

Against these discarded words – focused on men and suffering – the poet calls for alternative words that include the feminine like “matriot,” “matriarchal,” “matriarchy,” “matrilinear,” “matricentered,” “matricentric,” and “matriotism.” The focus on language aims at destabilizing the power men have endowed words with. In the author’s own words, her aim is to “overturn the legislation of the father-*nay*-tongue for they are often bleak in rhetoric & they have too often not acted in the interest of: / **heart’s / true state**” (901). Working with the *confusio linguarum* she mentioned in the prologue, the poet speaks to women of the need to use language as their weapon – language to learn “how to string along the enemy, catch him in a lair (a lie) / with meteoric speed & deft imagination” (907).

Similar to Kyger’s reinvention of Penelope, which avoided turning into a feminist utopia by acknowledging the rules of the larger, patriarchal, Homeric narrative, and to di Prima’s *Loba*, who called for female solidarity in search of a liberated feminine body and consciousness against masculine oppressors, Waldman’s epic search for the traces of the masculine power and energy – the reach of Jove’s sperm – leaves no room for doubt about the author’s belief in the necessity of facing patriarchy and its domain. Revisiting and exposing the history of male dominion is articulated as a strategy to fight back; and keeping an archive of male power, rather than aiming at the construction of an alternative female system, helps the poet create a map of his influence – “Destroy the relics of the patriarch? No, no we need them in the archive” (xiv). As a poet, using language as her weapon, she becomes a warrior and a fighter for the liberation of humanity,²⁸⁴ a position that has become essential in a world where myths have been exposed as fiction or alibis for violence and oppression; now that the “hero” – or even “god” – has lost its mythical and magical connotation, as she herself puts it, “[t]he artists in this secular world are the warriors, and the field of Mars is identical to the field of Love, & the artists are the only ones whose entire being depends upon the conduct on that field.” (76)

²⁸⁴ The poets, as Waldman has stated on various occasions, need to “keep the world safe for poetry” and that includes fighting injustice through their poetry.

In order to form her army of poets, the author does not renounce the support of men, but rather wishes them to turn away from the concept of patriarchy that Jove symbolizes. That is why patriarchy in *Iovis* is not only represented through war and the abuse of power, but also through the masculine literary lineage from which Waldman's poetical self emerges. An example of this can be seen in "DEAR CREELEY...", where the author honors the work of the Black Mountain poet, and situates her own work as influenced by his – "*The scientific scrutiny he brings to line, syllable, provokes her own attention, which takes another direction*" (100). Separating patriarchy from man, she makes sure to differentiate Jove's patriarchal violence and physical imposition from Creeley's literary influence; while "Jove mounts anything / The dissipated god whose action is / woman's fluid and to get his cock in / to come all over her" (100), Creeley "never touched [her] / but took love with all the syllables" (101).

Despite the seemingly easiness with which Waldman positions herself within the male literary tradition, she also considers the dangers women artists run when nurturing from male poets – or the "*conflict with spiritual traditions, their patriarchal dogma.*" (100) Accused of wanting to be like the men – Robert Creeley in this case – she wonders: "*Is that the case? She simply wants to be herself.*" (100) Although she admits to having wished for their privileged position, stating that she "wanted to take on the / male in [her] / & be the god you are / for you could take all the syllables you were in love with" (106), she still does not fit comfortably in that role. If she achieves the so-called phallic position, then how does her son – so prominent in her poetry – fit into that role – "could a son enter a life on a mother's poet's lintel / could the man survive, walk on in" (104). Being "a written / daughter / of" (115) the male poets, in the end she appropriates and rewrites Creeley and the others through her poem, making use of the same language that gave birth to her – creatively speaking – to gain her independence from them – "I tame you with my dakini hook / with my fiery text & mantric sound / with my love for you I tame you / these are my words / in my play / of you" (112).²⁸⁵

With such a strategy, the poet is able to benefit from the positive influence of her predecessors, at the same time that she evades the negative consequences of a patriarchy-based teacher/disciple relationship.²⁸⁶ Free – at least poetically – from the

²⁸⁵ Dakini refers to Buddhist spirits of nature and mind.

²⁸⁶ Such as a creative – or otherwise manifested – subordination of her poetry to theirs.

subordination patriarchy forces women to, in “DEAD GUTS & BONES”, Waldman addresses the dead male poets that influenced her – “Messieurs Kerouac O’Hara Olson Denby Berrigan Duncan” (223) – and describes them as floating “now as tattered bodhisattvas / in [her] heart.” (223) As bodiless presences within herself, within *Iovis* they fully depend on her words and poetry, where she has the power to celebrate them at the same time that she critically approaches their relationship with her.²⁸⁷ A similar situation is presented in “LIP OF THE REAL”, where the poet pays tribute to William Burroughs, who is described as a positive literary influence who “*set her on a path once of fragmented memory & dream retrieval that fed into more powerful writing*” (385), but whose misogynist attitude is also portrayed:

battleshield won’t help you here
 sent through you
 to get up my sisters
 who get riled by his old saw
 for he thinks them biddies
 & green skin

 or soggy (386)

As all of these examples point to, the fact that the poet acknowledges the positive influence of male poets in *Iovis*, does not mean that she is completely oblivious to the personal and artistic subordination many women were subjected to – a complex situation the poet refuses to reduce to a morally right/wrong binary. Interesting to this discussion, in “WELCOME TO THE ANHROPOCENE” she addresses with skepticism the category of “Beat women” and their relation to contemporary feminist discourses. Claiming that labeling these authors as feminist, “reduces a complex, personal, and individual history to a postmodern category”²⁸⁸ (982), she juxtaposes mythical texts – Demeter and Demophon’s myth and a broader notion of the sorceress – with a parallel

²⁸⁷ As an anecdote, going back to Creeley, she mentions one occasion on which he failed to value her as a poet: “I try / now not / to miss / you who are / older / sharper / I’m thinking / you called me / ‘hostess’ / once, New York / I’m insulted / because / of who / you are / to me” (113).

²⁸⁸ Although Waldman acknowledges the fact that they “definitely broke ground on many social levels” (982), her rejection of the label “feminist” is similar to other approaches taken by authors who prefer the term “proto-feminist” due to the conceptual temporal lapse between their social reality and the history of feminism.

story where “[t]he Beat guys [are] keeping the gnosis / all to themselves.” (982) Understanding the Beat legacy as an oral/mythical lineage, the author positions herself within that literary history:

whispered oral lineage
got it, my Allen
got it, my William
got it, Creeley
to muster and pass it on (982)

Obtaining, in this case, her strength from mythical figures such as the sorceress, she uses her “Magic wand” (983) to release her poetry from the negative aspects of the masculine Beat legacy – “O thee Beat devils unleash my tongue” (983).

To conclude, Waldman’s emphasis on patriarchy or on the masculine influences in her life – both positive and negative – places her in a similar position to that of Kyger’s and di Prima’s: rather than rejecting the position of women in a patriarchal society – turning towards utopian matriarchal societies – these authors represent women within the system, as well as women fighting against the system. Notwithstanding this similitude, Waldman’s approach also disassociates itself from the two previously studied authors: Kyger acknowledged and worked within the masculine Homeric grand narrative, using Penelope’s and her own experience to critique the subordination of women in life and art; and di Prima – exceptions excluded²⁸⁹ – painted different patriarchal manifestations – gender violence, Catholic or religious victimization and subordination of female body and sexuality, etc. – as the background from which her *Loba* runs, or the target of her charge. By contrast, in *Iovis*, the men also appear as supporters; they act as positive creative and artistic influences so frequently that masculine experience seems to dominate most of her feminist narrative poem.

Peter Puchek noted this seemingly contradiction in 2003, when just Books I and II became available; he stated that *Iovis* “seems out of touch with a late twentieth-century and twenty-first century societies increasingly impacted by women’s varied

²⁸⁹ In *Loba*, di Prima dedicates a poem entitled “DEER LEAP” to the poet Robert Duncan: “whisper my name, little brother, whisper / across the Net that links the stars / where yr angel / buzzes like an insect” (201).

roles and accomplishments” (40), but he also aptly observed that Waldman’s strategy “expands the horizon of feminism by avoiding a blanket condemnation of patriarchy [...understanding] that there is no vantage-point outside the male-dominated world” (50). Thus, Waldman’s approach can be said to agree with feminist thinkers such as bell hooks, who emphasize the need of feminism to include men and to free them from patriarchy as well.²⁹⁰

III.5.3. Women, Myth and the Androgynous God/dess

“Kali, come to me, I said, with your vajra rage” (919)

In this section I look at the way in which Waldman approaches myth and a mythological discourse within *Iovis*. To do so, I concentrate on two different approaches to myth; the first one reads myth as another discourse dominated by man, in which women – because of their historical inferior position – are often undervalued or used as scapegoats. From this perspective, Waldman uses a similar strategy to the deconstruction of war analyzed in the last section, exposing the malleability of myth through various narratives. Secondly, I analyze Waldman’s appropriation of specific mythic female figures – whose presence becomes more prominent in Book II – and which the author uses to give form to her poetical persona.

As the ever-present Jove/Zeus reveals, in *Iovis* myth is used as a central discourse that helps delineate Waldman’s investigation of the masculine energy. Hearing the voices of “lovers, grandfathers, brothers, father-in-laws, students, husbands, son, and the friends of [her] son, boys” (i), but also “the sound of a bigger vatic voice inside any myth, classic archetype, ritual sacrifice” (i) – that is often interpreted as masculine – in many poems Waldman investigates myth as another example of masculine power – as it happened with the historical and political discourse. As such, the study of myth offers the author the possibility of exposing the mechanisms used by patriarchy to perpetuate its dominance. By investigating the position of women within myth – as Kyger did with her revision of *The Odyssey* – Waldman uses her epic as a political and cultural analysis of the role of power in history.

²⁹⁰ In “Understanding Patriarchy”, bell hooks writes, “[u]ntil we can collectively acknowledge the damage patriarchy causes and the suffering it creates, we cannot address male pain. We cannot demand for men the right to be whole, to be givers and sustainers of life.” (30)

In this regard, a frequent strategy employed in *Iovis* involves drawing attention to the subordination of women in myth. In “OUSTED”, for instance, she not only condemns the exclusion of women from dominant positions in history, myth, politics and art, but also condones their victimization as scapegoats to cover up men’s failures or mistakes. Writing matter-of-factly she states, “[o]f course the stories known in many lands many tribes say this: about how men go off to battle, to catch a wild animal, to avenge a sorry deed, and if they slip, if they get maimed, if the animal eludes their grip, blame it on the wives. The wives were unfaithful. And so rush home to punish them. Oust them.” (292) As shown in the first section on the use of the epic genre, “OUSTED” is a section in which the poet also condemns the lack of support she receives from her contemporary fellow-poets; juxtaposing the denunciation of chauvinism within contemporary literary circles with this general statement about the systematic subordination of women within mythological discourses, Waldman points to the potential use of myth as a tool to perpetuate masculine dominance.²⁹¹

One way in which Waldman tries to free myth from the patriarchal domain is by separating it from a fixed position, stressing the religious or political interests that shaped its construction. An example of the evolution of myth and the construction of mythological figures is found in “EVANGELLE”, where the author writes under the effects of LSD she took while in Oregon with the Merry Pranksters, and reassembles different dialogues relating to the Goddess. Waldman initiates the conversation by describing one of the women who were part of the Prankster community as a representation of the goddess:

a deity of the house stokes the fire
behind
a broom
Hearth-lady

²⁹¹ Through this reading of myth as a manifestation of Jove’s power, it comes as no surprise that Waldman also considers its influence in her analysis of masculinity. On one occasion, addressing Glaukos, Anne’s mother’s first husband, she asks him the following questions: “1. What myth & which male character-hero do you identify with most? / 2. Which goddess do you most admire, fear, revere? Why? / 3. What was your rite of passage to manhood? At what age? What were the circumstances? / 4. When do you put your best foot forward?” (75). She asks a similar question to another man: ““What character (mythological, fictional, actual, such as in the movies) do you remember identifying with at any particular point in your life?”” (246)

who prays
 who is holy in prayer
 I recognize still-you out of this cock'd eye
 clouded tho it be
 with love decidedly acid (410)

This image of an earthly representation of the Goddess directs the poet's attention to Apuleius's description of the Goddess Isis in his *Metamorphoses* – or *The Golden Ass* – in which the protagonist invokes Isis for divine help. Referred to as the “goddess of a thousand names” (410), the depiction of Isis stresses the different incarnations and cults that have been attributed to her – presenting an image of a volatile, ever-changing Goddess closer to di Prima's *Loba*.²⁹² The story of Isis is followed by a quote from Enuma Elish, the Babylonian epic of creation,²⁹³ which narrates the defeat of the mother Goddess Tiamat, who is brutally killed by her great great grandson Marduk. While in an earlier myth Tiamat is described as a *creatrix* – responsible for creating the cosmos and a first generation of deities – in the later myth she is turned into a chaos monster whose dismembered body is used to create – or recreate – the cosmos. The quotes Waldman includes from the Enuma Elish in *Iovis* focus on Tiamat's defeat, emphasizing the violence and aggression committed upon her female body.²⁹⁴ Interrupting the cutting-and-pasting of the myth, she adds critical comments that draw attention to both the malleability of myth and the specific political context in which the changes were made – “(we're near the end of Sumero-Babylonian civilization / now see ever-increasing emphasis on war & conquest)” (414).

²⁹² In *Iovis*, quoting from Apuleius, Isis herself alludes to the plurality of her essence: “Some know me as Juno / some as Bellona of the Battles / others know me as Hecate / other as Rhamnumbia / but both races of Ethiopians whose lands the morning sun first shines upon, / & the Egyptians, who excel in ancient learning & worship me with proper / ceremony to my godhead, / call me by my true name, Queen Isis” (411).

²⁹³ It is possible that Waldman consulted or was influenced by *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (1991), written by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford. Following the different images of the Goddess in literature, art, and history worldwide, the book traces back to this archive to expose the historical subordination of the cult of the Goddess through the imposition of a patriarchal Judeo-Christian mythology. Chapter 6 focuses on Isis and analyzes Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, and Chapter 7 looks at the “defeat of the Goddess” through the Enuma Elish following, thus, a process similar to Waldman's.

²⁹⁴ Also interesting to Waldman's use of this text is the “oral” form she confers to it even while in print; quoting whole passages from the text – a translation of course – the story is interrupted with the line “(*I go inside to warm myself*)”, getting back to it a couple of stanzas later, as if the poet – and thus the reader – was accessing it through its original, oral form.

Marduk's destruction and later conquest of the Goddess' body – which is literally used as the ground to build his empire – emphasizes the brutal imposition of masculine violence upon women, a situation that is normalized and justified through a mythical discourse. As Anne Baring and Jules Cashford write in *The Myth of the Goddess*, “the mythic defeat of the Mother Goddess by a god is not, of course, unique to Babylonian mythology or to the Old Testament, but is enacted in the myths of every culture where the new rule of sky-god is superimposed on the older goddess religion” (420). By exposing the modification of the creation myth of the Goddess Tiamat – where she created life on its own – Enuma Elish shows, as Waldman writes, humanity was “born of brutality, rape, conquering, born of the heaped / mass upon / mass upon of female / suffering” (414-415), and how that discourse might be reproduced throughout the ages through other myths or customs.

Intrinsically linked to this notion, in “LACRIMARE, LACRIMATUS” Waldman seems to question the validity of myth altogether if it keeps being used to gain power through oppressing others. In this regard, she asks, “*Do we continue to conduct wars, more & more nationalistic, because we kept the myths alive in our various languages?*” (529). Answering this question in “Semiotics and Creation: Anne Waldman's *Iovis* and ‘Body Poetics’”, Puchek writes that even though the answer is affirmative in *Iovis* – Waldman, indeed, is deeply concerned with exposing the perpetuation of a history and myth that justify war – she does not renounce myth completely. In his own words:

[*Iovis*] locates the problem's source not in myth itself but in various societies' provincial and xenophobic approaches to myth. Myths that glorify wars of aggression or demonize the other definitely have no value to Waldman, but she is not ready to completely abandon myth [...] In fact, she advocates no contraction but expansion, more understanding and knowledge of myths, in particular different creation myths around the world. (58)

In this sense, Waldman's use of mythology, as part of the amalgam of texts, sources and other historical or cultural references that compound *The Iovis Trilogy*, can be linked to that of Margaret Atwood. As Wilson states in “Mythological Intertexts in

Margaret Atwood's Works",²⁹⁵ "Atwood intertwines these [folk tales, fairy tales, legends, etc.] and other cultural master narratives with radio, television, and film stories, not only to provide mythic resonance and polyphonic melody, but to parody or undercut narrative authority in a postmodern way." (215) Although, to a certain extent, Waldman does use mythology as yet another intertext – another document through which the dominance of Jove is perpetuated – the main difference with Atwood's appropriation of myth is that in *Iovis* the mythical references are hardly ever treated as a postmodern parody.²⁹⁶ As the previous quote from Puchek points to, Waldman does not merely discard myth – or parodies it, for that matter – but encourages the investigation and scrutiny of its sources and of the context in which they were written and spread from generation to generation; once this process is done, the poet can truly benefit from the creative power of myth.

Indeed, that the poet often uses myth in *Iovis* to denounce the malleable nature of mythical discourses, does not mean that she is unable to find a source for self-empowerment within specific myths or mythical figures. Just as di Prima did by composing a poem based on the different representations of characters such as Lilith, Waldman also exposes the malleable nature of myth even at the same time that she is empowered by it. An example of this can be found in the figure of Maria Lionza, a mystic deity of the Venezuelan Folklore. In "ROBERT CREELEY TURNING TO CHE IN A DREAM" she introduces the Goddess in a manner that stresses the fictional, narrative nature of myth:

so it goes:

a Caquetio Indian chief's daughter born with green eyes, a bad sign (evil eye),
 he takes her to a lake and gives her to the anaconda but she rises
 from the lake surrounded by many plants and animals
 or
 if she saw her reflection a monstrous snake would come bringing death and destruction
 so the father hid her and she had twenty-two guardians (805)

²⁹⁵ In *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (2000), ed. Reingard M. Nischik.

²⁹⁶ An example of an "unparodied use of heroic myth," (221) as Sharon R. Wilson notes, is Atwood's "Orpheus."

Offering up to three more parallel stories to Lionza's origin – all of them separated and introduced by the conjunction “or” – the goddess is finally described as a shape-shifter, who can “be a queen but she can also become a snake or a diplomat”²⁹⁷ (806). Just as the study of history, analyzing the contradictory origins of mythical figures such as Lionza endows the poet with the power of *not* being manipulated by any “official” version of history or myth; instead, knowledge grants her the opportunity to choose her own version, or of denying/accepting all of them.²⁹⁸ As it was the case in *The Tapestry and the Web* and in *Loba*, in *Iovis* Waldman also benefits from the open nature of myths, as it allows her to creatively empower herself through them. For instance, the poet concludes the section “MATRIOT ACTS” with a narrative piece in which she summons and invokes the rage of the Goddess Kali – called on to symbolize women's anger at the historical dominance of men. To Waldman, Kali's power lies in her contradicting nature as both benign and destructive, which allows her to use her power without completely falling into her rage. As she states, in the cult of Kali, “[n]othing is interdict, everything is permitted, when you can be both benevolent and fierce. Such is the ‘both both’ of Kali’.” (919) Seeing the Goddess as a “state of mind, as psychological twist” (920), Waldman chooses to transform Kali's physical power into a creative manifestation of female discomfort that aims at disestablishing patriarchal power through the action of words. If Kali is “the mother of language and mantra” (920), then each letter women use becomes potentially disruptive. As she puts it:

each letter a symbol of change, each letter a wheel, each letter a wheel of change, each letter a triumph, each letter a solar wind, each letter a storm, each letter a cameo appearance, each one a treaty, each one a place where plutonium safely resides, each one an hedrumite resolution, each one an epitrope, each one an orchestra of many gongs ... (920)

Concluding that each letter becomes a “palpable hit” (920), the transformation of Kali's alleged physical power into a language equally destructive, is ultimately achieved

²⁹⁷ In one of the versions Waldman offers Maria Lionza goes by the name of Maria del Prado and unsuccessfully tries to stop Ponce de Leon's “conquering mode” (805).

²⁹⁸ The freedom to choose your own version is praised in other sections of *Iovis*, as in the following example where the speaker refuses to reduce the Moon Goddess to a land conquered by man: ““When I was a child I learned that the moon was goddess Dewi Ratih. Then Neil Armstrong landed on it. I still look up at night and pray to Dewi Ratih’.” (172)

thanks to the shifting nature of myths.²⁹⁹ With this premise, the author successfully adopts a polyvalent approach to myth from which she can appropriate different characteristics of both female and masculine deities. In “SHIVA RATRI” the poet nurtures from the strength of different deities;³⁰⁰ as Waldman writes in the summary to the section, she “[c]alls on the deities to help her in her quest for power [as] she would like to be a *pamurtian* – a gigantic supernatural being with thousands of heads & arms brandishing weapons.” (154). Unlike di Prima, who saw the violence and physical power of figures such as Lilith as counterproductive to women’s liberation, Waldman invokes these figures not for their physical violence, but to obtain “[w]eapons like articulate speech & poetry’s orality” (154). Hence, in the poem she asks the deities to “bring out / the dormant power” (158), which she specifically locates within her language – “Take my tongue and inscribe on it all / the magic syllables / ANG UNG MANG / make my voice sweet with the inscriptions / of honey” (158). Although she acknowledges her inferior position in relation to the male deities – “they haunt her / eclipse her” (165) – she still, and unlike Kyger or di Prima, advises women not to completely reject the masculine example: “wherever the energy is / seize it!” (165). Notwithstanding the creative and artistic advantages of nurturing from masculine influences, the poet is also acutely aware of the risk women run when they function within a completely masculine system:

she lives inside them, she lives inside him, she
lives in the corner of his eye, she writes as
woman-who-had-stretched-to-this-point, to the
point of an eye or corner of “his” eye she writes
as one abused, she writes as collaborator, she writes
now she writes later (170)

²⁹⁹ In her poem “Fast Speaking Woman” Waldman also speaks through Kali, or lets Kali speak through her: “I’m the Kali woman the killer woman / women with salt on her tongue / fire that cleans / fire that catches / fire burns hotter as I go” (25). In “From Revolution to Creation”, Puchek links Waldman’s appropriation of Kali to di Prima’s in *Loba*, stating that, “di Prima’s *Loba* reincarnates the teeth mother as the she-wolf whose fires and floods produce ‘a new / creation myth’ of women’s desire (1978, 29). Fast-speaking-woman and the loba remind readers that Kali’s powers include healing and growth.” (239)

³⁰⁰ In the poem she calls out different Goddesses and female personifications of deities – “Call upon Giri Putri, Dewi Gangga, Dewi Danu / Call Mother Uma / Stave off Durga” (156) – and also Gods like Indra, or the “divine hermaphrodite” (157) Batara Siwa.

To prevent this problem, Waldman encourages the exaltation of the hermaphrodite nature of Shiva, and to “silence the chromosomes one small day” (175). This option allows her to benefit from the creative energy of gods and goddesses without the risk of falling into the gender impositions normally present in myth. Although the early allusion to the hermaphrodite in Book I foresees one of Waldman’s main concerns – an issue I get back to at the end of this section – before celebrating the genderless or multi-gendered being, the poet looks at myth in search of female examples she can appropriate or use.

One example of Waldman’s focus on female characters is found in “LEIR”, where the author thinks about rewriting Shakespeare’s *King Lear* after watching a theatrical production with Morris Carnovsky – which she sees as “too austere” (92). Finding her personal connection with Cordelia through her own relationship with her father – “*The vulnerability of father to daughters and how it goes the other way too*” (92) – but also to Lear himself – “*How to ground Lear’s soft foolish agony, his imagination?*” (92) – she proposes her own version. Condemning King Lear’s faulty governance and bad judgment, as a poet who speaks the truth rather than professing false love to the man, she becomes Cordelia in exile – “shunned from a door I know this / alive in hovel, grotto, dear father, I...” (93). While in Shakespeare’s version Cordelia remains off stage most of the time, Waldman’s poem becomes the medium through which her exile is represented,³⁰¹ and from which she can “crack Lear’s code” (96) and offer men a piece of advice:

someone thrown down in the mad hallway
it is a male

who wants to retire in power
expects something will come of something
& accorded scepter
not out went the candle (99)

Other references to mythical female figures highlight their subordination – or simply existence – as part of patriarchal myths. Examples of these include the Earth

³⁰¹ “I wanted to tell it from the other side / How a daughter could see split in two / theirs and hers, burnished side / word etch / She is a yogin for responsibility” (97).

Goddess Gaia, whose geographical inferior position to the sky-god subjugates her to his control: “I’m Gaia / Father Sky look down on me / Stars are his eyes / He enters me / All is full of him” (7). At other times the poet – who already established that she dwells in a patriarchal cosmos – likens her persona to Athena, born out of Zeus’s forehead: “The myths are alive or a time / I come out full-grown of my father’s split head / and armed for the battle of love” (27). Despite these examples, although there are many other references to female deities and mythical figures, the poet avoids identifying completely with any of them, rather including their presence within her poem as a counterpoint to the ever-present Jove. In the foreword of Book II, entitled “Guardian & Scribe: Prologomena to Exile”, Waldman claims to turn aside from the study of “male energy”³⁰² (341) she has been conducting in Book I, turning now towards “the female allies to join the throng of male voices inside her own.” (341)

Despite this assertion, none of the female allies Waldman invokes in Book II are more in tune to her own persona than the purposely vague “hag” figure. Indeed, besides the semi-mythical presence of the “Anne-who-grasps-the-broom” alter-ego, the figure of the witch or hag is the character which Waldman most frequently appropriates throughout *Iovis*. This identification is dealt with in “HAF OF BEARE (CAILLECH BERRI)”, where the poet invokes the presence of the Irish and Scottish mythical character of the divine hag, an ancestral deity and creatrix. Aiming to “*enter [the hag’s] keening mouth*” (378), the poet translates the ninth-century poem, “The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare”, in which the hag discusses her life as she reaches senility. Even if the poem concentrates on what the hag now lacks – soft skin, youth, agility, loves, etc. – Waldman praises her strength and her “[n]ever *self-pitying*” (378) attitude. Rather than hiding her old age – “I’m old, okay, I know it” (380) – the hag knows she has “lived a fast life, no regrets” (380). Praising the hag’s “*synoptic view*” (378) on her own life, through which she is able to re-enjoy her youth,³⁰³ Waldman identifies with her way with words, which she uses to escape patriarchy. “[S]moking mirrors, false prophecy, / botched teeth, clever poetry...” (384) might be “all you get to blunt your knife...” (384), that is to say, to quell Jove’s violence.

³⁰² Here she describes this study of male energy as “a challenge fraught with feminist irony” (341), in case readers misread Book I as a mere celebration a masculine supremacy.

³⁰³ “But I had it, had a time with kings / I swear – high on wine and mead” (380)

The hag – the old woman etymologically ingrained in Waldman’s name³⁰⁴ – becomes an icon figure who challenges patriarchy with her knowledge and cold irony.³⁰⁵ In a section entitled “REVENGE”, the poet fuses with the hag and follows a god-like masculine figure through a ruined world, seeing the man “*now as foolish prophet doomed by a stubborn, wrongheaded, & willful nature.*” (143) Alluding to Jove, the epitome of patriarchal western religious myth in *Iovis*, the poet uses the hag to denounce the subordination of women within religious discourses. In a way similar to di Prima’s reevaluation of The Seven Joys of the Virgin – where Mary was basically raped and later turned into an inanimate icon – the hag condemns Jove’s attempts at restraining her mobility:

You were the artisan
of the moment I got framed, caught in malachite,
caught in granite. You took the lead. You
assumed the charge of me. I was never good at being
still and wanted to bend with the gold. (144)

Using the poem to take on her revenge, the hag exposes the male god-like character’s flaws and elevates herself as a better candidate for power. For instance, she scoffs at his egocentrism, stating that “once, under trees, you whispered, pointing / at the sky GOD IS IMMENSE. That shattered, because / all you were thinking was you, you.” (144) The poet/hag, still honoring her archival urge, keeps a record of Jove’s activities that she will use to dismantle his power by exposing his inadequacy – breaking his spell on the world:

Words on tapes
and notebooks, which fill my shelves now, collapsing
under the weight of grandiose insight and scoff.
Can you take them all back? I doubt it. You said
this, and you said that, and you lost the train [...]

³⁰⁴ In “WHAT’S IN A NAME?” she links Anne to “anus = old woman” (136).

³⁰⁵ The hag for Waldman is also a female character that escapes gender norms. As she states in “Feminafesto”, where she links the image of the hag to her own mother: “By then [when her mother was 60] she was an embodiment for me of the ‘hag’ who had thrown off the shackles of mean expectation, could finally manifest beyond ‘girl,’ ‘wife,’ ‘mother,’ other domesticities. To some extent she’d stop measuring herself against a heterosexist world.” (*Vow to Poetry* 21)

No ears are deaf

and all of you will hear me. Hear me. History needs
to be retold in couplets. (144)

She similarly rejects his speech as hurtful and violent, claiming that he “punctuate[s] [his] speech with nails, with glass, / with mirrors, with chrome. With sharpness and / always some danger of a stab or jagged edge.” (150) Seeing through Jove’s lies, the hag frees herself, claiming that he now represents for her “false tradition, / Western illusion” (152). Nevertheless, although the poet/hag has successfully freed herself from his grip, she does not abandon him – in harmony with Waldman’s search of the androgynous being – but rather calls him “comrade” (152), and welcomes their union as the solution to the ruined civilization she has witnessed under his control. Here, once again, her position as scribe and archivist becomes crucial: “My shelves sag under the weight of your / teachings. My cave is a repository of the / inconsequence of your individuation” (152).

The hag/poet union, formed out of their mutual concern for knowledge and the investigation of a god-driven world, points towards the study of myth not only as a source for self-empowerment, but also as means to redirect humanity. Myth, in this sense, is not just revised, but used as site for rebirth and knowledge. In “BORN ON THE THATCH I WAS BORN TO” the poet chronicles a visit to the pyramids in Egypt and portrays the moment of entering as reaching a deeper knowledge:

You had to chant the names of all the Egyptian deities you could think of. You had to view yourself as witness, as barge, as eyes from another realm. You had to make your journey a sacred one toward the center of the past and toward death and rebirth in an old mythology. You had to have memory of everyone who went before you, of everyone who dies before you. [...] You had to crawl as witness, as first woman, as first girl, as sacrificial victim. You had to crawl naked. You had to crawl with your tough skin. With your fearless skin. (125)

This journey back to the beginning – and from a position of both humbleness and bravery – is seen as a necessary step in order to get acquainted with the past, a crucial action in order to “TIP THE SCALES” (126). Tipping the scales becomes an explicit attack on a patriarchal notion of myth and history, and the poet acknowledges

the threat her excavation into the past poses to the men who would rather she “didn’t read about these things / of past and weaponry” (128). Similarly, the poet emphasizes the need to remember and build up an archive, which becomes an intellectual and critical position in clear opposition to what the male mythmakers and historians want her to do: “You’d rather I leave off talk / Fill out forms / Forget the landscape, this room, / that night, the candidate’s smile” (128).

With the power the knowledge acquired through her investigation grants her, the poet, rather than simply shaping her life after some female deity probably created by men, is able to create her own meaning. In this light, another character the poet feels close to is that of the Scribal God – or Rabbit Scribe³⁰⁶ – who shares with Waldman and the hag the power of words and the knowledge of history and myth from their archives. In “GLYPHS” she appropriates this figure in her study of Maya glyphs and history. Inserting the image of the scribe with her poem, she emphasizes their connection:

& being the archeological I unearthed the glyphs to my own rendering

I, Princes am she who writes monkey-scribe Or rabbit woman



or let me live to crack a code: revolution (487)

Through the position as a scribe, she keeps the glyphs alive but also gives them new meaning – or at least separates them from historical misinterpretations.³⁰⁷ Keeping amongst her books the reminder of patriarchy – “always on my shelf: the terra-cotta phallus” (490) – the poet’s job as a scribe, hag or archivist is to keep words safe from the manipulations of the patriarch, to bring to light injustices committed to past civilizations, but also to ensure such acts are not repeated. Although Waldman refers

³⁰⁶ In Maya culture, divine scribes are usually monkeys, but in one ceramic Maya vase – known as the Princeton vase – the scribe is turned into a rabbit. In “The Way of God L: The Princeton Vase Revisited”, Barbara Kerr and Justin Kerr write that “[since] the rabbit is the offspring of the Moon Goddess [...] there may be a connection between this rabbit and the young woman [that also appears in the vase], who perhaps is a manifestation of the Moon Goddess” (73).

³⁰⁷ She refers in this section to Jean Frederick Maximilien Waldeck, whose errors in his illustrations fostered misconceptions about Maya culture and even encouraged Mayanism – whose followers study the connection between Mayas and extraterrestrial beings.

specifically to H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* (1961) as an influence for her epic, the many allusions to the importance of keeping an archive, and the elevation of the scribe as a powerful character endowed with a special power, also align her approach with H.D.'s *Trilogy* (1973). Like Waldman in *Iovis*, H.D., as Alike Barnstone writes, "as a poet she identifies with the Egyptian Thoth and the Alexandrian Hermes Trismegistes, the mystical scribes, messengers, and healers."³⁰⁸ (xxiii) This is most noticeable in the first poem in the collection, "The Walls Do not Fall", where H.D. grants poets with the power to record history in ways that would help humankind not repeat the same mistakes: "Thoth, Hermes, the stylus, / the palette, the pen, the quill endure, / though our books are a floor / of smouldering ash under our feet; / though the burning of the books remains / the most perverse gesture / and the meanest / of man's mean nature, / yet give us, they still cry, / give us books" (16). Just as in *Iovis*, in *Trilogy* there is a strong correlation between words and the dismantling of war and violence:

O Sword,

you are the younger brother, the latter-born,

your Triumph, however exultant,

must one day be over,

in the beginning

was the Word. (17)³⁰⁹

Situating her power in the domain of words, in *Iovis*, rather than typically revising or adapting myth, Waldman favors a flexible approach through which she makes room to well known mythological characters like Athena or Kali in her poem, but only truly appropriates the power of language and knowledge she locates within the less defined hag or scribe figures.³¹⁰ By refusing to reduce the category of woman to

³⁰⁸ Introduction to the 1998 A New Directions Book edition.

³⁰⁹ "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

³¹⁰ Together with these mythical references, at one point in *Iovis*, her adolescent son gets tired of his mother's constant note-taking and crowns her as an unusual goddess:

any image – in any case favoring a vision where her creativity is stressed – Waldman manages to escape the restraining, reductionist, stereotypes available in the cosmos ruled by Jove she established at the very beginning of *Iovis*. This position, which is similar to di Prima’s plural vision of Loba, is also found elsewhere in Waldman’s work, as in her highly praised “Fast Speaking Woman”, where she welcomes the plurality within herself and women in general.³¹¹ Opening her poem with Rimbaud’s “*I is another*” (3), she describes herself as follows:

I’m the abandoned woman
I’m the woman abashed, the gibberish woman
the aborigine woman, the woman absconding [...]
the transparent woman
the absinthe woman
the woman absorbed, the woman under tyranny
the contemporary woman, the mocking woman
the artist dreaming inside her house (4)

These and many other descriptions³¹² of female properties offer an elusive representation of femininity, pointing to the inadequateness of reducing women to an already established mythical archetype.³¹³ The plurality within women in *Iovis* is closely linked to the author’s search for the androgynous being, which is articulated as a

“ – Way to go, thanks, Mom. I’ll swear I’m going to tear that in half & you’ll never publish it.

– Wait a minute.

– Stop writing down your stupid notes. What are you writing down, Mom? Anne Waldman’s an idiot. She’s going to write these things & think: O I’m going to sell them for a dollar. Maybe I could sell it to a fool like me for a dollar. She’s the goddess of all idiots!” (595)

³¹¹ Within *Iovis*, Waldman’s son is also given the space to describe his mother in the same fast-speaking-woman style: “dear momma who probes in our bags & boxes and papers that aren’t really hers / who kicks me out of the kitchen so she can talk / who talks / who writes in a Powerbook / who drives a Volvo and adds chile to most of her dishes / who beats her little boy with broom handles / who demands some savvy / who sneezes in spring & buys sheets of stamps / who folds the day into many hours / whose brother slept in a drawer / who has great quantities in the trunk of her car / who saw a Queen Angel under the sea / who wears scarves of many colors / who dresses up for all sorts of occasions / who likes to travel to exotic places / who is a happy mother” (348).

³¹² Other descriptions are similar to her investigating mode in *Iovis*: “the phenomena woman / the woman who studies / the woman who names / the woman who writes / I’m the cataloguing woman [...] I’m the vendetta woman / I’m the inventive woman / I’m the invective woman” (12).

³¹³ In “Who’s Afraid of Anne Waldman” (2003) Codrescu also describes the author focusing on her many different incarnations: “Anne the traveler / Anne the dream journalist / Anne the raw-feeling lyricist / Anne the keeper of the record / Anne the epistolary [...] / Anne the Naropa builder / Anne the Shaman / Anne the Performing Shaman” (50).

way out of the mythical and archetypal construction of gender – both male and female – which she hopes to dismantle. In the last part of this section, I concentrate on the way Waldman articulates the dissolution of gender as escape from Jove’s domain.

In the last section of Book I, “YOU REDUCE ME TO AN OBJECT OF DESIRE,” the reader is confronted with the tension between the rejection of the masculine God by women – as an act of revenge for their historical subordination – and the realization that only the inclusion of female and masculine energies will put an end to the battle of the sexes. In this section, the poet-warrior, described as a “twin” (321) to the male, nurtures from a masculine source of energy to become more powerful – ultimately using the hybrid strength to eliminate Jove – the “Fat Almighty” of this section. Her initial strategy is one of mimicking, through which her abilities as a shape-shifter help her infiltrate an advantageous position she can use to turn against men:

- how did she get so “even”?
- in the night
- to hear how he clamors for blood, but she is smart
- in the name of land he rages on *Allah Allah*
- to name it his name but she steals his words
- to slay a demon in the same night (322)

This hybrid, androgynous form is born out of the poet’s “*acceptance of her power as twin of the male*” (321), for what she becomes, not only stronger, but also “*perhaps the better artist because she does write down her unflinching vision. And is willing to love her enemy.*” (321) The power she takes from men takes its most immediate manifestation in language, which in this same section is seen as the medium in which the poet-warrior acts. A series of statements on the use and power of language – introduced as anonymous quotes – show the malleability of language and its position as an instrument of domination or liberation. Separating the different quotes with the word “*deal*” – which in the context can allude to both agree with, or play with – language is represented as an ambivalent weapon. For instance, we are told that, “[t]he way you write will reflect what you think those words do – what effects they have, what effects they can be permitted to have – how you can change the effects they are known to have to what you want them to have” (330). With this in mind, the poet can fight with

words to reverse the way language has been used to subordinate women through history, religion, myths, etc. The following lines attest to such power:

You can assume the existence of a large, widely accepted set of rules. You can also not assume or accept it

that the language be fair, that it hold you
fast, that the cross it bears exempts the woman

She rides through the poem on
villains, brothers, saints, deities
they speed her on (331)

Using *Iovis* as an example – the poem inspired by the positive and negative masculine influences alluded to above – the poet situates the potential liberating use of language in the context of the inclusion – rather than exclusion – of female and masculine forces. This imagined space, “where the twins / rule / the / cosmos” (331), might finally be one in which they are willing to “take an artist as their queen” (331). This androgynous female/male artistic realm is presented as a freer space, and a way out of the negative stereotyping of both men and women. Throughout *Iovis*, Waldman complicates the notion of gender, encouraging the fusion of women into men and men into women. She sees herself as in an ambiguous way – “I speak in a man’s voice wildly discordant / I don women’s clothes / & deny the old religion / With my ironic undercutting, my new haircut / I speak a foolish tongue” (60) – and sees the investigation of the masculine influences in her life as a dissolution of her own gender – or rather the traditional implications of her gender – and invites men to do the same. Indeed, in “HEM OF THE METOR”, the poet “*moves through the lives of particular men as a kind of sympathetic magic to catch experience. She wants the men to do the same: change into women*” (33).³¹⁴ Bearing this goal in mind, Waldman also uses *Iovis* to study available examples of the power of the hermaphrodite.

For instance, in “SECRETS OF THE AMBULATORIES,” a section within Book III where the author considers the importance of light/sun – in the context of exposing, bringing something to light – she creates a character that she uses to subvert

³¹⁴ The same idea is repeated at the end of the section: “Don’t mock me as I avenge the death of my sisters / in this or any other dream / In order to make the crops grow / you men must change into women” (61). These verses are followed by the word “hermaphrodite” written in Greek.

the notion of the masculine, monotheistic God. Imitating the language of religious scripts, she transforms “thy” and “thyness” – as in pertaining solely to a masculine God – to a genderless form devoid of possession, individualization, egocentrism, domination and so forth. This new character is presented as the opposite of what Jove stands for in *Iovis*; unlike Jove’s marked masculinity, the character Waldman imagines is “without gender without godhead” (896).³¹⁵ She uses the poem to further disassociate this new form from the terrain of the domineering Jove – “thy is no kingdom come [...] no purple privileged glory [...] no flag, no rod, no scepter, no staff of brutality” (896). If the crashing and devastating form of masculinity of Jove led to all of these things, then the genderless, egoless new form is “a place with conscientious war tribunals / thy is of mercy and follows all the days of tracking war criminals” (896).

Similarly, in “SHIVA RATRI” – alluding to the Hindu festival that celebrates the union of Shiva and Shakti – she also praises the hermaphrodite deity as a more balanced and just being than the egotist Jove. She addresses the Batara Siwa – or the “divine hermaphrodite / source of all light, Windu” (157) – who, unlike Jove, represents the complete union of the sexes. As the following extract from *Island of Bali* shows – a book Waldman also uses in this poem – Siwa is not only capable of shifting into a man or a woman, but is simultaneously the harmonious union of the two. Siwa represents “the two eternal principles: male and female, spirit and matter, united for the constant production and reproduction of the universe, the exaltation of the union of the sexes for procreation.” (Covarrubias, 290) In any case, although the poet aspires and celebrates a hermaphroditic gender throughout the book,³¹⁶ she also sees the obstacles such a position may pose in her current culture. Alluding to society’s narrow-mindedness towards the rights of marginal sexualities – specifically the Christian doctrine – at one point the poet utters: “Dear Hermaphrodite: *Lasicate ogni speranza voi ch’ entrate*” (33). Quoting the well-known words from *The Divine Comedy*, the poet situates the would-be position of the hermaphrodite as already excluded at the margin – or quite literally, at the gates of hell.

³¹⁵ In “WELCOME TO THE ANTHROPOCENE” she introduces the third gender “hir”, which serves a similar function as “thy” in this section. In her own words: “what I think: she & he & hir are ‘both both’ in the bigger scheme / and something between to be sing parity / parity! / all live long day” (984). With this egoless, genderless being Waldman hopes to avoid the feeling of greediness that lies behind the war and violence of the almighty “He”.

³¹⁶ She even studies hermaphrodite or sequential hermaphrodite fish in a section (247).

Having reached this point, and in the light of Waldman's decision to write a feminist epic, one could wonder if the dissolution of gender, or the advocacy for a third – neither female nor masculine – gender leads to an apolitical/sexless body. In this respect Gayle Rubin's influential "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy of Sex'" (1975) becomes relevant. Rubin discards gender as a socially imposed division of the sexes, and as such also rejects the inverse situation in which men are eliminated or subordinated and women become the oppressors. In her own words:

we are not only oppressed *as* women, we are oppressed by having to *be* women, or men as the case may be. I personally feel that the feminist movement must dream of the elimination of obligatory sexualities and sex roles. The dream I find most compelling is one of an androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love. (204)

In an essay entitled "Feminafesto" Waldman discusses the situation of women writers and turns away from a feminist criticism "centered on the misogyny of literary practice" (*Vow to Poetry* 24), advocating instead for a position similar to Rubin's. Describing her turn towards "an enlightened poetics, an androgynous poetics" (24),³¹⁷ Waldman proposes "a utopian field where we are defined by our energy, not by gender. [she] propose[s] a transsexual literature, a transgendered literature, a hermaphroditic literature, a transvestite literature, and finally a poetics of transformation beyond gender." (24) Waldman's dissolution of gender in this essay is closely linked to the Buddhist concepts *prajna* and *upaya* – which represent a unified state of the masculine and feminine principles.³¹⁸ For Waldman these concepts make possible that "the body be an extension of energy, that we [writers] are not defined by our sexual positions as men or women in bed or on the page." (24) Buddhist practices in *Iovis* are equally important and closely related to Waldman's notion of a body poetics that reconcile the

³¹⁷ "You could be a man with a 'lesbian' consciousness in you, a woman with a 'gay' consciousness inside" (24), writes Waldman.

³¹⁸ According to this doctrine, "[a]ll truth is to be looked for and may be found in the very body of man, in what is inborn (*saha-ja-*) within it. It is this Sahaja which is the Absolute, and to attain it means to unify the elements creating duality within the body and within each personality, to combine the male and the female principles [...] Prajñā and the Upāya represent the principles of dualism and the unification of the two in a supreme non-dual state is the final aim of the Buddhist Sahajiyās." (Dusan Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature* 126)

masculine and feminine traits in the artist, at the same time that they hope to provide the genderless body with the power to effect change in the world. One of the practices that predominates in Waldman's text is the *tonglen*, which the author describes as “[a] Buddhist assignment [...] a sending and receiving practice where one takes in what suffers and breathes out the efficacy of that suffering. ‘In’ dissolves into white, ‘out’ into black.” (xiii) This Tibetan practice also means “taking it all in, including it all” (“Push, Push Against the Darkness” interview by Jim Cohn), a process that seems specially suitable for the all-inclusive hermaphroditic being – especially if we understand it in the Buddhist terms of the union of masculine and female principles. This process is, in addition, closely related to Waldman's politics and poetics. As Clemens Spahr writes in “Holding up the ‘Poetry Front’: Anne Waldman's Politics of the Aesthetic”, Waldman's:

[b]uddhist philosophy assures that any individual spiritual understanding is gained from experience in the first place, and, on account of the notion of compassion, must be re-transformed into political commitment for the sake of others. Secondly, the aesthetic realm acknowledges its dependence on and its function within society by containing again and again fragments of social events as well as direct political statements, thus foregrounding the political sphere which the aesthetic discourse originates in and, after all, rebels against. (154)

The hermaphroditic, androgynous being who puts into practice Waldman's politics/poetics should not be understood as the exaltation of a sexless artistic mode,³¹⁹ or as the absolute negation of the body as sexed – it is not part of the “equality feminism” Irigaray criticized in “Je, Tu, Nous”³²⁰ – but rather as the expansion of consciousness that allows the poet to give voice or speak through different people, a

³¹⁹ Which might stimulate a discussion similar to Elaine Showalter's critique of Virginia Woolf's androgynous voice (“Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny” in *A Literature of their Own*), which Showalter sees as counterproductive for feminism and reads as a “myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition” (264). In *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) Moi argues against Showalter's humanist reading, one that assumes “that good feminist fiction would present truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify” (7)

³²⁰ As she – somewhat dramatically – puts it, “[c]ertain modern tendencies, certain feminists of our time, make strident demands for sex to be neutralized. This neutralization, if it were possible, would mean the end of the human species. The human species is divided into *two genders* which ensure its production and reproduction. To wish to get rid of sexual difference is to call for a genocide more radical than any form of destruction there has ever been in History.” (12)

performance piece that becomes vital in light of her epic approach. As she states in “Epic & Performance,” the writer of an epic should “imagine it falls on to you – solo poet or collective ‘you’ – and you (voice) / ego are anointed / appointed to tell the story of your tribe, your race, your gender, [...] your village, your city in conflict with that other one down the road, the story of a war between families over water rights...” (312). If the poet is to represent humanity, his or her body should go beyond itself to ultimately acknowledge, and include, a complex, multitudinous, body. As she related in a personal interview, the idea is to “degenderize the voice of the consciousness, so that the consciousness is the field-poet who is moving in different arenas and areas.”³²¹ A similar idea can be found in her essay “Outrider,” where her poetics are not delimited to her own female sexuality, but hope to recognize “the linear body, lunar body, illuminated body, liminal body. Body poetics. Transgressed, trans-gendered. Or body maimed in war. Body scarred in many ways. Body politic. Afflicted by body politic.” (21) In this light, Waldman’s approach in *Iovis* – of “excluding nothing”³²² (*Iovis* 7) achieves a deeper meaning.

III.6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of Kyger’s *The Tapestry and the Web*, Diane di Prima’s *Loba* and Anne Waldman’s *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* – three major works of the female Beat canon – I have investigated the role of myth and the revision and appropriation of mythical characters in their poetry. Studying the texts – published from 1965 to 2011 – individually, but also in relation to one another, offered me the possibility of tracking the use of myth through a forty-year span of time. In this regard, and bearing in mind a common concern for the position of women in society and the arts, we have seen the way in which these works were influenced by fluctuations and shifts of emphasis in feminist discourses, each, very much a product of its time.

In this regard, the three collections can be said to share many similarities in their approach, while also reflecting specific differences linked to the author’s personal approach or to their concrete socio-political context. Firstly, Kyger’s *The Tapestry and the Web*, the earliest of the three texts – written prior to the explosion of the second

³²¹ November 2014.

³²² Even if she knows that is impossible – “What’s true by excluding nothing (I can’t really do this)” (7) reads the whole quote.

feminist wave in the U.S. – foregrounds many of the preoccupations that would be central to feminist revisions of mythology. Firstly, Kyger’s uses her reinterpretation of *The Odyssey* to foreground the presence of Penelope – refocusing the attention Homer devotes to Odysseus and his voyage. At the same time, Kyger uses the larger structure of the epic to give shape to her own experience, in this case, her position as a female poet surrounded by masculine literary circles, and the gender expectations of her new status as a married woman. Nevertheless, while Kyger’s poems offer Penelope the potential space to recreate her subjectivity – she toys with different representation of Penelope – the poet does not provide her with a completely liberated identity; stressing the fact that, at the end of the day, Penelope cannot escape the patriarchal order.

Secondly, di Prima’s *Loba*, mostly written during the 1970s, seems to be much more influenced by movements directly connected to the second wave feminism. On the one hand, the prominence of the goddess – or Loba in her different incarnations – draws attention to the Goddess Movement, an approach that would guide the reading of those poems in which Loba is described as an ancient divinity as the overturn of the established patriarchal power to place women in an advantageous situation as rightful leaders. Nonetheless, the emphasis in *Loba* of poems which give expression to the actual position of women within di Prima’s society, attests to a possible connection to other branches of feminism, such as the Radical Feminism – Loba’s denunciation of the way patriarchy has subjugated women, together with the actual threat her power represents for the establishment, can be linked to some of the concerns voiced by Radical feminist such as Mary Daly or Monique Wittig. In the case of the latter, Wittig’s voicing of the need of critically question heterosexuality as a political regime becomes relevant in the light of Loba’s active opposition to a patriarchal system.³²³ Though di Prima does voice in *Loba* a specific agenda through which to work towards female liberation, she primarily highlights Loba’s ability to symbolize new forms of female representation.

³²³ Wittig’s description of heterosexuality, as a system in which women must necessarily dwell – unless they find a way out of the gender norm, for instance, through homosexuality – resembles di Prima’s portrayal of patriarchy in *Loba*: “I describe heterosexuality not as an institution but as a political regime which rests on the submission and the appropriation of women. In desperate straits, exactly as it was for serfs and slaves, women may ‘choose’ to be runaways and try to escape their class or group (as lesbians do), and/or to renegotiate daily, and term by term, the social contract. There is no escape (for there is no territory, no other side of the Mississippi, no Palestine, no Liberia for women). The only thing to do is to stand on one’s own feet as an escapee, a fugitive slave, a lesbian.” (*The Straight Mind* xiii)

Finally, Waldman's *The Iovis Trilogy* shares with the previous two texts the centrality of female experience – the poem is self-styled as a feminist epic – but adopts a much wider approach as it also encompasses masculine experience. Even more evidently than in *Tapestry* and *Loba*, in *Iovis* Waldman is preoccupied not only with portraying patriarchy and its atrocities but also with investigating its mechanisms so that humanity in its totality – hence the elevation of a hermaphrodite power – can benefit from a liberated existence. In this respect, her position seems closer to later forms of feminism that focus more concretely on equality between the sexes, even if the recurrent denunciation of Jove's power can easily be interpreted as the condemnation of masculine forms of power. In any case – and in parallel with Waldman's rejection of fully embracing any of the mythical characters within her epic³²⁴ – the poet also avoids reducing her work to any theoretical form. As Nona Willis Aronowitz and Emma Bee Bernstein write in *Girldrive: Criss-Crossing America*, Waldman's "allegiance has always been to the 'creative imagination.' And when male dominance stood in the way of creativity, Anne was on board to fight it" (160) – which points to her own definition of "feminism" depending on her creative needs.

One thing that Kyger, di Prima, and Waldman share in these texts is the inclusion of their personal experience using a genre – the epic – that has historically been oblivious of the lives of women – both as subject matter and as writers of epics. This move represents a double achievement; on the one hand, they are expanding the traditional use of myth to include their own experience, not only appropriating myth but highlighting their position as writers – as sort of creatrix – who mythologize their own lives. From this position, at the same time, they avoid falling into a utopian vision of an old golden age where women were in a position of power which, though valid, may lack the political effect of situated texts. On the other hand, using the epic genre, and doing so from a stance in which their own position as women writers is pushed to the forefront, places their texts in dialogue with masculine epic texts. Their decision to write within such a gender-coded genre might precisely stem from their intention to free themselves from the literary constraints of literary canon and poetical influences. In *Strange Big Moon*, Kyger considers the implications of following the example of Pound – one of the master epic writers Waldman also praises in *Iovis*. Kyger's words,

³²⁴ With the exception of the "hag", who was celebrated because of her powerful language.

nonetheless, point towards the specific gender structures that found the construction and perpetuation of literary genres:

Reading Ezra Pound biography. Now: could a woman ever be a *great* poet, write an epic the way he says a great poet must, have the command of a world/universal view. More particularly her craft seems to deal with parts, particulars.

The changing face – the neckline.

What can I know without reading & observing all of mankind: my own mind but a risky & perhaps lopsided direction. (226)

The Tapestry and the Web, *Loba* and *The Iovis Trilogy* – as three epic texts written by women and concerned with, primarily, the position of women – can be interpreted as the authors' affirmative to the question Kyger voiced in her journals. Their epics defy the very genre they deal with by proving that women's experience – their "own mind" and "lopsided direction" as the ironic Kyger writes – can indeed form the view about the universe contained within epics. Following, mainly, a modernist approach to the epic – in which fragmentation, collage, a heterogeneous style and the focus on previously excluded stories predominate – become in their appropriation a less strict medium through which to give form to their personal experience. Nonetheless, even if stylistically or thematically embracing a more open epic form, as the example of Waldman's *Iovis* showed, the still prevailing history of the genre as a predominant masculine form, keeps interfering with the political or personal reach of the epics written by women.

Linked to this idea, the epics of these three authors have shown how their texts become platforms from which to critically analyze, primarily, the social construction of gender – mainly by exposing the malleability of myth, and by promoting a personal understanding of it – but also a larger socio-political construction of history. For this reason, the three authors were greatly concerned with, not only appropriating myth to offer a freer space for female subjectivity, but also with exposing their take on myth as inclusive and subjective, rather than authoritative and exclusive as the patriarch's is. Investigating, collecting data, exposing official lies and calling people out to join in their quest to bring to justice aggression and violation against humanity, the

environment or, among others, poetry, were central activities in Waldman's epic, but also in di Prima's. As Timothy Gray writes in *Urban Pastoral*, quoting from Lynn Keller's *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*, "Loba seems to prepare the way for feminist 'forms of expansion,' which with their 'openness to sociological, anthropological, and historical material [have been] particularly useful for poets eager to explore women's roles in history and in the formation of culture' (Keller, *Forms* 15)" (170).

In addition, the decision to write within such a historically masculine genre – this is especially noticeable in the case of Kyger and Waldman, who self-consciously situate their texts in a marked masculine canon – as well as the insistence upon representing masculine dominance in historical, social, political, or artistic spheres, might not only be motivated by a desire to achieve, both in life and in art, a more powerful position, but it might simply be the only recourse available. As Toril Moi wrote in her essay "Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's Dora" (1981): "The attack upon phallogentrism must come from within, since there can be no outside, no space where femininity, untainted by patriarchy, can be kept intact for us to discover. We can only destroy the mythical and mystifying construction of patriarchy by using its own weapons. We have no others." (*What is a Woman* 347)

In consequence, *The Tapestry and the Web*, *Loba* and *The Iovis Trilogy*, even if they adopt different approaches to the reinterpretation of myth and the evaluation of patriarchy, all voice a common concern over the need to counterattack the system from within. With this move, they insert their poems within a specific socio-political context, turning away from utopian visions, in favor of a literary stance that highlights their creativity and position as poets eternally engaged in a fight for freedom. In this respect, the job of the poet is to be continually vigilant and ready to fight – or at least try – against oppression and injustice; for this reason, in the last section of *Iovis*, when Waldman comes across the distress of a group of women, after twenty-five years recording similar experiences, she has no option but to keep on working:

So much suffering in the tainted waters below

and the crazy women a few days ago grabbing my arm, pointing up at the sky,

“chem clouds! chem clouds!” and I knew not of what they spake

and climbed back into my laboratory to research the difficulty of these chemical times. (1006)

CHAPTER IV:

FEMALE BEATS and THE VISUAL ARTS

IV.1. The Media Beat

Horrible movie-makers making horrors that move,
Teenage, were-kids, hot-rockers, rolling with the blows,
Successful screen writers drinking down unsuccessful screams,
Plastic beatniks in pubic beards, with artistically dirtied
feet

(Bob Kaufman, "Hollywood", *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* 24)

No other Beat poet has so ferociously denounced the mainstream media for the construction and perpetuation of a cheap and shallow American dream as Bob Kaufman. In his poem "Hollywood" (1959) he presents a devastating critique based on America's veneration of a fake, mass-produced and easy to digest, "art" that in Kaufman's poem is in direct opposition to a loosely-defined, yet truthful, artistic sensibility. For Kaufman, Hollywood and the mainstream media falsify experience through the cult of "Ranch Market hipsters who lost their cool in gradeschool / Yesterday idols, idle, whose faces were made of clay" (24). What is worse, in the selling of those phony products, the mainstream media obliterate the real power of an honest approach to Art – be it poetry, painting, music or film. For these reasons, at the end of the poem, a blunt Kaufman fiercely attacks Hollywood as "the artistic cancer of the universe." (26)

More than five decades later, Hollywood still seems not to take the hint, producing more and more of those "[p]lastic beatniks in pubic beards, with artistically dirtied / feet" ("Hollywood" 24). Indeed, the myth of the Beat Generation – that was at its peak when Kaufman wrote his critique – has continued to prove a source of inspiration for filmmakers who, while being attracted to the sense of freedom and rebellion often prevailing in the lives and works of Beat authors, frequently fall prey to

the same clichés and simplified representations of the social and the artistic significance of the movement. Within the scope of this thesis, the position of women and women artists in these movies – if they are ever granted that category in the first place – becomes an interesting aspect that documents, not only the by now irrefutable sexism that reigned in the majority of the American 1950s cultural and artistic constructions, but also – and more interestingly – the contemporary preservation of those values through the perpetuation of the subordination of women and the devaluation, or complete elimination, of their artistic work.

For instance, John Byrum's *Heart Beat* (1980), the soap-opera-like film adaptation of Carolyn Cassady's memoir, shows both Carolyn and LuAnne occupying the everlasting victim position – even if each of them is situated at the far ends of the respectability/immorality spectrum. What is interesting about Byrum's approach is that, in opposition to any other film adaptation of Beat works written by men, where the act of writing takes a central stage, Carolyn-in-the-movie is never identified as the writer, even if she is the narrator and the story is, more or less, told through her.³²⁵ In contrast, David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* (1991), Stephen Kay's *The Last Time I Committed Suicide* (1993),³²⁶ Rob Epstein's and Jeffrey Friedman's *Howl* (2010), Walter Salles's *On the Road* (2012), and John Krokidas's *Kill your Darlings* (2013), to name some examples, all share the almost identical shots of the literary men at work: white short-sleeve t-shirt or unkempt shirt, gleaming eyes fixed on the typewriter and smoking cigarettes moving to the rhythm of their lip-dubbing – a soundtrack of bebop jazz is recommended. If through this technique the films highlight the authorial position of the writers whose work they are adapting,³²⁷ by avoiding placing Carolyn as the interpreter

³²⁵ The only reference to Carolyn as the writer is shown in an introductory title that reads: "Suggested by the memoir 'Heart Beat' by CAROLYN CASSADY." Despite this, the film begins with Kerouac writing on the typewriter, not her. Carolyn, in fact, was not at all content with the adaptation. In 1986, she sent a letter to *Moody Street Irregulars* complaining about the music used in the film. Hoping to clarify the type of music she, Neal and Jack were actually fond of, she writes to Joel Scherzer – who had written the piece "Missing the Beat" in a special musical issue of the above-mentioned journal – telling him: "I cheered your comments on the Jack Nitzsche score for the deplorable film, *Heart Beat*. Some of the fault must lie with John Byrum, I suspect, who mesmerized everyone into his interpretation of 'my' story, except me and Mr. and Mrs. Jack Fisk." (in Lynn Marie Zott, ed, *Beat Generation: a Gale Critical Companion*, Vol. 1 356)

³²⁶ Based on the famous "Joan Anderson Letter" that Neal Cassady sent to Jack Kerouac in December, 1950; a letter that is often mentioned as having deeply inspired Kerouac's spontaneous, uninhibited, style and which, in 2014, was found in its entirety in some boxes that belonged to a publishing house.

³²⁷ Michael J. Prince notes how Salles's *On the Road* is "a film that both contains the plot of the book, while at the same time tell[s] the story of writing the book" ("Why Is Marylou Reading Proust?" *Out of*

of the facts through her writing, *Heart Beat* – so far the only mainstream movie based on a text written by a woman associated with the Beat Generation³²⁸ – undervalues her experience and potential literary value.

Other movies, like Gary Walkow’s *Beat* (2000), struggle to subvert the apparent conflict between women and creativity in the Beat milieu – at least, in its mainstream representation. *Beat* focuses on the lives of William Burroughs and his wife, Joan Vollmer, and on the events which took place in Mexico City in 1951 – the year Burroughs accidentally killed her. While the few existing accounts of Joan Vollmer describe her as a very intelligent and sharp woman, no writing – except for a few personal letters – has survived. Interestingly, in the film adaptation of her life, Courtney Love – who plays the role of a blonde-haired Joan – is shown in several scenes working on a manuscript:



Figure 9. Joan appropriating the “type-writer” position

She similarly appears eagerly writing on the typewriter in a flashback to New York, 1944, when a blood-stained Lucien Carr enters the apartment and confesses to

the Shadows 170). He further states that “Sal is portrayed typing as Dean, the eager pupil, looks on; he is frequently cribbing impressions from recent experiences in his ‘scribbled secret notebooks;’ writing and trying to write are important moments in the film. And in the concluding scenes, the text proper of the novel is being written.” (170)

³²⁸ In a letter written to Anton Mueller of Grove Atlantic Press, dated April 21st 1998, Hettie Jones draws attention – actually uses it to encourage the publication of book titled *In Care of Worth Auto Parts* – to an apparently now failed film adaptation of her memoir: “There are a number of reasons why I think Grove should consider publishing this book. The first and most compelling is the movie of *How I Became Hettie Jones*, which seems nearer than ever (and which I simultaneously hope for and dread). Will Smith Enterprises is developing it and Miramax is just waiting for a script to sign on. The writer is now writing, and rumor has it that if all goes well they’ll start shooting this fall. Of course that’s Hollywood and anything can happen, but I’ve met these people and they seem determined.” (unpublished letter, Hettie Jones Papers, Columbia University, New York).

having killed David Kammerer. In a different scene, while William is shown in the background typing, Joan appears in the foreground writing down in a notebook over the breakfast table. Neither Joan nor any of the characters that interact with her – mainly Burroughs, Ginsberg and Lucien – ever comment on, or point to, the fact that she was writing; only we, as audience, the film seems to suggest, are aware of the fact that Joan did write. Indeed, the closest we get to her writing in the film takes place in a scene in which Joan opens the door to Ginsberg and Carr, who had arranged a visit with Burroughs – who had instead gone to Guatemala with his lover Lee. After briefly greeting the two men, Joan goes quickly – as if ashamed – to the typewriter, pulls out the page, and places it upside down on a stack of already typed sheets.³²⁹

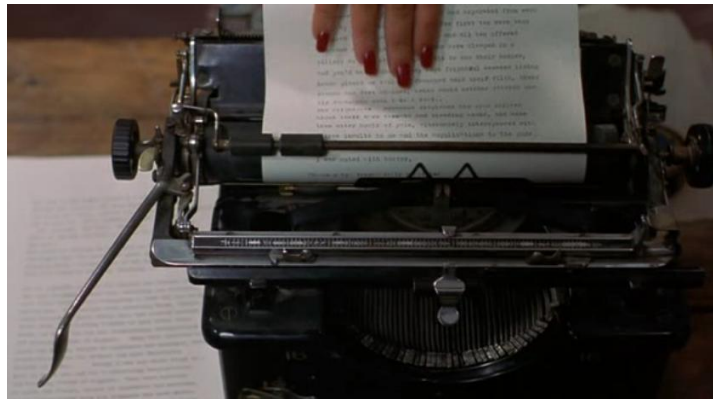


Figure 10. Joan's manuscript

All of these scenes in which Joan is interpreted through her writing – and not through her substance abuse or alleged psychosis, as she is often portrayed in Beat-related movies – contrast sharply with the actual absence of any work authored by Vollmer. Through the insistence on Joan's writing, Jack Sargeant writes, *Beat* “comments – albeit in a barely perceptible fashion – on the occlusion of women within the literary ranks of the Beats [...as] the viewer cannot help but wonder exactly what Joan was writing throughout the film.” (*Naked Lens* 241) If the viewer is left wondering what it is that Joan was writing, as Sargeant proposes, it is also possible that the viewer wonders about what would have happened had she not died or, even more so, had Burroughs and Vollmer exchanged places in their *William Tell* recreation. Right before

³²⁹ Some might argue the manuscript she hides is Burroughs' and not herself. It is, in the end, the same typewriter Burroughs was typing in just before leaving for Guatemala. Nevertheless, a subsequent scene – when Burroughs has already left – shows a highly focused Joan typing on that same typewriter. For this reason, and for the way in which the movie further emphasizes her writing, I believe it is her manuscript that she hides from Ginsberg and Carr.

the credits, the last image in the film shows the famous quote from the 1985 edition of *Queer* in which Burroughs writes: “I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing.” (n.p.n) On various occasions throughout the movie Joan comments on the artistic potential she sees in her husband, who by then was not writing and did not consider himself a writer; at the time his writing potential, she points out, could be appreciated in his letters. While this might farfetched, the fact that the Burroughs we see in the film is not yet the famous novelist – being Joan instead the one portrayed writing – one plausible reading offered by the movie is that had Joan lived – had that manuscript seen the light of day – she may have turned out to be a writer, while Burroughs – in that hypothetical case without the source of inspiration – may just have not.³³⁰

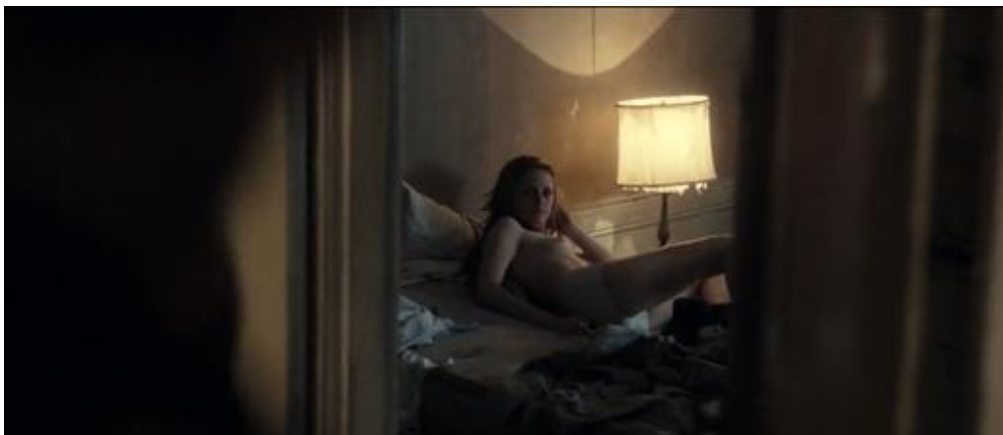
A more recent example of a film adaptation of a Beat novel that tries, even if unsuccessfully, to endow women with more depth is Walter Salles’s *On the Road* (2012). While following very closely Kerouac’s novel – both the first published edition and also the Original Scroll³³¹ – at times the film momentarily deviates from Kerouac’s text to allow women a tiny, little, room for self-expression. Or so it seems. This turn is mostly felt in the representation of Marylou – played by teenage idol Kristen Stewart – who in the movie seems to play a bigger role than the one her fictional counterpart had in the novel. Her visibility can be appreciated simply by looking at the promotional posters of the film, which show a car speeding along the archetypical American road, with a big blue sky over head, and a rear mirror where not only Sal and Dean – but also Marylou – are reflected. This places her in a, a priori, more equal position to the men, as the three are depicted “experiencing” the road. In addition, by choosing to cast a well-known actress to play Marylou, a mere accessory in Kerouac’s novel, Salles’s instantly

³³⁰ The alleged complexity with which Joan is presented in *Beat*, especially her position as a potential writer, succumbs when – in light of the poor treatment Burroughs gives her – both Ginsberg and Carr ask her: “why don’t you leave?”, to what she, each time, simply answers “I cannot leave Bill.” In addition, the enactment of the William Tell episode clearly shows Joan in a she-was-asking-for-it attitude – a despicable argument often used by Burroughs’ friends when relating what happened. Slowly placing the glass on her head, she looks at William directly in the eye with a daring expression that is, on top of everything, accompanying with the actual words that express her death-wish: “I dare you.” For all her potential creativity and literary genius, Joan simply ends up as victim.

³³¹ For the screenplay they also consulted *Carolyn Cassady’s Off the Road* – as Cassady tells in the documentary *Love Always, Carolyn* (2011) – but still maintained her character in the film rather plain and undeveloped.

directs the viewers' attention to her; one still has to see whether that look, that "gaze", challenges or merely perpetuates Kerouac's depiction of this character. Michael J. Prince has noted that "with the casting of Kristen Stewart as Marylou, [Salles] transformed one of the least visible figures in the novel into the most visible. Stewart, due to her success and fame in the *Twilight Series*, brings her reputation and the sum of her production to Salles and Rivera's *On the Road* as a potent precursor text."³³² (179)

But what of this new found visibility? Unfortunately, not much. Besides a couple of scenes in which Marylou is "passed the mic" to complain about the way in which Dean treats her – she is well aware he will eventually return to Camille and his family – she is still mostly, and quite willingly, used for sex.³³³ Other scenes in which she, for example, is shown reading from Marcel Proust's *Swans Way*,³³⁴ or looking tenderly at the highly neglected Burroughses' children, and later confessing to Sal that what she really wants is to have a house and raise a family, do little to counteract Marylou's objectification. Together with every other female character portrayed in the film, Marylou cannot help but being depicted through a male gaze that, with an outstanding frequency, places women on domestic spaces – more concretely on the bed. See for instance, the following two stills of the first time we see Marylou and Camille:



³³² "Why is Marylou Reading Proust?: Intertextuality as Metatextuality in Salles and Rivera's *On the Road* (2012)".

³³³ In the film, when Dean suggests Sal having the ménage à trois with Marylou, and they wake her up just for the occasion, a half asleep Marylou tells Sal: "well hop on, the water's fine." When a dubious Sal whispers to Marylou is she is o.k. with the arrangement, it is Dean who answers for her: "She thinks it's swell."

³³⁴ The role of Proust's novel in Salles's adaptation – several close-ups of the novel appear throughout, and both Dean and Marylou read from it at one point – is analyzed in depth in Michael J. Prince's previously mentioned article, where he writes that, "Since the published book *On the Road* cannot be presented within the film, *Swann's Way* serves as an analogy between the two novels and at the same time makes the future work present in its own adaptation." (172)



Figure 11. Dean's girls on the bed

Purposely duplicating the scenes, in both cases Sal arrives at Deans' – or his lover's – house and a (half) naked and sweaty Dean opens the door. The camera follows Sal's gaze as it takes us to two women in bed in very similar poses, the main difference being their level of nudity, which works accordingly to the level of respectability Sal held for each of them.³³⁵ Introducing Marylou and Camille for the first time in bed is a direct reminder of their position within Dean's life as sex-objects. In the case of Camille, who has the “good” fortune of also being the one to provide a family and stability for Dean, the bed also functions as a symbol of more traditional roles she fulfills, like motherhood.



Figure 12. Camille, pregnant with her second child

In Salles's *On the Road*, the bed acts as a powerful cultural signifier associated to the different roles women fulfill in society. Besides the sexual companion and the

³³⁵ The lighting and the set also help differentiate Marylou's and Camille's respectability in Sal's eyes; while Marylou lays down “shamelessly” naked on a shabby bed, with a torn lamp, and dim lights, Camille covers her not even fully naked body with white sheets in a well-lit, clean, room.

bearer of children, just to name a few of the examples made available in the film,³³⁶ the bed also accommodates the role of the complacent wife of the artist – a recurrent and important role in the 1950s artistic scene. After befriending a saxophonist named Walter late at night in a Jazz nightclub, Sal and Dean continue their party at the musician's house, where his wife was sleeping. Far from being upset – if not for her husband's intoxicated state, at least for his lack of consideration – the saxophonist's wife warmly greets the men from bed. Equally joyful, she is shown still in bed – the clock approaching 5:45 a.m. – smiling and overhearing the men speak while they smoke marihuana and talk loudly in the adjacent living room.³³⁷

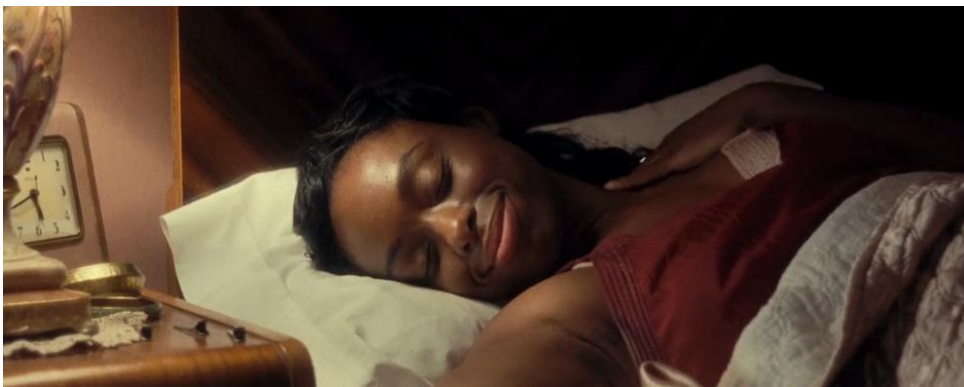


Figure 13. The ever supportive wife of the artist

To a contemporary viewer, the obliviousness or unwillingness of these films to challenge the masculine Beat discourse in which women are repeatedly reduced to sexual and/or domestic props, or to (un)willing victims in the best of cases, is inexcusable – or at least one would hope that it is. Either by complicating the reading of those texts or by choosing to focus on female poets and artists – which would at least raise awareness of their work and potentially contest the masculine representational power – these films could have helped in the construction of a much-needed female *counter* counter-culture. Instead, by actualizing the chauvinism present in the texts through their film adaptations – and justifying it through the weak alibi of fidelity-to-the-original – these filmmakers add to the already obscured position of female Beat writers and artists.

³³⁶ A different meaning is assigned to the bed when Gabrielle – Sal's mother – is shown sadly sitting down on it while Sal packs his clothes and gets ready to go on the road. Gabrielle's now empty bed, since the death of her husband, draws attention to the spot she is trying to fulfill with the presence of her son.

³³⁷ We do not see her face, however, when her husband asks Dean and Sal, "What is it like being with a white woman? I always wondered." When Dean asks him if he has really never been with one, the musician answers: "I've been with a white man," with which the three men burst into laugh.

I linger with these recent Hollywood films because the aim of this chapter is to counteract the visual representation of women in the Beat Generation generated by the mainstream media. To do so, I turn away from Hollywood's discourse – which as I have demonstrated, persistently fails, or consciously refuses to show women in artistic positions – and focus on the actual involvement of Beat female poets and writers in the visual arts.³³⁸ In order to do so, this chapter is divided into two main sections: the first one analyzes the contribution of poets such as Joanne Kyger, Anne Waldman, Diane di prima and Joanna McClure to film and video, media through which they sought to expand or supplement their poetry. This section then functions as a corrective to the narrow visual representation of Beat women as artists not only in Hollywood but also in the histories of experimental film and video. Secondly, the last part of this chapter analyzes the work of poet Ruth Weiss, using as a tool the concept of “visual work,” which allows us to include a broader notion of the importance of the visual arts in relation to writing. In this section, besides focusing on Weiss's work in film and video, I look at the ways in which her own writing was influenced by visual art forms such as painting, sculpture, theatre, lightshows, etc. I choose to focus on Weiss firstly because her work is a great example of Beat women writers' commitment to an “expanded,” trans-media conception of literature, a conception that entailed a constant conversation with movement and images and, secondly, and in keeping with the main aim of this thesis, because I wish to bring to light the work of a still – unfairly – fairly unknown poet.

By reevaluating the dominant visual representation of Beat women, and by substituting oversimplified commercial images with the real expression of their art – through film, video, poetry, theatre, etc. – this chapter further develops the revisionist approach advanced in the two previous chapters. Through memoir and mythology, Beat women reevaluated not only their own position within the Beat canon and history, but also investigated the historical, cultural and political mechanisms through which women

³³⁸ For books focusing on the representation of women in film see Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Women: Women, Movies & the American Dream* (1973), Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1973) or Jeanine Basinger's *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (1983), to name a few examples. E. Ann Kaplan's *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (1990), focuses not only on the representation of women in films directed by men, but also on the work of female filmmakers who counterattack the male gaze. Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982) similarly expands the debate of women's representation in men's film by including images created by women.

are “written” as inferior. The analysis of audio visual work produced by women of the Beat Generation in this chapter challenges the representations of the “Beat Girl” that still dominate the mainstream media, at the same time that it opens up a space for the analysis of a part of their work that remains largely ignored in scholarly and academic studies on the Beat Generation.

Before jumping into the analysis of the position of Beat authors within film and video, in the following section, I briefly sketch “a Beat film history” by analyzing some of the mainstream and experimental films that were released during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both as points of departure or as influential works, these movies represent the cultural and artistic background in which many of these authors first were involved with the audiovisual media.

IV.2. Mainstream and the Underground “Beat” Film

As early as 1959, three years after the publication of Ginsberg’s “Howl” and two after Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Hollywood had already fully appropriated the image of the Beatnik and turned it into a profitable product that it could sell as entertainment to the very same society the Beats were – in principle – rebelling against. If the packaging and commercialization of the self-defined Beat position as an outsider was not in itself bad enough, the violent or/and silly caricature of the Beatnik recurrent in many of the mainstream films of this era did nothing but belittle the artistic and literary achievements of the movement.

In 1958, in his infamous article “The Know-Nothing Bohemians” (1958), Norman Podhoretz described the bohemianism of the 1950s as a movement that is “hostile to civilization; [one that] worships primitivism, instinct, energy, ‘blood,’” (*Beat Down to your Soul* 484) further stating that “this ethos shades off into violence and criminality, main-line drug addiction and madness.” (484) In keeping with Podhoretz’ views many of the mainstream films of the era depicted the Beat phenomenon in analogous violent and negative terms. As a case in point, the late 1950s and early 1960s were incredibly productive years for films where “beatness” was reduced to madness and violence. Both *The Beat Generation* (dir. Charles F. Hass, 1959) and *The Beatniks*

(dir. Paul Frees, 1960) use the background of beatnik enclaves to situate their villains,³³⁹ the serial rapist known as the “aspirin kid” and the psychopath murderer Moon, respectively, can be seen as embodiments of Podhoretz’ critique, at the same time that they fulfill Hollywood’s political agenda and moral codes when their arrests bring about the subsequent restoration of peace.



Figure 14. The “aspirin kid” in action

Besides the apparently almost inherent link between the Beats, violence, and crime, these movies hardly ever miss the opportunity to scorn the overall rebellion as a mere childish tantrum. In *The Beat Generation*, when the detective is asked his opinion about “these Beat characters,” he patronizingly answers: “bunch of phony, pseudo intellectuals, jumping on the gravy train of rebellion...I guess we’ve always had them ... fake bohemia. I don’t know maybe I am getting old, Jackie, but, they bore me.” As Jack Sargeant writes in *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema*, all of these are “exploitation movies.” This term generally encompasses B-rated movies with low budgets and quick production schedules which exploited cultural trends, being often targeted towards teenagers.³⁴⁰ They show the film industry’s natural progression in the marketing and selling of a highly profitable youth culture. As Sargeant writes:

³³⁹ Gene Fowler Jr.’s *The Rebel Set* (1959) is another example of the loose connection made in many of these films between criminality and the Beat Generation as a social phenomenon. In this case, three beatniks are chosen to rob an armored car, not so much because of their expertise in the field of crime, but simply because they have nothing else to do. When one of them asks their now boss and owner of the beatnik coffee house why he chose them, he tells them: “Because none of you are Beat, you’re merely beaten. You are not detached, you’re unemployed. You’re not dispassionate, you’re afraid, scared.” Unemployment and too much free time, so it seems, lie at the root of the beatniks’ proclivity to crime.

³⁴⁰ For a history of the exploitation film, see Eric Schaefer’s *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Film 1919-1959* (1999).

Following the craze, and success, of the Juvenile Delinquent genre manifested in films such as *The Wild One* (1954), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and a wealth of similar rock and roll, drag racing, and gang war movies, exploitation producers sought out the next ‘youth’ sub-culture with which to shock and titillate their audiences. The Beatniks provided filmmakers with a ready made sub-culture to incorporate into a series of exploitation movies. (222)

Even more dangerous than the criminal and immature connections made in the previous films, is the explicit cause and effect relation established between creativity/art and violence/death in some of the movies of the period. Roger Corman’s *A Bucket of Blood* (1959) and Julian Roffman’s *The Bloody Brood* (1959) not only depict Beat-related characters in killing sprees, but specifically situate their murderous rage in the domain of their artistic creativity, or their lack of it. In *A Bucket of Blood*, when Walter Paisley, the waiter of a beatnik joint and wannabe artist, listens to one of the poets deliver a speech on the immortality of works of art – “Let them die, and by their miserable deaths become the clay within his hands that he might form an ashtray or an ark” – he is inspired to become a sculptor. However, his absolute lack of talent – in a scene he is shown beating the clay and yelling at it, “be a nose, be a nose” – and the accidental killing of a cat, inspire him to devise his artistic plan: kill people and cover their corpses with clay.



Figure 15. Walter, the sculptor-killer, in an exhibit of his work

If Kerouac as a novelist felt “attracted to criminality” (485), as Podhoretz wrote in his article, Walter is forced to criminality to achieve his longed-for artistic success. In much the same way, just as Kerouac was crowned the king of the Beats soon after the

publication of *On the Road* – a label he would quickly reject precisely because of its violent connotations – Walter is instantly hailed as the king of the beatniks. The rest of artists and poets in the movie, while not murderers – unless we count the death of good taste and literary achievement – are represented as a bunch of pseudo-intellectuals who talk grandiosely without producing any meaning,³⁴¹ or as groupies who, failing to see Walter’s lack of talent, follow him blindly as a cultural phenomenon. Soon after acquiring his new-found fame, an anxious girl follows Walter and offers to go home with him. Rejected, she still feels the urge to “assist” him in his creativity – “Oh Walter I gotta be with you...you’re creative [...] isn’t there anything I can do for you [...] I’ve gotta do something. I’ve gotta contribute.”³⁴²

The Bloody Brood applies a similar principle, even if the genre changes from the horror-comedy of *Bucket* to a more conventional thriller-detective story. Inspired by the death of a random bum in the beatnik bar he frequents, the psychopath and drug-dealer Nico begins killing people for the sake of it or, following the film’s logic, just for kicks. What distinguishes Nico’s behavior from other beatnik criminals – like Moon in *The Beatniks* – is the fact that Nicos’s actions are contextualized as an extreme, practical, realization of his philosophical and artistic views. Set in the background of the beatnik joint, where bongos, poets and other artists discussing the threat of the atomic bomb abound, Nico is depicted as being affected by the socio-cultural and political circumstances that surround him – “I need something to drown the pain, I can’t stand to hear those screams,” he dramatically utters. While keeping a regular day job, becoming a home-owner and raising a family would be the ready-made solutions offered by the “square” society, Nico opts for the alternative route: the bohemian approach to life that, according to mainstream society, only leads to death and crime.

³⁴¹ This is best exemplified by the poet Maxwell H. Brock, whose speech at the beginning of the movie – full of food metaphors – barely makes any sense: “Life is an obscure hobo bumming a ride on the omnibus of Art. Burn gas, buggies, and whip your sour cream of circumstance and hope, and go ahead and sleep your bloody heads off. Creation is, all else is not. Creation is graham crackers; let it all crumble to feed the creator; feed him that he may be satisfied.”

³⁴² She ends up giving him drugs, an action which an undercover detective sees and uses as an excuse to follow and interrogate Walter in his home. Surrounded and in need of his muse, Walter kills the detective, and later turns him into a sculpture. So the “groupie” girl, it turns out, does contribute to his creativity in the end.



Figure 16. Nico and a beatnik kid contemplating death

When a man – identified by the gang simply as another “square” – dies, the film stresses two aspects: that the beatniks are undoubtedly a danger to mainstream society, and that the source of their violence is not a reaction to society’s ills, but a faulty approach to being part of that society. While the sensible option would have been to call an ambulance or assist the man, Nico simply watches, stating: “Gentlemen, this is the greatest show on earth: spontaneous, unrehearsed...there’s only one performance [...] did he die or was he murdered by life?” In *The Bloody Brood*, by linking creativity with death, art is placed in direct opposition to regular, more highly valued occupations. This opposition is clearly emphasized when Nico, who sees death as “the last great challenge to the creative mind”, kills a messenger boy who, as his older brother states, “wanted to be a doctor, make people live.” As in *A Bucket of Blood*, the creative mind of the beatnik in *The Bloody Brood* is not only the source of many bad poems and ugly sculptures, but also a threat to society. By making the enemy visible, and by doing so from the vantage point of its highly controlling modes of creation and production, Hollywood assimilates the beatnik threat only to turn it against itself. As David Sterritt writes:

Hollywood movies dealing with such Beat-associated phenomena as jazz, drugs, the coffeehouse scene, avant-garde art and poetry, and relaxation of strictures on sex and racial ‘mixing’ provide useful examples of how the motion-picture establishment mobilized during the ‘50s period (in accord with other social, cultural, and political forces) to contain and combat this multiform ideological foe. (*Mad to Be Saved* 140)

The rupture between the beatniks and mainstream society is, in some of these films, frequently traced back to a break in communication between parents and their teenage sons and daughters.³⁴³ Two British films – Edmond T. Gréville’s *Beat Girl* (a.k.a. *Wild for Kicks*, 1960) and Guy Hamilton’s *The Party’s Over* (filmed in 1963 but released in 1965) – are interesting to this analysis not only for the way in which they situate the rebellion within the family, but because they also focus more closely on the position of women. The cultural break is clearly stated in *Beat Girl*, where the “problem daughter”³⁴⁴ Jennifer and her father seem to inhabit two completely different worlds, something that permeates not only their language,³⁴⁵ but also their approach to life. Jennifer’s noisy and busy world of rock and roll music and late night parties contrasts sharply with her father’s plan for “City 2000,” a futuristic city which he describes as “an almost silent place” in which “a man can be as alone as if he were ten thousand miles from anywhere in the country.”

More than in any of the films analyzed before, Jennifer’s rebellion is expressed in terms of a reaction against the values held by her father and new-found stepmother – a 24 year-old French woman who, as we learn later on, worked briefly as a stripper and prostitute.³⁴⁶ Before secretly leaving home to go to the various beatnik joints and parties, Jennifer transforms – through hip clothes and heavy eye-liner³⁴⁷ – into the typical beatnik chick:

³⁴³ As one beatnik states in *The Bloody Brood*, “who needs a mother? I’ve been born.”

³⁴⁴ In the trailer for the U.S. 1961 release David Farrar – who plays Jennifer’s father – is introduced as “the man with the problem daughter.”

³⁴⁵ A failed attempt at holding a conversation between father and daughter in the movie goes as follows: Jennifer’s father: “this language, these words...what does it mean?”

Jennifer: “it means us...something that’s ours. We didn’t get it from our parents. We can express ourselves, and they don’t know what we’re talking about. It makes us different.”

³⁴⁶ Now married to a wealthy architect, she represents a successful story of the good-girl-gone-bad who is successfully reintegrated into society.

³⁴⁷ In the 1960 film adaptation of *The Subterraneans* (Dir. Ranald MacDougall), Roxanne, the dancer and painter with whom Leo has an affair, customarily wears heavy black eye shadow. This make-up functions in the film as a mere disguise, as we later learn when she announces – with much more conventional make-up and clothing – that she has left the beatnik/artistic life behind. Despite Roxanne’s eventual return to conventionality, she still occupies the very rare position of the female artist. Steve Wilson writes that Roxanne “tests the roles that define women in the late fifties. She has her own apartment, pursues her art at the expense of her relationships, has no children or family, does not seek a man to make her secure, presents her sexuality openly to all – in dance and in dress, and loudly expresses her passions and confusions to and about men.” (“The Female Artist in the Film Version of Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans*” 41). The early scenes in the film in which Roxanne dances or paints her self-portraits,



Figure 17. Putting the “Beat” on

As the multiple reflections in the mirrors seem to suggest, Jennifer’s rebelliousness is nothing but a superficial, shallow opposition to the control exerted by her father and stepmother. Dave, the working class guitar player and songwriter, also sees through Jennifer’s beatnik disguise, calling her “phony, just like an iceberg.” With such a superficial approach to her rebelliousness,³⁴⁸ Jennifer could have featured as a model for Pamela Herbert’s short piece, “Beatnik Beauty” (1960), where she reduces the female participation in the movement to women’s make-up and hairstyle:

The secrets: lots of heavy eye make-up, white or pale lipstick, and loose, thick-bodied hair. To achieve the correct effect, use light base so that you look pale and world-weary. Then darken and broaden the brows, giving them an upward sweep. Run a dark, heavy line above and below the eyes and punctuate with dark shadow and plenty of mascara. Lipstick next, pale and full-mouth. Result: beauty the ‘beat’ way. (23)

Wilson argues, show the possibilities of this character of embodying female rebellion, despite the fact the she is soon enough turned into the “safe and predictable role of ‘woman abandoned.’” (43)

³⁴⁸ A similarly superficial approach to beat(nik)ness – in this case performed by a man – is found in Shepard Traube’s *Once Upon a Coffee House* (1964). This comedy features a wealthy playboy who undertakes a beatnik transformation in order to seduce the female singer of a beatnik coffee house. As part of his transformation, the playboy grows a goatee, wears tighter pants, reads books on the “ethnic sources of folk music” and, in a not very elegant drug-related pun, takes horse riding lessons. The portrayal of the “real” beatniks in this film is as fake as the playboy’s metamorphosis. In the opening scene a group of neatly dressed, polite and forever smiley young people sing a Kumbaya-like song whose lyrics go “slow me down lord, I’m travelling too fast, don’t know my brother lord, when he goes past, slow me down lord.”

At the end of the movie, Jennifer's weak commitment to her beatnik side is promptly abandoned when her father saves her from the striptease club that she had tried to join – where she, within the first five minutes, is almost raped and witnesses a murder. Now fully embracing her family – and their values – at the end of the movie Jennifer walks past her beatnik friends without even noticing them.

The Party's Over shares many of the concerns introduced in *Beat Girl*, especially in the way it situates the beatniks' rebellion as a reaction to an established set of values and mores. However, while *Beat Girl* promptly discards the counterculture as an infantile trend, *Party* complicates this simplistic reading by avoiding pointing to the return to traditional values as the solution. One of the first scenes in the film shows a group of beatniks aimlessly dragging themselves zombie-style – not “through the Negro streets” – but through the streets of London at dawn:



Figure 18. The runaway Melina leading the group of beatniks

Although the leader of the group is the – most of the times – pretentious and chauvinistic Moise, the main action of the film revolves around Melina, an apathetic, rich, American girl who has run away from her fiancé, Carson – an employee of her father's for whom marriage seems simply a smart career move. When the latter travels to London in search of his future wife and interrogates Nina, one of the beatnik girls, he tells her that Melina and himself are “scheduled to get married,” to what Nina replies: “you make it sound like a business deal.” In this light, Melina's rejection of marriage and subsequent fall into the beatnik nihilistic abyss is not so much denounced in the film as quite simply brought to light, exposed to the viewer without too much judgmental imposition.

Of course, her death due to a bad fall during a party, her post-mortem rape and the later guilt-ridden suicide of the man who had sex with her corpse can, if seen as cause and effect events, be analyzed as clear moralizing elements in a cautionary tale about the dangers of being beat(nik) – as the saying goes, it is all fun and games until someone...dies and then gets raped? Nonetheless, this might be too simplistic a view since Carson, who embodies mainstream society's values together with Melina's father, is equally portrayed as flawed. Besides the fact that none of them is aware of Melina's psychological ailment – she might not even know it herself – Carson fulfills an uneasy position as the hero of the film since, for starters, he does not save his fiancée and, moreover, he quickly finds a substitute wife in Nina when he cannot find Melina.

With the characters of Nina and Carson – the converted Beatnik and the converted square – the film arrives at a seemingly peaceful reconciliation of the dichotomy. The following conversation between the two, which takes place in the morgue after identifying Melina's body, points to their personal growth:

Carson: "Poor kid. I wonder where she thought she was going. It isn't fair. I guess it's just a question of time. Sooner or later...She shouldn't have died before she had at least half the chance to grow up."

Nina: "Would you believe me if I told you I only grew up just recently. Very recently."

Carson: "I'd believe you. I've been ageing rather rapidly myself."

This ambivalent position towards both the values represented by conformism and the counterculture is also present in the gang leader Moise, who while encouraging the beatnik attitudes of his group, is simultaneously depicted as highly critical of his power over them and their lack of independent thinking – in one scene he literally "baas" at his followers. Just as Nina, who at the end leaves with Carson, Moise leaves his beatnik group behind as he settles down with Libby – one of his lovers who is repeatedly mistreated and disrespected by him. Even if these characters reject the beatnik lifestyle, the refreshing aspect of this film – especially when compared to others where the restoration of peace simply means the return to traditional values – lies in the fact that it does not propose a clear-cut solution.

In fact, the seemingly open-minded view with which the beatniks are portrayed caused *The Party's Over* to suffer from heavy censorship. This happened not only because of the nudity, wild partying and necrophilia theme present in the film, but also because the behavior of the beatniks was not, according to the censors, overtly and unequivocally condemned.³⁴⁹ In fact, the cut that was finally released ended up with Nina and Carson as a representation of the happily restored conventional couple, and not with Moise and Libby as initially intended. In addition, the following voice-over comment by Moise, in which the Beatniks are attacked under the pretense of a defense, was added to the opening credits in the released cut:

This film is the story of some young people who chose to become...well, for want of a better word, "beatniks". It's not an attack on beatniks. The film has been made to show the loneliness and the unhappiness and the eventual tragedy that can come from a life lived without love for anyone or anything. Living only for kicks is not enough.

Overlapping in time with the release of these movies which, either delivering blistering attacks on the beatniks or offering more subtle representations, ultimately conformed to the mainstream values and taste of Hollywood's audiences, the Underground Film³⁵⁰ world was producing works that had different political,

³⁴⁹ In the booklet included in the FPI Flipside DVD version – which includes a restored version with the censored scenes and the original editing – Andrew Roberts writes that the censors wanted the film to end with all the beatniks getting killed by a bus.

³⁵⁰ The terms "underground", "experimental" and "avant-garde" when referring to film keep being used interchangeably on more than one occasion. In this study, I refer to Underground cinema as a specific post-war American trend in film that positions itself against mainstream productions and commercialism in the arts. Experimental film, while also used to encompass a certain group of filmmakers, on the other hand, is also approached as a set of aesthetic characteristics that may or may not be employed in Underground films, or any other films. These include personal and subjective themes and imagery as well as physically alterations to the celluloid – through scratching, dyeing or burning (among others) the film – to, as Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster write, "create a tactile viewing experience that would repeatedly remind the audience throughout the projection that they were witnessing a plastic construct, a creation of light and shadow, in which the syntactical properties of the cinematic medium were always an aesthetic consideration." ("Introduction", *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader 2*). In his essay "Independence for Independents", Jonas Mekas alludes to the terminology issue. After sketching a brief history of terms in their context – avant-garde and experimental film, American Cinema and Underground Film, home cinema and Personal Film, etc. – he sees "[t]hese changes in terminology and focus [as indicative of] a long and constant anxiety of filmmakers working in the avant-garde film mode to define their own identity, to understand where their art belongs within the art of cinema." (*Contemporary American Independent Film* 36) Daniel Kane, in *We Saw the Light: Conversations between the New American Cinema and Poetry* (2009), similarly alludes to the terminological issues that arise when studying these types of films. In a note, he resolves to use the terms

philosophical and aesthetic ties with the Beat Generation. As a movement that grew in the late 1950s as a reaction to mainstream and commercial modes of artistic representation, the Underground Film has much in common with the Beat ethos. In fact, in the 1995 introduction to Parker Tyler's *Underground Film: A Critical History* (1st published in 1969), the American film critic J. Hoberman explicitly links the birth of the Underground Film with the release of *Pull my Daisy*, the Beat movie par excellence:

The Underground announced itself on the evening of November 11, 1959 when Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's 28-minute *Pull My Daisy* – written and narrated by Jack Kerouac and featuring beat luminaries Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso – had its world premiere (on a bill with the revised version of John Cassavetes's no-less-epochal *Shadows*) at Amos Vogel's pioneering New York film society, Cinema 16. (vi)

In addition, like the Beat artists, these filmmakers self-consciously positioned themselves at the margins of society, attaching a high value to their own experience as means to get to some basic form of truth in their art. Similarly linking Underground Cinema to the Beats, David Sterritt sees filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner and Kenneth Anger as fulfilling a similar position to that of the outsider artist, even if they had very different artistic approaches to film. Like the Beats, he writes in *Mad to Be Saved*, these filmmakers “believed deeply in the necessity of confronting the social given with new and daring ideas, and their activities helped enrich and expand the Beat challenge to an increasingly ossified society.” (6)

As part of the reaction against this “ossified society,” some of these filmmakers relied heavily on their own subjectivity and personal vision as main carriers of meaning. Many of Stan Brakhage's films can be said to follow this premise. In *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), for instance, the filmmaker explores the possibilities of his handheld camera as it records images through rapid movements and unusual angles. In addition, the rapid editing favoring repetitions avoids narrative linearity and draws attention to Brakhage's own position as a filmmaker – distorting the conventional illusion of the invisible camera employed in Hollywood films. Amos Vogel, who sees *Anticipation of the Night* as an example of a movie in which plot and character are “subsidiary to the

interchangeably: “I'm going to use the terms ‘Underground Film,’ ‘Experimental Film,’ and ‘New American Cinema’ interchangeably, given the lack of one fixed term that is applicable to the wide-ranging film scenes in New York and San Francisco during the 1960s.” (207)

medium's poetic potential" (84), speaks of the dissolution of linearity in cinema as a consequence of a complex society: "[t]he dilution or rejection of conventional narrative and straightforward realism is the predominant tendency of contemporary art. The multi-faceted, fluid nature of reality as now understood can no longer be subsumed in the certainties of linear narrative structures." (*Film as Subversive Art* 83)

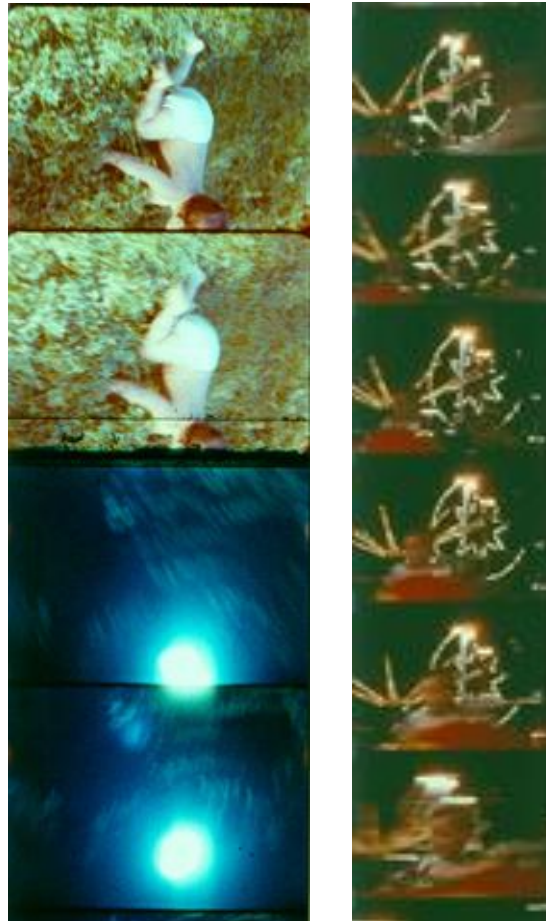


Figure 19. Stills from *Anticipation of the Night*

The lack of narrative, or “plot”, as it is traditionally understood, together with the absence of sound – which often times acts as a conduit of meaning – force the viewer to experience the different images without guiding preconceptions or established generic molds. This very romantic notion of cinema, in which the position of the filmmaker as an artist and visionary is emphasized,³⁵¹ has much in common with the

³⁵¹ Brakhage's approach to film owes much to the work of filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger and Maya Deren. As Gregg S. Faller notes, Brakhage developed “the psychodrama (or trance) model as developed in the 1940s by Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, Gregory Markopoulos, and James Broughton. This style of experimental film emphasizes surreal, temporally and spatially fragmented dream narratives of psychological revelation in which the filmmaker typically performs as an on-screen protagonist. This protagonist experiences a literal and metaphorical journey of self-exploration built upon

Beats' poetic and aesthetic mission. Gregg Faller, in *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen*, observes how Brakhage's films not only share affinities with the Beat sensibility, but also with abstract expressionism in painting. Discussing Brakhage's theoretical work on film, Faller notes how the filmmaker "reinforced the notion of the solipsistic artist expressing himself with little concern for social commentary or viewers' comprehension. This convergence of lyrical cinema, the abstract expressionist art world, the Beats, and Brakhage as neo-Romantic figurehead would ultimately secure his deification in the experimental film canon." (289)

Nevertheless, Brakhage's investment in personal vision was not the only approach used by Underground filmmakers, nor was it always well received by critics and fellow filmmakers. In his 1966 history of the artistic movements in New York's East Village during the early and mid 1960s, John Gruen scorned the complexity of Brakhage's films and described his hyper subjectivity as indecipherable even to those predisposed to find meaning in it:

When double, triple, and quadruple exposures are subjected to rapid, rhythmic editing and cutting, when the eye becomes immersed in a plethora of disparate but juxtaposed color images rushing soundlessly across the screen for hours on end, the effect is more soporific than hypnotic. Only the true aficionado could find these works stimulating, and even then stifled and unstifled New Bohemian yawns are audible at Brakhage screenings. (*The New Bohemia: The Combine Generation* 100)

Even if Gruen's harsh and ironic undertone may compromise the objectivity of his critique³⁵² – if such a thing exists – other contemporary sources of criticism prove that Gruen's words may not be (so) out of place. In *Points of Resistance* (1991), Lauren Rabinovitz notes how as early as 1959, Jonas Mekas had complained about a cinematic

representational imagery that alternates between objective and subjective perspectives." (Gregg S. Faller, "Unquiet Years': Experimental Cinema in the Fifties", *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen* 286)

³⁵² Gruen uses similarly colorful terms to talk about Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky: "The smells of perspiration, garbage, and marijuana – the sweat, refuse, and dreams of the poverty-stricken – assail the caller climbing the long flights of stairs to Allen Ginsberg's and Peter Orlovsky's apartment on East Fifth Street. Ginsberg, author of *Howl*, has become the paunchy guru of the New Bohemia. Bearded and balding, the bespectacled poet has shared these quarters with Orlovsky, his lanky, long-haired friend, for nearly thirteen years: three rooms on the top floor, every room a bedroom. The floors are covered with mattresses. A desk, a bookcase, and a few chairs constitute the furnishings. The place is geared for LOVE." (52)

extreme lyricism and subjectivity best represented by Brakhage. This critical trend, Rabinovitz comments, “developed against the backdrop of New York art institutions, where certain critics and journalists leveled new charges at the reigning avant-garde in painting [arguing] that the Abstract Expressionist content of ‘private myth’ and its therapeutic function of artistic self-recognition was overly narcissistic, an aesthetic dead end.” (108)

In any case, the expression of subjective and personal vision was not the only way in which filmmakers established connections with the work of Beat Generation poets and writers. A decade before Brakhage started directing films, experimental filmmakers were already advancing some of the aesthetic or thematic concerns that were central to the Beats. Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and *At Land* (1944) rely heavily on the subconscious mind of the filmmaker, resulting in the use of dream-like imagery and non-narrative modes of expression. Similarly, films like *Fireworks* (1947) by Kenneth Anger, in the foregrounding of homoerotic desire and homosexuality, as well as through the centrality of the artistic value of dreams, forwards a thematic interest to be found in many of the Beats’ works. Like Brakhage’s, the Underground films that are most often associated with the Beat Generation often share aesthetic similarities with the experimental films of the 1940s, at the same time that they initiate more direct dialogues with the literary movement. The majority of these films – produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s – coincided with the publication of *On the Road*, *Howl*, and *Naked Lunch* and, as such, coexisted with many of the exploitation beatnik movies.

Alfred Leslie’s and Robert Frank’s *Pull my Daisy* (1959), narrated by Jack Kerouac, featuring Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky, and painter Larry Rivers, with a musical score by David Amram, and a title taken from a poem co-written by Kerouac, Ginsberg and Cassady in the 1940s, does not need many more credentials to enter the ranks of the Beat film.³⁵³ *Pull my Daisy*, while not sharing the subjective camera or the rapid editing of other experimental films, opposes the mainstream representation of the beat(nik) by celebrating the child-like, irreverent and

³⁵³ The plot of the movie, in addition, was taken from the first act of a play Kerouac wrote called “The Beat Generation,” where he described real life events that took place on Carolyn and Neal Cassady’s house.

spontaneous life of the artist.³⁵⁴ It does, unfortunately, duplicate the stereotypical representation of women as domestic accessories, as obstacles in the lives of men, or as “glorified mommies”³⁵⁵ (202) as Ray Carney writes. Even if Milo’s wife is introduced as a painter, she better fulfills the role of the nagging-wife:



Figure 20. “Wife” scolding Milo in front of the beatnik friends

Like the Camille portrayed in Salles’s *On the Road* (2012), who can do nothing except “scold” Dean for his behavior, Milo’s wife is left alone crying when they men go out in search for kicks. Lauren Rabinovitz notes in the introduction to *Points of Resistance*, how:

The bohemian realm of the Greenwich Village scene in the 1940s though the 1960s celebrated the male artist as a Romantic hero while configuring women’s roles only in relation to the male artist’s greatness – as either wives or lovers. The large, familial atmosphere typically describing Greenwich Village’s legendary artists’ parties was structurally an enclave consisting of artists, wives,

³⁵⁴ Not all critics, of course, appreciated such child-like behavior in films. On the connection between the Beat generation and the Underground film, Parker Tyler wrote: “The Underground Film is not predominantly or necessarily the expression of a beatnik cult. The point is that it encourages beatnik expressions through its practical rule of universal tolerance. The moral note struck has a good deal to do with the revolt against the Establishment that predated the rise of the Underground Film and centered during the fifties in the plays and novels of England’s Angry Young Men. It also received a strong current of influence (as the 1958 Underground film *Pull my Daisy* proves) from the prose and poetry of the Beat Generation that appeared in the late fifties and that celebrated, to borrow Jack Kerouac’s own formula, the milieu of the dharma bums.” (*Underground Film* 32)

³⁵⁵ “Escape Velocity: Notes on Beat Film” (*Beat Culture and the New America* 190).

and mistresses. In this environment, bohemian male artists were exempt from the bourgeois morals and demands of marriage but women were not. (5)

In two interviews with Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank – included in *Naked Lens* – Jack Sargeant specifically inquires into the representation of women in *Pull my Daisy*. Both Leslie and Frank point to the real position of women within the movement, defending their representation as an accurate depiction of reality.³⁵⁶ In *Pull my Daisy*, while women still fit the same stereotype they did in mainstream films, beatnik men are elevated, as Kerouac did with Cassidy, to the position of the “holy goof”. Unlike the exploitation films of the era, where the questions Peter Orlovsky bombards the bishop with – “Is baseball holy? Is the cockroach holy? Is glasses holy? holy? holy?” – would have been used as examples of the beatniks’ nonsensical discourse, in *Pull my Daisy* they are elevated as playful, spontaneous, examples of their exaltation of everyday-like experiences. While aesthetically and technically rather conventional – it has a linear narrative and traditional camera angles and editing – *Pull my Daisy* relies on its subject matter and its made-believe spontaneity³⁵⁷ as the main assets to counterattack the mainstream cinematographic discourse.³⁵⁸

A similar approach is found in John Cassavetes’s *Shadows* (1959), whose history is also ingrained in discourses of spontaneity and faithfulness to the moment in art. In fact, the origin of the film can be traced back to an acting class taught by Cassavetes in which he engaged his students in improvisation of some of the scenes that

³⁵⁶ Leslie says: “Hey man, that was the scene. That was the scene of their lives, they were marginal to their lives. They were treated...that was the basis of the story and I just followed the line.” (37) Similarly, Frank states: “Well, I think it represented the general view of that group of people, you know, that did not want to be responsible for a family, didn’t want to...you know. I mean Kerouac lived with his mother and was very kind to her, but as a rule they [women] would interfere with that kind of life that group of men would have or want to have.” (43)

³⁵⁷ For many years *Pull My Daisy* was believed to be completely improvised, but now it is commonly known that it was carefully rehearsed and planned. In “The Making (and Unmaking) of ‘Pull my Daisy’”, Blaine Allan writes that “[f]or the filmmakers, improvisation involved a network of controls and liberties, preparation and spontaneity, and the establishment of a design for the film and its production.” (187)

³⁵⁸ Ron Rice’s *The Flower Thief* (1960) owes much to Leslie’s and Frank’s *Pull my Daisy*, taking the staged spontaneity of the latter a step forward by following actor Taylor Mead – who would later become an underground legend through Andy Warhol’s films – through an unscripted tour in the streets of San Francisco. Like *Daisy*, *The Flower Thief* celebrates the child-like and spontaneous vision of the beat and the outcast. Ruth Weiss – who was a good friend of Mead – acted in this movie, but her scenes were edited out of the final cut. Her scene in the film, as she commented in a personal interview, was her and Taylor Mead doing a Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire routine by the Coit Tower in San Francisco.

would later appear in the film.³⁵⁹ Besides the more or less improvisational nature of the acting,³⁶⁰ Cassavetes's film deviates from mainstream cinema mainly through the way in which his handheld camera portrays the lives of three African American siblings: Hugh, a singer who is having trouble coping with the demeaning artistic market he has to dwell in,³⁶¹ Bennie – played by Ben Carruthers – as an unemployed hipster who does not seem to fit into the bohemia nor is he offered an alternative, and Lelia, the younger sister who “passes” as white and acts as a sexually liberated woman. In addition to the jazz score of the soundtrack, and the focus on characters that are often marginalized, misrepresented or oversimplified in Hollywood, *Shadows* is interesting in its representation of female experience.

Lelia is torn in the film between the conventional position of women in society and the alleged freer position offered by the counterculture. Her ambition to be independent is often compromised by socio-political factors that place her in a vulnerable position. For instance, after accompanying her brother to the station and, despite his advice, choosing to walk back home on her own to prove her independence, a random man follows her at once and tries to molest her, until a passerby – a cameo by John Cassavetes – saves her from him. Another example of the way in which gender constructions keep inhibiting her, takes place at a party in which David – an older writer who pursues her – criticizes a story she has written on the grounds that it is not an honest representation of her experience; literature, according to him, is not all about the imagination. Lelia's story, in which a girl walks alone in the city and kisses a stranger, is criticized by David on account of her lack of sexual experience. To prove the point of the story, she starts kissing a boy who had just been standing next to her, an action which prompts David's disgust: “It's even more revolting in real life,” he remarks.

³⁵⁹ Cassavetes filmed a first version in 1957 – which was highly praised by Jonas Mekas and apparently almost completely improvised – and then a second version in 1959. In his essay “The Forest and the Trees”, film-critic J. Hoberman writes: “The *Shadows* controversy was the first great debate of Meka's career at the *Voice*. After publicly championing the one-hour version of *Shadows* shown at the Paris Theater in late 1958, befriending the filmmaker, and arranging for a subsequent series of screenings at the Ninety-Second Street YM-YWHA, Mekas disowned Cassavetes' virtual remake, attacking the film in the *Voice* (18 November 1959) and subsequently explaining (27 January 1960) that unnamed ‘distributors’ had ‘succeeded in persuading Cassavetes to re-shoot and re-edit the film, to make it more suitable for the commercial theaters. The result was a bastardized, hybrid movie which had neither the spontaneity of the first version, nor the innocence, nor the freshness.’” (108)

³⁶⁰ A title card at the end of the film reads: “the film you have just seen was an improvisation.”

³⁶¹ In the film he is told to introduce a “girls' line” in a show, which he is very upset about – “what am I introducing a bunch of dumb broads for? What's to introduce?” His position in the film exposes the fake and inauthentic approach to art favored by the commercialization of art in the entertainment industry.

Throughout the film Lelia performs her sexuality and independence as if it was a mask she was wearing, the different men that pursue her demanding her to embody different personas.³⁶² Tony, the boy she kisses at the party, thinking about the way David claimed Lelia as his property, asks her: “What do you belong to Lelia?”, to what she replies, “Well, I belong to me.” What should have been a powerful reinstatement of her independence, becomes in the eyes of Tony as assertion of her sexual availability. When they go back to his apartment and have sex – Lelia was still a virgin – *Shadows* powerfully exposes the romantic implications that having sex for the first time – especially, if not exclusively for a girl – has acquired through the media and other cultural forms:



Figure 21. Lelia unable to reconcile her experience with the myth

Lelia’s disappointment stems from both the physical pain she suffered – “I didn’t know it could be so awful” – and the disconnection between her actual feelings and the emotional, and psychological implications traditionally associated with it – “I thought being with you would be so important...mean so much...that afterwards two people would be as close as it’s possible to get. But instead, we’re just two strangers,” she tells Tony. In an interview included in the DVD version, Lelia Goldini – the actress

³⁶² When Lelia has a date with a black boy after Tony realizes she is black and leaves her, she tries different strategies to demonstrate her power: she keeps him waiting for hours while she gets ready, telling him that it is in any case his fault because he wants her to be pretty – he sees it as her way of proving her masculinity; she similarly asks him for a second date, something which he considers is his responsibility – hers, according to him, is merely accepting or rejecting the offer. In the end she asks him, “well, how do you want me to behave?” to which he answers, “Look, just dance. And be as lovely as you look.” Even if she answers, “Look, David, I am what I am, and nobody tells me what to do,” she does stay and dance as demanded.

who played Lelia – specifically comments on this scene as being scripted, unlike others which were more open to improvisation. As a young woman in the 1950s, Goldini admits she would not have dared to say a line which clearly broke the romantic myth through which the moment women lose their virginity becomes a wonderful, magical, event.³⁶³ Lelia’s sexual independence is at odds with the dominant construction of female sexuality and femininity; when she asks Tony, “What happens now? Do I stay with you?,” she is merely following the script she has learnt, playing her part in the post-coital scene.³⁶⁴ Together with Lelia, the younger brother Bennie is also forced to wear different masks, and like his sister, he is similarly placed in an uncomfortable position regarding social expectations. Unable or unwilling to conform, he is also uneasy with the life of the hipster – hanging out in bars, chasing girls, and getting into fights.³⁶⁵ Like in the case of Lelia, no solution is offered.



Figure 22. Bennie and mask sculpture

³⁶³ The female virginity myth was, and continues to be, a recurrent trope in cultural constructions. As Tamar Jeffers McDonald points out in the introduction to *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film* (2010), “[The virgin appears [...] to mobilize conflicting arguments and points of view and does so in contexts that are always both entirely specific to the time of the particular film and connected to longer traditions of beliefs about purity, innocence, and goodness. The ‘double standard’ and the ‘technical virgin’ may seem to be uniquely 1950s concepts; yet [...] both are still pertinent to current films and the societies they reflect and serve.” (3)

³⁶⁴ What the experience has really taught her is that sex does not need to have any emotional connection, and her later reaction – “Please, don’t touch me. I wanna go home. I wanna get dressed” – is the result of her disillusionment.

³⁶⁵ “No more of this jazz for me, baby,” he tells his friends after they are beaten up because they were hitting on some girls in the company of their boyfriends. Even if Bennie tells them that he does not understand why they do this, and that he is not going to do it anymore, the film ends with him wandering aimlessly through the city.

Jonas Mekas's *Guns of the Trees* (1962), also featuring Ben Carruthers, and including a soundtrack with Allen Ginsberg's recited poems, similarly focuses on marginal characters. The film revolves around two couples: one white, worn down and visibly dissatisfied with society, and the other black and in love with life.³⁶⁶ Considered by some critics as an "exploration of Beat angst",³⁶⁷ the film is set in New York's bohemian scene of the 1960s and, as such, it documents the political revolt of the era – references to the protest against Caryl Chessman's execution, Richard Nixon's campaign, and environmental issues are mixed with the stories of the two couples. These political and social references engage in dialogue with the countercultural artistic scene, represented in the film by Ginsberg's poetry. For instance, a scene in which Ben is trying to sell a life insurance to a man who confronts him by asking, "don't we believe in death anymore?", is followed by an excerpt from Ginsberg's "Death to Van Gogh's Ear".³⁶⁸ In this context, Ginsberg's poem enacts through art the social opposition to America's culture of production and consumption: "Money! Money! Money! shrieking mad celestial money of illusion! Money / made of nothing, starvation, suicide! Money of failure! Money of / death! / Money against Eternity! and eternity's strong mills grind out vast paper of / Illusion!"³⁶⁹ (*Selected Poems 1947-1995* 74) These external elements cause feelings of anguish and oppression in Frances, the white girl who commits suicide and whose friends are shown in the film, in scenes set in the past trying to show her reasons to live and also coping with her death in the present,³⁷⁰ In addition, a recurrent scene in the film shows two young men wearing suits and briefcases – with white faces and sunken eyes – slowly walking through fields while crying and screaming with despair:

³⁶⁶ Meka's film can be said to fall for the happy-in-their-simplicity stereotype of African American people. While the white couple seems to be more aware of the political and philosophical issues of the day – Frances even commits suicide because she cannot find beauty in the world – the black couple seems content in their daily lives: getting a haircut, dancing, making love and enjoying cheap dinners with their friends. However, at the end of the movie Ben shows similar signs of anguish and disillusionment, getting drunk in a bar because of his inability to affect the world.

³⁶⁷ David E. James, "The Movies Are a Revolution: Film and the Counterculture" (301).

³⁶⁸ Interestingly, in this poem Ginsberg also attacks Hollywood and its mechanisms: "Hollywood will not rot on the windmills of Eternity / Hollywood whose movies stick in the throat of God / Yes Hollywood will get what it deserves / Time / Seepage of nerve-gas over the radio / History will make this poem prophetic and its awful / silliness a hideous spiritual music" (72).

³⁶⁹ Other poems read by Ginsberg in the film include "Sunflower Sutra" and "The Fall of America".

³⁷⁰ Mekas' *Guns of the Tress*, in its depiction of collective anxiety, is reminiscent of Christopher Maclaine's *The End* (1953), where disconnected stories of several people on their last day on earth are loosely linked by the threat of the atomic bomb – the awaiting death of humanity.



Figure 23. Grey flannel suit men

In addition to the intermittent presence of these two characters, the pressure to conform to society's expectations is also shown in a scene in which Ben – similarly suited up – walks at a very fast pace side by side with another besuited man through long, maze-like, corridors until they get to a door with a sign that reads “Personnel.” Competition to win the rat-race, the film suggests, only leads to more fake, white-faced, men going through life while dead inside. *Guns of the Trees*, with the double portrayal of the despair and joy of the life of the “beatnik”, is an interesting document that counterattacks the simplistic media-mediated representation of the outcast and the bohemian by offering him/her a space from which to express the communicative and ideological break with mainstream society – as Adolfas Mekas, the white man, puts it in the film, attempts to communicate with a square cause only, “bubbles, bubbles, bubbles”.

Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* (1961) recounts the story of a young filmmaker and his cameraman as they film a group of drug addicts who are waiting for their dealer – or connection – Cowboy.³⁷¹ From its very origins as a film adaptation of a Living Theater play with the same title, *The Connection* was linked to the Beat Generation. As Rabinovitz writes, Clarke's film “drew upon the publicity attached to the Living Theatre's off-Broadway production of the play in 1959. That the two would be identified together is a function of the Beat or hipster cultural milieu from which both

³⁷¹ By focusing on marginal characters, like the drug addicts in *The Connection* or the African American gang members in *The Cool World* (1963), Clarke tackled the discrimination she herself felt as a female artist: “For years I'd felt like an outsider, so I identified with the problems of minority groups. I thought it was more important to be some kind of goddammed junkie who felt alienated rather than to say I am an alienated woman who doesn't feel part of the world and who wants in.” (*Los Angeles Times* interview, 1976)

productions arose, as well as the specific marks of Clarke's production that referred to the earlier one. Clarke retained the play's original title, acting cast, and premise." (117)

The film, which takes place in the – roach and beatnik infested – apartment of a man named Leach, where musicians, writers and other characters simply hang around while waiting for Cowboy, is especially interesting in the way it exposes the inability of film to reproduce reality. Keeping the appearance of a documentary, or social document, Clarke does not appear as the director of the film until the ending credits. In fact, the film begins with the following note read out by the camera man: "Jim Dunn, the documentary film-maker, titled this film 'The Connection' and turned over all the footage to me before he left. I worked with him as cameraman and we shot the whole thing in a drug addict's apartment early one evening last Fall. The responsibility of putting together this material is fully mine. I did it as honestly as I could. J. J. Burden." To further create the illusion of raw material, the film is full of interruptions from the director, Jim Dunn, who is not content with the footage he is getting – that is to say, he is not content with the way the junkies are playing their own selves. Early in the film Jim complains about their lack of authenticity: "the moment I put a camera on you, you change [...] just act naturally [...] I'm not interested in making a Hollywood picture." On a different occasion he complains that the story is not visual enough, which Sam – one of the junkies – tries to correct by playing around with a hula hoop. The director keeps struggling with the junkies, who either overact or do not want to be filmed – when he points a lamp at them to get better lighting they turn away from him, visibly upset. In much the same way, the few times he manages to film someone saying something interesting, it turns out to be a critique on the concept of his movie: "What do you wanna hear? that we are a pity miserable self-annihilating microcosm? That's what you wanna hear. Hurry, hurry, hurry, the circus is here! But imagine anyone wanted to use REAL junkies just to make a movie. Wow..." Still waiting for Cowboy, getting impatient for the next fix, one of them – called Sam – addressing directly the camera, promises to tell Jim "good stories" if he gives him money to buy drugs.³⁷²

³⁷² Earlier in the film we learn that the director had pay for a week-long fix so his beatniks will be high and ready to put on a show.



Figure 24. Sam offering stories for money

When Cowboy finally arrives – accompanied by Sister Salvation³⁷³ – and gives each of them their dose, the drug-dealer challenges the director to take a shot so he can experience the effects first hand. Once the director is high, he exchanges roles with the junkies, who now demand to know what he is feeling – to which he answers: “don’t be a drag, man.” In the end, when Leach – who had been complaining his dose had no effect on him – finally takes a second fix and collapses, the director gives up, telling the camera man: “It’s all over, it’s all over...it’s yours now.” After all, if junkies waiting to get fix were not entertaining enough for a film, they are even less so when in a comma.

By drawing attention to the way in which the filmmaker “molds” reality – directly telling their actors what to do – *The Connection* challenges not only the commercial representation of the junkie or the hipster, but also those approaches allegedly based on truthfulness and honesty. The techniques through which the presence of the director is exposed³⁷⁴ are used in Clarke’s film to position “authentic approaches” such as cinema vérité as just as false and artificial as Hollywood discourses.³⁷⁵ As

³⁷³ An old lady who helped Cowboy and who thinks the latter is helping the drug addicts with their addiction.

³⁷⁴ At the beginning of the film, when the director realizes the cameraman has been filming how he argued with the junkies, he tells him: “what are you doing? Are you still shooting?” Trying to keep the first rule of direct cinema – that the filmmaker be invisible – he tells the cameraman, “just keep me out of it”.

³⁷⁵ In *Portrait of Jason* (1967) Clarke returns to cinéma vérité in a film solely constructed with an interview with Jason Holliday, a gay African American man who has worked as a hustler and wants to be a cabaret performer. The apparent authenticity of Jason’s story collapses at the end when Clarke’s and the cameraman’s questions begin to expose his lies. But the way in which his story develops – he says at one point that he is going to offer “sex, parody and tragedy” – also challenges Jason’s collapse in the end as

Rabinovitz notes, “[t]he film’s controlled dramatic situation has only been made to resemble cinema vérité to expose how cinema vérité fails as an exposé.” (*Points of Resistance* 114)

Despite the greater focus on women in these last films, the avant-garde film scene was – like the mainstream Hollywood circles – a world ruled by men. Even Maya Deren, a strong and blunt woman whose work influenced male filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, saw her films and theoretical works belittled and underestimated.³⁷⁶ Feminist film critics have strongly criticized the exclusion of women filmmakers as well as the representation of female characters in experimental films. B. Ruby Rich has written that “[t]he role played by women in the films of the avant-garde was, to quote Martha Coolidge’s film title of a few years later, not a pretty picture. It wasn’t only the leftie politicians that thought a woman’s place was on her back: these avant-garde artists, whose politics were often closer to royalist than anything else, thought the same (or, in their case, on her back and on camera).” (*Chick Flicks* 103-104) Referring to filmmakers and critics such as Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas or P. Adams Sitney, Rich’s comment does not mean that there were no women filmmakers at the scene – which of course there were and their work was praised by male critics or influential to male filmmakers – but draws attention to the still dominant masculine position of power in the construction of cultural and artistic material. It was not until the mid-seventies and eighties, with the publication of works like Claire

the truth. Demanding more from Jason at one point, Clarke asks him “What else do you got?” and he replies: “Yeah, got to cry, I got to do the end.” While Clarke has always maintained the truth of the last 20 minutes of the film – when the cinema vérité works its mojo and we get the real Jason – the latter seems to be quite aware of the performance aspect throughout the film: “I know I am a great actor and I got a chance to prove it . . . I wondered if people would think I was a homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. I wondered if I was great enough to convince them I was all three . . . I was aware filmwise of what I was doing. I never got too far beyond my image. But what is my image? Other than a well-dressed, well-liked swinging cat? I also play many roles in life. I was also hip enough to do it on the screen – dig it?” (Interview with Jonas Mekas, *Village Voice*, September 28, 1967).

³⁷⁶ Bill Nichols, in the introduction to *Maya Deren and the American Avant-garde* (2001), relates the anecdote that took place at the famous 1953 *Cinema 16* symposium – entitled “Poetry and the Film” – where Deren “claimed that film works on two axes, a horizontal, narrative axis of character and action and a vertical, poetic axis of mood, tone, and rhythm. Later, film scholars recognized this theory as comparable to Roman Jakobson’s treatment of the metonymic and metaphoric poles of linguistic organization. Deren’s simple claim, however, befuddled her older male ‘superiors.’ Dylan Thomas dismissively announced that he was ‘all horizontal and vertical,’ or ‘up and down,’ and confessed that the only avant-garde work he’d seen was ‘in a cellar, or a sewer, or somewhere. I happened to be with Mr. Miller over there.’ Arthur Miller later added, ‘To hell with that horizontal and vertical. It doesn’t mean anything.’” (8)

Johnston's "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Ann Kaplan's *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (1983) or J. Rose's *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1988), to name a few, that a comprehensive feminist film theory and discourse started to form.

IV.3. Female Beats in Film and Video

In *Mad to be Saved: The Beats, the 50's and Film* (1988), David Sterritt draws attention to the necessity of including cinematographic discourses in analyses of Beat literature. Alluding to the many visual metaphors employed by Kerouac in "The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose"³⁷⁷ – "Don't think of words when you stop but see picture better" (487) or "Writer-Director of Earthly Movies produced in Heaven, different forms of the same Holy God" (487) – Sterritt aptly observes how "[a] pungent visuality often pervades Beat writing and thinking." (9) For this reason, he adds that while "Beats and their commentators have cited concepts drawn from contemporary music (especially jazz improvisation) more often than visual art when identifying key influences on Beat works [...] practices in fine-art productions (especially action painting) and cinema also played an important role in shaping and crystallizing Beat notions of creativity." (9) Focusing his analysis on – mostly – the work of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, Sterritt analyzes the visual element in their literature and its connection with both mainstream and experimental film productions of the 1950s and 1960s. Though his investigation into literary techniques such as cut-ups and montage, as well as the role of performativity in literature,³⁷⁸ is relevant, in the parallels Sterritt draws between the aesthetic of these writers and various experimental filmmakers, he omits the actual involvement of Beat writers in film.³⁷⁹ Especially pertinent to the scope of this thesis is Sterritt's disregard of the relationship of women poets and film.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ Ann Charters, ed. *Selected Letters: Jack Kerouac 1940-1956* (1996).

³⁷⁸ Sterritt speaks of the "fondness [Beat writers and experimental filmmakers felt] for such devices as nonlinear montage and cut-up texts, improvised camera – dances and spontaneous typewriter-songs, cascades of instinctive imagery and howls of intuitive incantation. All were aimed at subverting and inverting the proprieties of a world perceived as suffocating in the prison of its own orderly thoughts." (*Mad to Be Saved* 59)

³⁷⁹ An analysis of *Pull my Daisy* and Burroughs' collaboration with Antony Balch are exemptions to this.

³⁸⁰ In *Screening the Beats: Media Culture and the Beat Sensibility* (2004) Sterritt shares a similar scope and approach as in *Mad to Be Saved*. Also focusing on the work of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, in this book Sterritt expands some of the analyses suggested in *Mad to Be Saved* by analyzing, for instance, how Kerouac's "association of Buddhist concepts with cinematic analogues and metaphors proves to be a

Women – both as poets and filmmakers – are similarly left out of the scope of study in Jack Sargeant’s *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema* (revisited edition 2008). Although Sargeant’s analysis focuses more closely on experimental filmmakers and their connection to the Beat Generation – he investigates the work of John Cassavetes, Harry Smith, Jack Smith, Jonas Mekas, Conrad Cook, among others – as well “cinematic” techniques in the literature by Burroughs,³⁸¹ he leaves women completely out of the field, save for a brief analysis of Hollywood’s products John Byrum’s *Heart Beat* and Gary Walkow’s *Beat*, which I referred to in the introduction to this chapter.³⁸²

More interestingly, in *We Saw the Light: Conversations between the New American Cinema and Poetry* (2009), Daniel Kane studies the “profound interest American poets had in Underground film” (5). His aim, as he puts it, is to analyze how these artists “were making profound philosophical investigations into the role of technology, the relationship of formal innovation to conceptions of visionary experience, the function of realist narratives in a world marked by imperialist wars abroad and racism at home, and the possibilities for an interdisciplinary art form to create new and progressive forms of consciousness.” (5) Focusing on poets Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, Kane’s analysis similarly leaves behind the rich link between poetry and film in the work of female Beat poets.³⁸³ In this section, by studying the connection with film and video of – primarily – poets Joanne Kyger, Joanne McClure and Anne Waldman, I expand

productive synthesis. Dynamism and flux are primary characteristics of film expression, and Buddhism holds the same qualities to be inherent in all experience and existence.” (53)

³⁸¹ For the connection words/image in William Burroughs see Douglas G. Baldwin’s “Word Begets Image and Image Is Virus: Undermining Language and Film in the Works of William S. Burroughs” (2002).

³⁸² A short appendix to the book, entitled “Beats on Film” includes a list of documentaries on Beat writers. Although none of the ones mentioned by Sargeant focuses exclusively on women, the documentary is an interesting – and hardly ever considered – medium from which to reevaluate the Beat Generation and the participation of women in it. Relevant documentaries/performance videos focusing on Beat women include *The NY Beat Generation Show, Vol. 2: Women and the Beats* (1995), *Diane di Prima: Recollections of my Life as a Woman* (1995), *Diane di Prima: Beat Legend* (1998), *The Poetry Deal: A Film with Diane di Prima* (2011), *Love Always, Carolyn* (2011) and the upcoming *Outrider: A Documentary Film on Anne Waldman*.

³⁸³ In the introduction to his book, Kane acknowledges the difficulties of establishing a group of poets and filmmakers to discuss. Aware that the reader might ask – as Kane puts it – “Why these poets and filmmakers; what about everyone else?” (6), he admits to having limited the scope of his study to “poets who not only were demonstrably influenced by film, but who had to some extent collaborated with a filmmaker in the production of a film or connected deeply through their poetry with a specific film.” (7) All the poets I analyze in this section, together with ruth weiss – whose work I analyze in the next section – fit Kane’s description.

Kane's acute analysis by including female experience, following this way his lead and exploring the "too-often ignored interdisciplinary community composed of filmmakers and poets" (3). Before getting into some of the visual projects of Kyger, McClure and Waldman, to illustrate the connection between Beat women poets' and experimental filmmakers, I briefly sketch Diane di Prima's participation in the cinematographic avant-garde culture in the early 1960s as she is an exemplary case of female participation in Beat image production.

Most notably, di Prima plays the part of "pregnant cutie" in Jack Smith's *Normal Love*³⁸⁴ (1963) which Jack Sargeant describes as "a continuation of the revelry of *Flaming Creatures* (although shot on Ektachrome colour), the film included scenes of chorus girls/creatures (including Frances Francine, John Vaccaro, and a very pregnant Diane diPrima) dancing on cake (constructed by Claes Oldenburg) in a field near Wyn Chamberlain's rented summer house in Old Lyme." (*Naked Lens* 109)



Figure 25. "Pregnant Cutie" dancing and dying

In addition to di Prima's participation in Smith's film, the filmmaker Andy Warhol filmed a short movie during the filming of *Normal Love*,³⁸⁵ a reel that was confiscated by the police by mistake while it was being screened together with Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* in an event organized by Jonas Mekas at The New Bowery³⁸⁶ – Mekas's Film-Maker's Cinémathèque in addition shared the same venue

³⁸⁴ The film also features Mario Montez (René Rivera), the cross-dresser and drag queen that became a superstar through Warhol's movies.

³⁸⁵ Warhol filmed, as he puts it, when "the cast made a room-size cake a got on top of it." (*Popism: The Warhol Sixties* 100)

³⁸⁶ Mekas was arrested for screening Smith's film; In *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (2008, revisited edition) Cynthia Carr relates this event in the context of similar obscenity charges: "In 1961, postal inspectors busted LeRoi Jones and Diane di Prima for sending obscenity

for a time with The New York Poets Theater, the company founded in 1961 by Diane di Prima, Fred Herko, Alan Marlowe, LeRoi Jones and James Waring. Di Prima's intersections with Warhol do not stop here: it was through *The Floating Bear* – the newsletter edited by di Prima and LeRoi Jones – that Warhol first became acquainted with Billy (Linich) Name's haircutting parties, which inspired Warhol to film his Haircut movies,³⁸⁷ films that were screened at The New York Poets Theater. Warhol, in addition, shot a short film of di Prima and her then husband, Alan Marlowe. In *Andy Warhol: Poetry and Gossip in the 1960s*, Reva Wolf discusses about the origin and content of this film:

Warhol filmed the short episode-like movie of di Prima and Marlowe (the title of which is at present uncertain) soon after 29 January 1964, when di Prima sent a letter to the artist that alluded to his interest in making a film of the couple: “come see us & shoot a Day in Our House like you said & show the Alan & me pornography –” Warhol ended up filming di Prima and Marlowe for around three minutes, the duration of a 100-foot reel of film, rather than the originally planned length of one day.³⁸⁸ (43-44)

The close ties di Prima had with the underground film world in the early 1960s – in that same period of time she also appeared in Jonas Mekas's *In Between*³⁸⁹ – is not an isolated case, but rather exemplifies the fruitful collaboration between poets/writers, filmmakers and other visual artists. In what follows, I concentrate on the poets Joanne Kyger, Joanna McClure and Anne Waldman, to investigate the dialogue created

through the mail – their literary magazine, *Floating Bear*. (A grand jury failed to return indictments.) In 1964, Lenny Bruce got a one-year sentence for using words like *fuck* and *cocksucker* onstage at the Café Au Go Go. (It was overturned on appeal after Bruce's death.) That same year, two detectives broke up and East Village screening of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, arresting Jonas Mekas, who had programmed the film. (Mekas got a six-month suspended sentence, and Smith's film was banned in the state of New York until 1970).” (308)

³⁸⁷ Freddie Herko, the dancer and close friend of di Prima – for whom she wrote *Freddie's Poems* – features in *Haircut # 1* (1963). In *Andy Warhol, Poetry and Gossip in the 1960s* (1997) Reva Wolf writes about the connection of *The Floating Bear* to Warhol's Haircut movies, stating that it was “the visual artist Ray Johnson, who first brought Warhol to one of Name's haircut parties in 1963.” (38)

³⁸⁸ Wolf quotes di Prima's description of the material filmed: “He came and shot a movie. It was a very short movie. A three or five minute movie of me and Alan. Alan is in bed, and he's covered by a tiger skin, which he's stroking the tail of in a very obviously suggestive manner. I get on the bed in a black leotard and tights and kind of trample him. It was a tiny room.” (44) Wolf sees this movie – as well as the haircut movies – as examples of Warhol's use of “gossip as an integral component of art” (45).

³⁸⁹ Also featuring Shirley Clarke and Taylor Mead.

between their poetry and the moving image, stressing a multimedia approach to their artistic vision.

IV.3.1. Descartes: Kyger and Visual Images

While di Prima's connection to the film world was based on acquaintance rather than on a specific involvement with film – she did not make films herself nor influenced decisively the conception of those she appeared in – other writers did interact more profoundly and significantly with visual media. Joanne Kyger, the Bay area-based poet better known for collections such as *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965), *The Wonderful Focus of You* (1979) or *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journal, 1960-1964* (1980) is an example of this.

The story behind Joanne Kyger's video-poem *Descartes* (1968) clearly reflects the epoch's openness to new forms to explore creativity. In 1967, the National Center for Experiments in Television, housed at the San Francisco public TV station KQED-TV, set up "The Experimental Project," a year-long program whose main objective was to explore the possibilities of TV and video as vehicles for personal artistic expression. Brice Howard, organizer and administrator of the project,³⁹⁰ conceived the program as a space in which artists from different disciplines could freely investigate the medium, collaborating if they felt the need, but without the pressure of actually having to produce anything.³⁹¹ The idea was to separate the project from the product-oriented broadcasting television; a medium which for Howard, as Kris Paulsen points, was "clearly an artistic medium, [even if] its potential had not been realized – or even recognized – by the industry or the general public. The reason for this, he claimed, was that television had been formally and aesthetically crippled by the commercial conventions that governed it."³⁹²

The poet Joanne Kyger was one of the first five in-residence artists who were invited to participate in the project – the painter/sculptor William Allen, the novelist

³⁹⁰The project was, as Eugene Youngblood writes, funded by "the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts" (*Expanded Cinema* 281).

³⁹¹In an interview conducted by Eugene Youngblood, Howard states that "[t]elevision has been a broadcast system, and for that reason its technology and its practice grow essentially from that logic, the logic of distribution. We accepted the inference that we were not obligated to produce anything. And because of that, all kinds of things happened. If we had started out by saying 'let's make a program' it would have been a pretty redundant or repetitious thing." (*Expanded Cinema* 283)

³⁹²"In the Beginning, There Was the Electron" (*X.tra*, Winter 2013, Vol. 15, n°2).

Bill Brown, composer Richard Feliciano and the filmmaker Loren Sears, completed the line-up. As Howard states, “none of these people had a very precise, and certainly not a sophisticated understanding of television as either a technical or as a social broadcast phenomenon.”³⁹³ The artists’ approach, thus, would be uncontaminated by the profit-based TV market, and the space created for them to develop their ideas, as Rani Singh notes, “became a think tank for poets, painters, craftsmen, writers, musicians, dancers, and filmmakers to experiment with the new medium of video, which had yet to develop formal rules or language.” (*California Video: Artists and Histories* 146)

Kyger’s video, based on her narrative poem “Descartes and the Splendor Of: A Real Drama of Everyday Life in Six Parts”, was the result of a collaboration between the artists – in this case, with the filmmaker Loren Sears and Robert Zagone.³⁹⁴ The black and white, 11-minute video, follows Kyger’s poem as she revisits René Descartes’ *A Discourse on Method* (1637), the philosophical and autobiographical treatise where the latter meditates on the nature of reality and the role of body and mind in relation to that reality. Like the philosopher’s argument – which is divided into six nights or meditations – Kyger’s video is also structured into six different sections. Quoting extensively from Descartes’ text, Kyger – as Jane Falk has rightly noted³⁹⁵ – uses the structure of Descartes’ reasoning to situate her revision in much the same way as she used Homer’s *The Odyssey* in *The Tapestry and the Web*. As in the latter, Kyger’s revision of the French philosopher’s text refocuses the attention to include female experience. Like in *Tapestry*, where San Francisco often replaced Ithaca in the recontextualization of the myth, Kyger’s *Descartes* relocates the argument to fit the poet’s personal experience and domestic spaces.

In part I, Kyger appropriates the philosopher’s words to set up her plan: “I shall thus DELINEATE MY LIFE AS IN A PICTURE so that I may DESCRIBE THE WAY IN WHICH I HAVE ENDEAVORED TO CONDUCT MY OWN DESIGN AND THOUGHTS in six parts.” (*As Ever* 70)³⁹⁶ Descartes’ words – emphasized in the text through the use of capital letters – are rearranged through a “cut and paste” technique

³⁹³ Interview with John Minkowsky, August 1977, available at: <http://ncet.torusgallery.com/howard/howard.html>

³⁹⁴ Other collaborative projects in which Kyger participated include *Into the Shining Sea* – directed by Kyger and Richard Feliciano – and *Sorcery* and *Suzanne* by Loren Sears, in which Kyger acts.

³⁹⁵ Footnote to her essay “Joanne Kyger ‘*Descartes and the Splendor Of*,” included in *The Philosophy of the Beats*.

³⁹⁶ All future references to this poem will be quoted from Joanne Kyger’s *As Ever* (2002).

that emphasizes the poet's editorial process of the original text. In this section, seeing "the grand design of Yosemite" (70) as part of the same perfection of her "own natural inherited mind" (70), Kyger substitutes Descartes' description of the disappointment he felt with different areas of education – language, poetry, math, and philosophy – with the "acceptance of [her] natural magnificence of heritage as being due to the ignorance and unfamiliarity of [her] NATIVE COUNTRY." (70) Like Descartes, who quits formal studies in favor for the experience travel can grant him,³⁹⁷ Kyger sums up her travels – or knowledge of the world – to the personal web connections and friendships she has created – "So, I traveled a great deal. I met George, Ebbe, Joy, Philip, Jack, Robert, Dora, Harold, Jerome, Ed, Mike, Tom, Bill, Harvey, Sheila, Irene, John, Michael, Mertis, Gai-fu, Jay"(70) plus other thirty-something names.

Nevertheless, neither formal studies nor knowledge based on personal experience prove sufficient for Descartes, for which he concludes – as Kyger also writes – "TO MAKE MY OWN SELF AN OBJECT OF STUDY." (70) The images in the first part of Kyger's video attest to – at least at first sight – the centrality of the poet as her own subject of study; indeed the use of close-up shots of her face throughout this section seem to emphasize her position as the philosopher "philosophizing" about herself.

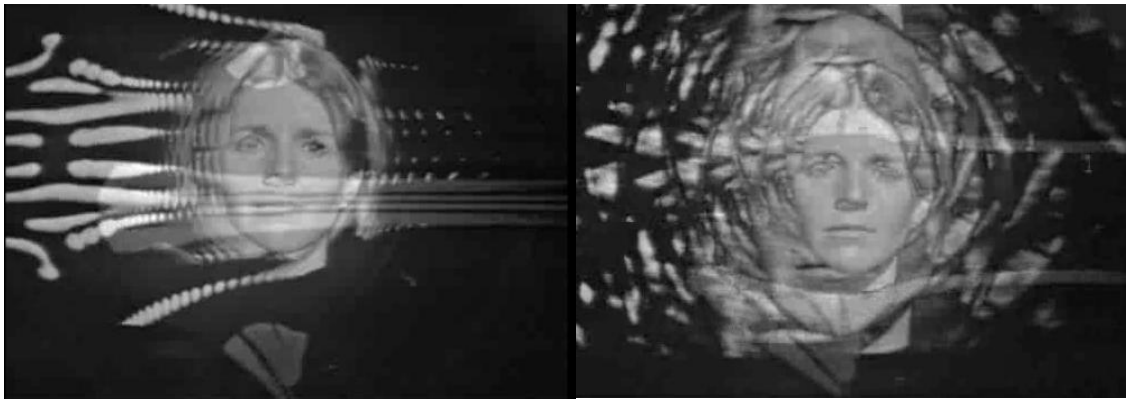


Figure 26. Part I, visual effects

³⁹⁷ "For these reasons, as soon as my age permitted me to pass from under the control of my instructors, I entirely abandoned the study of letters, and resolved no longer to seek any other science than the knowledge of myself, or of the great book of the world spent the remainder of my youth in traveling, in visiting courts and armies, in holding intercourse with men of different dispositions and ranks, in collecting varied experience, in proving myself in the different situations into which fortune threw me, and, above all, in making such reflection on the matter of my experience as to secure my improvement." (*A Discourse on Method*, Gutenberg Project unpaginated)

Nevertheless, as soon as the impressive array of visual special effects employed to distort the image begins to take effect – rendering the image of the poet at times almost indiscernible – Kyger complicates the availability of “one’s own” as an object of study. In addition to the problematization of a stable visual representation, Kyger plays with the connection between her video and the appropriation of Descartes through sound – distorting the sound, for instance, when directly quoting Descartes’ “NATIVE COUNTRY” (70) by using an obscured, slowed down effect that contrast with the speeded up and superimposed audio of the list of names that stand for the study of her own native country. Kris Paulsen³⁹⁸ sees the destabilization of the image of the poet as an image in the video as a technique used to complicate the representational possibilities of video:

The kinetic flickering motion at first appears to be a problem with the set’s vertical hold, which makes visible the striped structure of the screen. But the distortion is quite purposeful. It destabilizes the visible body as the origin and container of the voiceover soundtrack of Kyger reading the poem; she becomes merely an image rather than a thing. The video image, like one’s grasp of the world in general, is not stable or sure.

In addition to the visual distortion of Kyger’s own presence in the video, and the audio effects that complicate the relationship between sound/image and narration/author, in part I Kyger’s face is also fused with archival footage of America’s history. For instance, coinciding – again – with the study of her native country, an American flag is superimposed on the poet’s face, and a series of images documenting political speeches, university graduations, women picking grapes, soldiers or signs of the Veterans’ Day, among others,³⁹⁹ also blur the visual representation of the poet:

³⁹⁸ “In the Beginning, There Was the Electron”.

³⁹⁹ Vague references to war link Kyger’s video to Descartes’ own context, as Jane Falk writes: “images of contemporary life, such as American flags, are superimposed over the speaker’s face, a subtle allusion to the Vietnam War then in progress as well as to Descartes’ participation in European wars.” (*Philosophy of the Beats* 119)

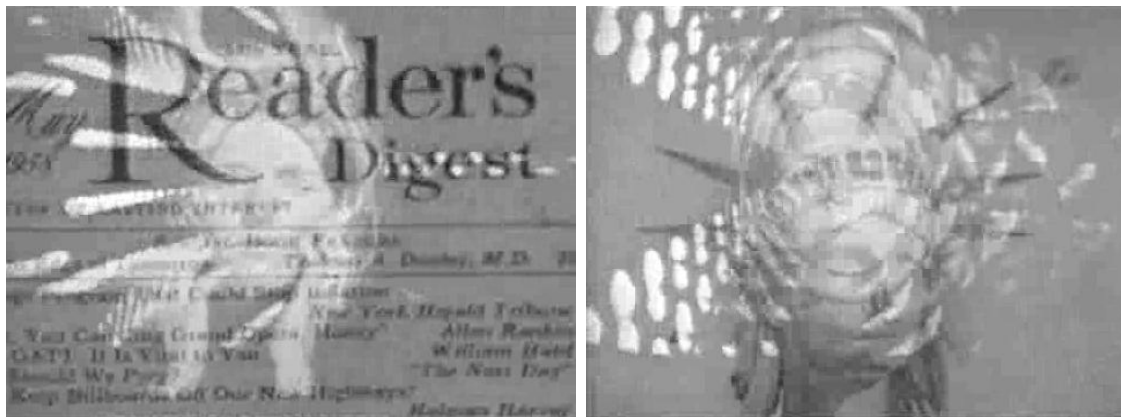


Figure 27. Archival footage

These images function in the video not only as cultural signifiers and as visual representations of Kyger's "native country" but, in the larger context of The Experimental Project, the superimposed images of American history and society also exemplify the conventional, politically-inclined and commercially-prone, traditional use of images as representations of reality in TV. In the following sections, Kyger continues to reproduce Descartes' argument while subtly refocusing the body and mind dilemma on which it is based. In Part II, where the philosopher decides to base his approach on reason alone – "I farther concluded that it is almost impossible that our judgments can be so correct or solid as they would have been, had our reason been mature from the moment of our birth, and had we always been guided by it alone" – Kyger uses the video to ironically distance herself from Descartes' text. Giving the philosophers' "sweeping away" of old theories a new meaning and context, part II opens with Kyger literally philosophizing while sweeping away the floor. As such, the grandiose ending of part I – where images of military men carrying billowing flags were superimposed over a cherub-like Kyger that had just become her own subject of study – sharply contrasts with the domestic, stage-recreated, philosophy act of part II





Figure 28. Upper row, end of part I and lower row part II

If Kyger approached the work, as Jane Falk reports, as an “11-minute translation of Descartes’ six-part *Discourse on Method* into video, using various techniques to visualize thoughts” (118), part II can be interpreted as an ironic/satirical reminder that the mind cannot be understood in isolation from the body – especially when talking about the female body – or, at least, that bodily and sensorial experience are just as relevant to the search for truth as mental processes. Mixing grandiloquent speech with more colloquial language, Kyger follows Descartes’ intention of heralding a fresh start “not adding one little iota until [she] was absolutely sure of it” (71), and summarizes in four sentences the laws Descartes establishes to determine the veracity of things.⁴⁰⁰ While still carrying out different household chores, Kyger’s cunningly uses omission in her summary of Descartes’ text to expose the philosopher’s feigned humbleness, at the same time that she posits her own reasoning as superior. While Descartes writes that “the chief ground of my satisfaction with thus method, was the assurance I had of thereby exercising my reason in all matters, if not with absolute perfection, at least with the greatest attainable by me,” Kyger elides doubt altogether by stating: “I THEREBY EXERCISE MY REASON WITH THE GREATEST ABSOLUTE PERFECTION (ATTAINABLE BY ME).” (71)

⁴⁰⁰ To the viewers’ relief, Kyger has a keen eye to summarize Descartes’ points, cutting through his repetitive rhetoric and going straight to the core of the idea. For instance, the third self-created law in *A Discourse on Method* – “The third, to conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence” – translates in Kyger’s economy of language as “I will go from the easiest to the hardest, in that order.” (71)



Figure 29. The philosopher and her chores

By relocating Descartes' reasoning within the specific female body, as Falk writes, "Kyger subtly undermines male privilege as she replaces Descartes with a female persona in a domestic space. In impersonating Descartes, recontextualizing him as it were, the preeminent male philosopher becomes female, in the process feminizing this most masculine of professions." (121)

In part III, Kyger keeps situating her reasoning and philosophy within the domestic sphere, visually representing Descartes' house metaphor of a strong reasoning built with a solid structure,⁴⁰¹ at the same time that she draws attention to the necessity of including the physical world and the body within philosophical discourses. In this section of *A Discourse on Method*, Descartes lays out his "provisory code of morals" to execute reason alone which include, as Kyger summarizes: "1) OBEY THE LAWS AND CUSTOMS OF THE COUNTRY [...] 2) BE AS FIRM AND RESOLUTE IN ACTION AS ABLE" (71) and "3) ALWAYS CONQUER MYSELF rather than FORTUNE, and CHANGE MY OWN DESIRES RATHER THAN THE ORDER OF THE WORLD" (71). It is in this third code that Kyger distances more clearly from the mind/body division that Descartes is starting to delineate. According to the philosopher, the secret to reason, so to speak, is to understand that nothing, besides our own thoughts, is completely in our power. If one sees all external objects – including one's

⁴⁰¹ Descartes writes: "before commencing to rebuild the house in which we live, that it be pulled down, and materials and builders provided, or that we engage in the work ourselves, according to a plan which we have beforehand carefully drawn out, but as it is likewise necessary that we be furnished with some other house in which we may live commodiously during the operations, so that I might not remain irresolute in my actions, while my reason compelled me to suspend my judgment, and that I might not be prevented from living thenceforward in the greatest possible felicity, I formed a provisory code of morals, composed of three or four maxims, with which I am desirous to make you acquainted." (n.p.n)

own body – in this light, Descartes suggests, then one is freed from the eternal desiring of external things. In his own words:

if we consider all external goods as equally beyond our power, we shall no more regret the absence of such goods as seem due to our birth, when deprived of them without any fault of ours, than our not possessing the kingdoms of China or Mexico, and thus making, so to speak, a virtue of necessity, we shall no more desire health in disease, or freedom in imprisonment, than we now do bodies incorruptible as diamonds, or the wings of birds to fly with.

In her video Kyger counterattacks this position, firstly, by insistently transmitting Descartes' elevation of mind over body through the visual representation of her body. In part two and three, this was done in more conventional and realistic fashion than in the first section, where the different visual effects distorted the poet's image almost to a point of no recognition.⁴⁰² Secondly, Kyger consciously misreads Descartes' house-metaphor to subtly turn it to the exaltation of the material world the philosopher is turning against. Right after an improvised poem based on Descartes' words – "We shall not desire bodies as / incorruptible as diamonds, / make a virtue of necessity in our span of time." (71) – Kyger concludes part three by stating that "having furnished [her] cottage [she] begin[s] the establishment of the castle." (72) Turning the house-metaphor on the philosopher – who envisioned it as an example of the mind's prevalence over the external world – Kyger now associates it with the human need of owning bigger, better, objects. This need – especially appropriate to the post World War II American consumerist society, would cease to exist if, as Descartes recommends, reason alone were executed.

⁴⁰² In a review of a Women's Video Festival (1972) where *Descartes* was screened, Robin Reisig wrote: "An exuberant, playful tape of a poem on 'Descartes,' written and read by Joanne Kyger with visuals by Robert Zagone, made full use of the video medium. Wild black and white dots flare out of eyes and fingertips. These dazzling pyrotechnics, which are used in too many experimental products for their own dizzying sake, work brilliantly here because they are suited to the subject of a woman spinning out of her head and trying to draw reason out of chaos." ("Women on Tape: Spinning Tales and Tailspins" 46)



Figure 30. Kyger content in her well-reasoned cottage

In part IV – where Descartes arrives at his first principle, the famous *cogito ergo sum* – we see the poet reasoning her way out of Descartes’ complete separation of the thinking mind and the physical body – Descartes writes: “I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing.” Obscuring the philosopher’s argument through her very colloquial recreation – “I THINK hence I AM. OR I Doubt hence I AM; or I Reject hence I am. You get the picture.” (72) – Kyger clouds Descartes’ “First Fundamental Truth.” (72) In addition, she calls into question the assertion that “the intelligent nature is distinct from the corporeal” by expanding on Descartes’ notion of a mind independent from the body. Kyger’s development of the argument by which “in order to think, it is necessary to exist,” turns Descartes’ championing of a reason based on clarity and distinctiveness⁴⁰³ into a conversational speech based, on the contrary, on unfounded assumptions: “I never saw a dead man think, I never hope to see one, but I can tell you any how, I’d rather see than Be one. Dead men don’t think.” (72)

In this section Descartes purportedly proves the existence of God, assuming him to be the Perfect Being who placed within him the idea of perfection itself. In this context, Kyger introduces the second major change since the representation of Descartes through her own female body: changing the philosopher’s masculine God to a female deity. The turn to a mother God, in addition, is done in such a way that it exposes the poet’s own editing of the philosopher’s actual words in *A Discourse on Method*. Purposely allowing the discordance created when inserting “mother” in the sentence in

⁴⁰³ In Descartes’ own words: “I concluded that I might take, as a general rule, the principle, that all the things which we very clearly and distinctly conceive are true, only observing, however, that there is some difficulty in rightly determining the objects which we distinctly conceive.”

which Descartes introduces God, the poet efficiently draws attention to her own position as the one actualizing his words. In her text, this perfect being “POSSESSES WITHIN ITSELF ALL THE PERFECTION OF WHICH I COULD FORM ANY IDEA, that is to say, IN A SINGLE WORD, *MOTHER GOD*.” (72) As this no longer “single” word attests to, this is Kyger’s, and not Descartes’, text and to understand the poet’s subtle critique, one must pay attention to the details. For instance, Descartes’ opinion that the imagination cannot be used to attain knowledge of sensible things – being “a mode of thinking limited to material objects” – is quoted in Kyger’s text as such: “AND THE STUFFY MIND ASSUMES IF YOU CANNOT IMAGE, something, IT DOES NOT EXIST. WHICH IS beside the point and off the argument if not completely irrelevant to this text by which I am following myself in glory and splendor.” (72-73) Disrupting the system through which the use of capital letters stood for direct quotes from *A Discourse on Method* and going off track in a kind of stream-of-consciousness discourse about her own project, Kyger appropriation of the philosopher acquires a discernible revisionist and ironic approach.

In contrast with sections II and III, the images in section IV turn to the close-ups of the first part of the video, adding even more visual effects to alter the poet’s image. Accompanying Kyger’s authoritarian voice in this section, as Jane Falk writes, “[t]he section begins with abstract images multiplied and swirling, which give way to Kyger’s head, so huge it takes up the whole screen, signifying mental power.” (122) On account of Kyger’s use of visual effects, it might be important to remember, as Eugene Youngblood states, “that VT is not TV: videotape is not television though it is processed through the same system. The teleportation of audio-visual information is not a central issue in the production of synaesthetic videotapes; rather, the unique properties of VTR are explored purely for their graphic potential.” (*Expanded Cinema* 281) Youngblood’s technical reminder rings true to some analyses of Kyger’s *Descartes*, such as Phil Wagner’s, who interprets Kyger’s poetry in conflict with the visuals, stating that “[in] *Descartes* one can detect an ideological tug-of-war between Kyger, whose foremost aspiration was to supplement her poetry with video, and the technicians at NCET, who saw Kyger’s heady writing as an impetus for technological fireworks.”⁴⁰⁴ While some of the effects might just have been an exercise or practical experimentation

⁴⁰⁴ “Visionary video: the archive and the national center for experiments in television,” *Afterimage*, 2009 unpaginated.

of the possibilities of video – that was, ultimately, why these artists were invited to participate in the project – it also seems too simplistic to regard the visuals independent of – or even in opposition to – Kyger’s poetry. Regarding the work produced during the experiment’s first year, Youngblood has stated that “[the] approach seemed balanced between use of the medium for its kinaesthetic design potential, and the medium as vehicle or environment for some other aesthetic content.” (*Expanded Cinema* 282) This balance between visual virtuosity and the poetical content seems to sit more comfortably with Kyger’s video. After all the distorting effects used in part IV, the image centers again on the visual representation of the poet’s body. Part V makes use of different effects such as feedback loops to make the poet’s body – now representing Mother God – multiply and expand.

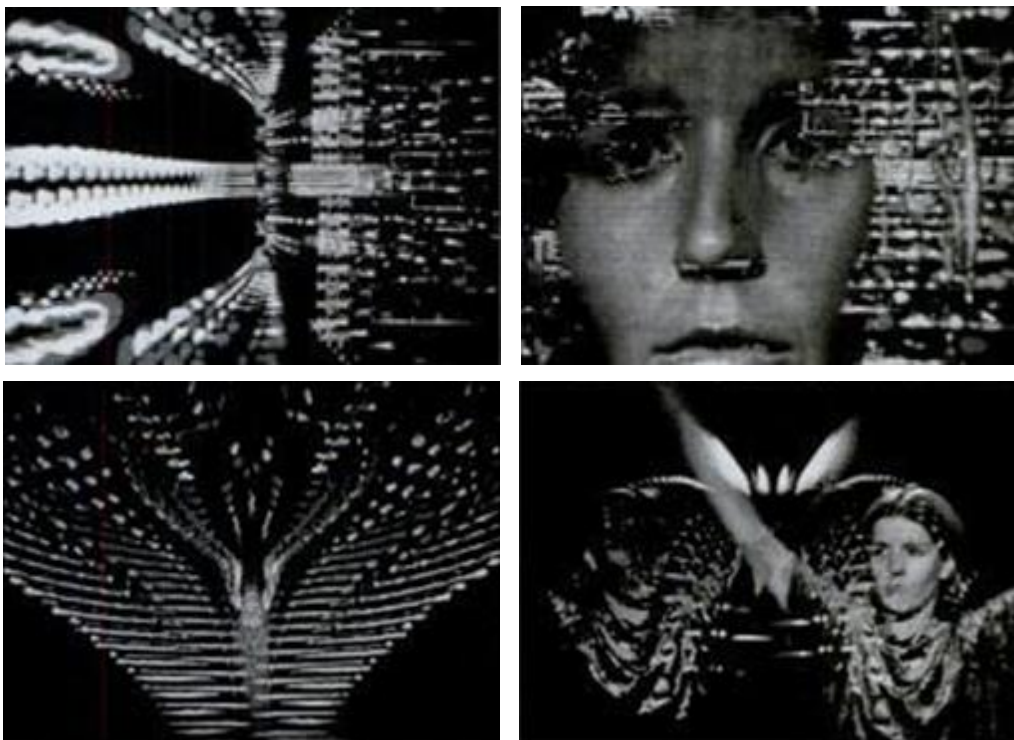


Figure 31. Upper row, part IV. Lower row, part V

In this section, as Kyger writes, she “move[s] thru language and transfer[s] the delicacy of vision into the moving and written word” (73), a comment that might allude both to her video and to her position as a poet; after all, as Descartes writes in his fifth meditation, it is our soul – our language and ability to communicate – which differentiates us from the animals. It is then through language, and through Kyger’s “delicacy of vision” that she exposes Descartes’ flawed reasoning – for instance, in the assertion that since animals “do not speak the language of man, they speak no language,

and are DESTITUTE OF REASON.”⁴⁰⁵ (73) In the last part of Kyger’s video – where the camera shifts back to show the studio where the video is being recorded⁴⁰⁶ – the poet carries on with the mixture of grandiose and colloquial language to highlight “the difficulties of trusting and using your own mind” – which, according to Descartes, must be stable, indivisible. At the end of Kyger’s reasoning, or method, body and mind stand on equal terms for, while “MOTHER GOD has created all, and [she] found this from [her] OWN MIND, whence reside the germs of all truth” (73), the poet also foregrounds Descartes’ emphasis on self-knowledge and personal experience: “ONE CANNOT SO WELL LEARN A THING WHEN IT HAS BEEN LEARNED FROM ANOTHER, AS WHEN ONE HAS DISCOVERED IT HIMSELF.” (74) In the last images of the video, the poet embodies different personas at the same time, so that her body has multiple meanings: she is the performer who has been acting out as Descartes, the poet who has actualized his text, and the “Mother God in the Castle, of Heaven” (74) – as the last word of the video establishes. What all of these images share, as it becomes now evident without the visual effects and distortions, is the poet’s body, the image with which *Descartes* concludes.



Figure 32. Kyger in the studio in part VI

IV.3.2. Joanna McClure and Larry Jordan’s *The H.D.’s Trilogy Film*

Lawrence Jordan, natural of Denver – where he went to high school with Stan Brakhage – won a scholarship to Harvard University where he discovered the works of

⁴⁰⁵ Here, too, Kyger spares the reader long passages in which Descartes describes, for example, the motion of blood within the arteries, a lecture for which he even advises “those who are not versed in anatomy, before they commence the perusal of these observations, to take the trouble of getting dissected in their presence the heart of some large animal possessed of lungs (for this is throughout sufficiently like the human), and to have shown to them its two ventricles or cavities.”

⁴⁰⁶ Falk quotes Kyger discussing how this “shows the unadorned studio (signifying the difficulty of trusting and using your own mind.)” (123)

experimental European filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein. Returning to Denver a year later due to personal circumstances, Jordan, “continued to experiment with film, and with other friends set up a little theater in Central City, Colorado in the summer of 1953.” (Michael Duncan and Kristine McKeena, *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman & His Circle* 190). In 1955 he relocated to the Bay Area, where he has been making films and other visual work ever since. Working, as Sitney Adams writes, with a variety of techniques that include “animated collages, pixilated actualities, portraits, superimposition films, and [...] handpainted film” (*Visionary Film* 324), Jordan is an example of the multimedia approach to art favored by many Bay Area artists of the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁰⁷ His work, in addition, illustrates the dialogue created between filmmakers and poets; as Richard Demin writes in “A Cinematic Alchemy,” “[t]he 1950s were an unparalleled era of discussion and dialogue across the arts, and many filmmakers spent a great deal of time with poets discussing the potential for art to transform experience at both the individual and the social levels.” (371) This is true for Jordan, who moved to San Francisco attracted by the literary and poetic scene, and has often collaborated with well-known poets like Michael McClure or Kenneth Rexroth.⁴⁰⁸ *The H.D. Trilogy Film*, based on the late poems by Hilda Doolittle, and interpreted by the poet Joanna McClure, is an interesting example of the confluence between poetry and film.

Throughout the years, Jordan has differentiated two main approaches within his own work: animation, which he describes as his “interface with the inner world”⁴⁰⁹ and what he refers to as, “personal poetic documentary,” based on the filmmaker’s relationship with the outer world. In the “artist’s statement”⁴¹⁰ he describes this second group of films as his “interface with the real world on poetic footing,” adding that what he does is to “place a movie camera between [himself] and outside reality and try to show exactly how it was in that time and place.” Going by this, it seems much of the space between his camera and the outside reality from 1990-1994 was occupied by his

⁴⁰⁷ ruth weiss, whose work I analyze in the second part of this chapter, is also a good example of the overlapping of art forms.

⁴⁰⁸ Jordan has filmed these two poets: *Visions of a City* (1956-7) is a short film featuring the poet Michael McClure walking the streets of San Francisco. In *Spectre Mystagogic* (1957), Jordan filmed Michael and Joanna McClure, as well as the poet Kenneth Rexroth and his daughter.

⁴⁰⁹ “Jordan’s Animated Journeys,” interview by Doniphan Blair, August, 2010. Available at: http://cinesourcemagazine.com/index.php?/site/comments/jordans_animated_journeys/

⁴¹⁰ Statement available at the filmmaker’s website: <http://lawrencecjordan.com/Bio/Statement.html>

partner, the poet Joanna McClure. *The H.D. Trilogy Film* as Karl Cohen writes, “combines the filmmaker’s images of the woman he loves with Hilda Doolittle’s long poem *Hermetic Definitions* [sic].” (“A Film Trilogy by Larry Jordan” n.p.n.)

Mimicking the three-part structure of H.D.’s *Hermetic Definition* – “Red Rose and a Beggar”, “Grove of Academe” and “Star of Day” – Jordan’s trilogy is also divided into three parts: *The Black Oud* (1992) *The Grove* (1993) and *Star of Day* (1994). H.D.’s poem, published in 1972 but completed in 1961 – the same year she died at 77 – focuses, on a first level, on her unexpected falling in love with Lionel Durand, a younger Haitian journalist who was the chief of the Paris Bureau of Newsweek magazine, whom she met on two occasions in 1960 – the first one when he interviewed her in Switzerland. “Red Rose and a Beggar,” focuses on H.D.’s romantic feelings for the man, which she feels are inappropriate due to her age – “the reddest rose unfolds / (which is ridiculous / in this time, this place, / unseemly, impossible, / even slightly scandalous)” (3). In addition, in this poem H.D. gives expression to a double feeling of rejection: physical, as Durand did not return her attraction, and poetical, as he wrote an unenthusiastic review of her poetry. It is in this rejection, that the true focus of *Hermetic Definition* can be found, as the poems are not so much about the poet’s position as a “beggar” for the man’s love, but as an artist able to transform life experiences – in this case of unrequited love in old age – into art. Even in the first part of the poem, when the speaker is more noticeably affected by the man’s physical and intellectual rejection, her commitment to poetry still surfaces:

true, it was “fascinating...

if you can stand its preciousness,”

you wrote of what I wrote;

why must I write?

you would not care for this,

but She draws the veil aside,

unbinds my eyes,

commands,

write, write or die. (7)

The predominance of poetry in H.D.'s life is similarly emphasized in the second poem – “Grove of Academe” – in which she addresses Saint-John Perse, the French poet and diplomat whom she met during a ceremony held in New York in which she was given the Award of Merit Medal for Poetry by the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters. After praising Perse's gallantry,⁴¹¹ in this poem H.D. stresses their mutual interest in poetry – “our curious pre-occupation with stylus and pencil / was re-born at your touch” (26). While inspired by Perse's poetry, this section also establishes H.D.'s creative independence, as she understands that his “sequence of invocations” (44) and “magnificent rhythms” (44) do not necessarily represent her creative path – “I want my old habit, / I want to light candles; / *Seigneur*, you must forgive my deflection” (44). Through this encounter, H.D. regains the strength to keep on writing on her own terms, a central theme – not only in the poet's life – but also within *Hermetic Definition*. The last poem in the series, “Star of Day,” starts with the announcement of the young man's sudden death, a reality that is transformed through her poetry into a rebirth – “just as my Christmas candles had burnt out, / that you were born / into a new cycle / one of the zodiac angels, / one of the countless others, / yet remaining yourself, / integrated with the Star of Day” (47). It is in this context that her memories of her unrequited love and Durand's disdain for her poetry are turned into fuel for her art; as Vincent Quinn wrote in “H.D.'s ‘Hermetic Definition’: the Poet as Archetypal Mother” (1977), “H.D.'s absorption of her personal experience with the young man into her life as a poet, a theme established in Part One and then diminished in Part Two, is now given full sway.” (59) This experience, nonetheless, is not used as a confessional outburst in her poetry, but rather as the initiation of a metapoetic dialogue on the source of creation and inspiration in poetry. Even if the Durand is now gone forever, as Quinn notes, the poet shows “no grief at all” (59), instead using their relationship to metaphorically conceive her own poem – the fruit of their unfulfilled love:

⁴¹¹ H.D. had recently broken her hip and Perse helped her get up. In the poem she writes: “You are my own age, / my own stars; / I accepted acclaim / from the others, / for the honour, / unexpectedly thrust upon me, / some thousands were there, / then the Great Hall was empty, / though no one had moved away, / and I might have fallen / but your hand reached out to me, / and it was the *grove of academe*.” (23)

only when I had no letter,
I felt cast out, I was thrown away,
and to recover identity,

I wrote furiously,
I was in a fever, you were lost,
just as I had found you,

but I went on, I had to go on,
the writing was the un-born,
the conception. (54)

Through her poetry she recovers her lost identity – that of the poet – frees herself from Durand’s physical and poetical rejection at the same time that she comes to terms with her own death. Just as she transformed the young man’s death into new life, so can she get a new beginning through poetry: “there is always an end; / now I draw my nun-grey about me / and know adequately, / *the reddest rose*, / *the unalterable law* ... / Night brings the Day.” (55)

The relation between Larry Jordan’s *The H.D. Trilogy Film* and H.D.’s *Hermetic Definition* is better understood if the poem is regarded as a structure and aesthetic base for the film – rather than the film being a visual representation of the poem. As the filmmaker has stated, “[t]he poem provided a source of image modality. It determined how the shots would be taken, the style in which the photography of Ms. McClure would occur...The bottom line is that the film’s premise is to trace life *in general*, but real, actually occurring life, not fictional life.”⁴¹² Joanna McClure, who was in her early sixties when the films were shot, does not stand for H.D., but rather – as Jordan’s words suggest – she stands for a more abstract or archetypical category of the older woman traveling alone; more specifically, as my analysis of Jordan’s films will point out, she also represents the exaltation of art. It is precisely through this use of H.D.’s poetry and the representation of McClure as archetypical subjects, that Jordan conceived of a new

⁴¹² Jordan’s website.

direction of his “personal poetic documentary,” now shifted towards “bio-documentary.” While the term “bio” refers to life, and his H.D.’s films do record portions of Joanna’s life, the juxtaposition of H.D.’s poetry with the images filmed create in Jordan’s eyes a mythological framework in which McClure’s actions go beyond her individuality into an archetypal realm. In his own words, “[t]hrough the use of H.D.’s great poem, [sic] ‘Hermetic Definitions,’ as the fictitious thoughts of Joanna, a kind of everywoman is projected onto the screen, and it is no longer simple biography, but bio-documentary, a document of all life.”⁴¹³ Like H.D.’s poems in *Hermetic Definition* which, as many of her later poems, have been described as “elliptical, personal, and imbued with mythology and spiritualism,”⁴¹⁴ Jordan’s film retains a contemplative and poetic quality in its shots and lighting. Filmed in 16mm in black & white with an added sepia tint,⁴¹⁵ the films follow Joanna as she visits – or revisits if we consider her an archetype – European cities which were important to Hilda Doolittle’s own life.

The Black Oud (1992) opens with Joanna visiting Rome, walking its busy streets with traffic and tourists – so much that at times she seems to escape the camera, fusing with the multitude. The first five-minute sequence of McClure walking around Rome and sitting down at a café, comprise just the first three verses of “Red Rose and a Beggar” – “Why did you come / to trouble my decline?” (3) and “I am old (I was old till you came)” (3) estranged from their poetical continuity by being separated at the beginning and end of this sequence. This especial communication between poem and film draws attention to the specific use of time and space in Jordan’s film; disassociating a direct correlation between film and poem, this sequence points toward an evocative parallelism between the two texts. Another disruption of H.D.’s poem in the film takes place when a traditional Greek song – played with the English subtitles projected against a black screen – acts as an interlude used to change the location from

⁴¹³ Jordan’s website.

⁴¹⁴ Vincent Quinn, “H.D.’s ‘Hermetic Definition’: the Poet as Archetypal Mother” 1.

⁴¹⁵ Jordan had used sepia tints for his films before – *Visions of a City* (1978) is an example of this – so, while it is quite possible that the sepia tone was just used for purely aesthetic reasons, in the specific context of *Hermetic Definition* it also evokes the color of the young man’s eyes, a recurrent reference in the poem: “equal in power, together yet separate / your eyes’ amber” (4), “Azrael; ironic and subtle in his smile, / near and familiar in his face / (are his eyes amber?)” (20), “of this other / of whom you *transhumance* wrought miracle, / miracle out of majic, / his eyes’ amber” (38) and “but was it quite fair or fate / to accost me with amber, / Egyptian eyes’ amber / in an ordinary man’s face?” (41)

Rome to Greece. All of this, taking place within the first two stanzas of “Red Rose and a Beggar.”

On other occasions, nevertheless, film and poem are more in synch. For instance, when the narration takes us to H.D.’s conception of Isis as the archetypal lover – “Isis, Iris, / fleur-de-lis, / Bar-Isis is son of Isis, / (*bar ou ber ou ben, signifiant fils*). / so Bar-Isis is Par-Isis? / Paris, anyway;” (5) – Joanna visits ruins as the camera follows her, at times functioning as a kind of camera-I that symbolizes her own vision; this seems to be the case in shots in which the hand-held camera moves up and down with Jordan’s steps while we hear Joanna’s feet tapping the ground, which contrasts with other shots in which the camera stays fixed in one place – or barely moves – while Joanna comes in and out of frame:



Figure 33. Joanna visiting Rome and Greece

Another break in the narration – also introduced with a subtitled song – takes the viewer to one of the direct correlations between poem and image as the verses “the pine-cone / we left smouldering in the flat dish, / is flaming, is fire, / no before, no after – escape?” (9) are synchronized with an image of an actual pine cone burning. Together with the pine-cone, other recurrent images in H.D.’s poem, like the rose and the serpent

are frequently translated into visual images in Jordan's film. Despite these – and other – visual allusions to the poem, in general the images seem to simply record McClure performing various daily tasks or sightseeing as any other tourist would. This way, in *The H.D. Trilogy Film*, Jordan manages to maintain a balance between poetical images – or images suggestive of the poem – and the daily routines of the woman being filmed. As Karl Cohen notes, “[t]o achieve this documentary look Jordan says he limited his directing chores to simple instructions; he would tell Joanna to sit at a table and pour out a glass of wine, to open books, to walk in a certain direction. He says he rarely made changes in the places used in the film. One change he did make was to put a rose in a niche in a wall, an image suggested by the poem.” (“A Film Trilogy by Larry Jordan”)

Part two of the trilogy, entitled *The Grove* (1993), takes place primarily in England – Kew, Brighton, Birmingham and London – in a trip Joanna took during the spring 1991, although interludes of her previous trip to Greece are introduced whenever the poem alludes to these memories. Like in *The Black Oud*, McClure walks around – travel-book in her hand – sits at cafes to write or drink coffee, takes trains and boats, etc. Jordan keeps following McClure with his camera as she performs all of these actions but, unlike in the first part, H.D.'s poem seems to influence the images more strongly here. Section 5 of H.D.'s “The Grove of Academe” opens with the poet wondering: “Is remembrance chiefly a matter / of twig, leaf, grass, stone? / that is as far as I see” (29). In Jordan's film, a scene with Joanna traveling by train in England is edited with images of Greece – of the beach, the sea and old temples – as H.D.'s poem focuses on those remembrances: “a light silt of sand / are part of Aegina, the island,” (29) and “small, intimate, not so august / as the Athenian Parthenos” (29). These images, combined with the main action – which is Joanna traveling by train, reading Oliver Sack's *Seeing Voices*⁴¹⁶ (1989) – establish a direct association between narration and images, suggesting now more clearly the poem as being a representation of Joanna's thoughts. In much the same way, the verses “I breathe the aloes, the acacia / of your senses, tropic red spike, / trumpet flowers, indigo petal-drift / of your

⁴¹⁶ This book, which covers the history of deaf people in the U.S. and focuses on the richness of sign language, as well as the implications of deafness for teaching and child development, can be seen as a subtle reference to Joanna's interest in parent education. As Brenda Knight writes in *Women of the Beat Generation*, “Joanna read A.S. Neil's *Summerhill*. This began a study of education and developmental psychology that led her career in early childhood development and parent education.” (219)

remembrance” (30), are all accompanied by images of the actual plants and flowers referred to:



Figure 34. Correlation between poem and film

In addition to the marked correlation between image and poem in *The Grove*,⁴¹⁷ where many of the symbols or memories brought up by H.D. are actually represented in film, it is also in this second film in which the position of the filmmaker is more present. This can be appreciated, for instance, when an intimate portrayal of a naked Joanna is made to represent – or rather placed in dialogue with – the verses: “I am conscious of my exquisite spine / (God’s work) as I slip and swing” (37). The nature of the images and the rather subjective representation of H.D.’s words, seem to be the result of the intimacy between actress and filmmaker rather than a straight visual illustration of the poem. At other times the correlation between the narration of the poem and the images acts as a premonition of what is to come in the poem. For instance, when H.D.

⁴¹⁷ The owl – “(her white rosary), / with the Owl, / her confederate” (28) – or the gorgon – “you would meet the Gorgon” (36) – are also examples of synchronicity of poem and image. Sitney wrote that “[u]sually the poetry and cinematic images evoke separate autonomous realms, but at times the images almost coincide with the text.” (*Cinema of Poetry* 147)

comments on the obscurity of Perse's poetry, writing "are we translated, transubstantiated, / derived from tree and fish? / rest under my branches," (36) we see Joanna standing on a grave under a tree – an image that functions, not on account of the relationship between Perse and H.D., but rather as a premonition of the young man's death, something that readers of the poem – such as Jordan himself – knew. The position of Jordan as the filmmaker is, in fact, stressed in this part from the very beginning, when ordinary images of Joanna become overexposed to the point that the poet is hardly visible. Richard Deming has specifically referred to this technique as emphasizing the role of the filmmaker as mediator of the pictures: "the saturation in its varying intensities never lets the viewer slip into some mesmeric fantasy of thinking he or she is actually seeing McClure (as opposed to seeing her by way of a camera); we are always reminded that what we are seeing is being mediated." ("A Cinematic Alchemy" 375)



Figure 35. Overexposed Joanna

The significance of highlighting the nature of the film as a construction, as an artistic product, achieves its full connotations in the last part of the trilogy, *Star of Day* (1994). If part two concluded with Joanna acting out H.D.'s verses, lighting candles and sitting down to immerse her poetry in her story with the young man – which represented a direct opposition to Perse's "cooler"⁴¹⁸ approach to poetry – part three begins with Joanna sitting down in her home in San Francisco, researching and writing. Although some scenes retreat to images of outside landscapes – especially flowers and vegetation – or short portions of a trip to Urbino and Pesaro (Italy), the main action throughout this

⁴¹⁸ "I stopped waiting for a letter, / and into the veil rent, / as through parted curtains / was the exact intellectual component / or the exact emotional opposite, / your cool laurel, the olive silver-green, / to compensate or off-set the reddest rose, / this enigmatic encounter." (41)

film remains confined to Joanna's apartment, where she alternates between reading and writing. Quite interestingly, it is just in this last part in which Jordan chooses to represent H.D.'s anguish and desperation over not receiving letters from the young man – using flashbacks in which Joanna paces nervously in hotel rooms, or hastily scans her mail looking for a letter from him. Instead of editing these images in part I, where they would parallel H.D.'s "Red Rose and a Beggar", they are introduced in the poem in which H.D. transforms the sadness she does not express – or even feel – into the essence of her creativity: "Rain falls or snow, I don't know, / only I must stumble along, grope along, / find my way; but believe me, / I have much to sustain me" (53).



Figure 36. Joanna writing in San Francisco

With the symbols of her passion for the man – the flowers and the candles she lit up to wait for him – presiding now her workspace, the poet remembers their story through her own poetry – "I did not realize my state of mind, / my 'condition' you might say, / until August when I wrote / *the reddest rose unfolds*" (49). Joanna's constant writing in this section emphasizes H.D.'s commitment to her "stylus, pen or pencil" (50). The centrality of poetry, of art, in this last part functions on two different levels; it foregrounds not only Joanna's own involvement with poetry – by that time she had written three poetry collections⁴¹⁹ – but also the film's very nature as an art product. The saturation that in part two forced the perspective of the filmmaker on the viewer – as the illusion of natural representation was broken – returns in this section to separate the main action – Joanna's writing – from the scenes that represent her memories. Emphasizing Jordan's role in the editing process, that is, in the creation of the finished product the viewer is witnessing, the film itself – as a product of Jordan's creativity – stands for H.D.'s *Hermetic Definition*; just as the poem represented H.D.'s conception

⁴¹⁹ *Wolf Eyes* (1974), *Extended Love Poems* (1978) and *Hard Edge* (1987).

of her relationship with a young man, *The H.D. Trilogy Film* can be seen as the filmmaker's elaboration – the baby in H.D.'s analogy – of Jordan and McClure's artistic relationship. In this light, a scene in part I in which Joanna is putting on make-up and Jordan films his reflection on the mirror – without her reacting in any way to his presence – can now in retrospect be analyzed as a reminder of the filmmaker's active, artistic, construction of the film.



Figure 37. Jordan filming Joanna

IV.3.3. Anne Waldman: The Performing Poet

“Drawing, diagrams, the thrust of documentary visual art to include the word, to parallel the new Orality, Oration.”

(Anne Waldman, “Hybrid,” *Outrider* 59)

In her essay “‘I Is Another’: Dissipative Structures”,⁴²⁰ Anne Waldman writes about the position of the speaking/writing “I” in poetry and performance. A long-time believer in the energy and power of words, Waldman describes the connection between her own body and the poem as such: “I enter into the field of the poem with my voice and body. The poem that in turn has manifested out of my voice and body. There is reciprocity of energy involved. Sometimes as I create the poem, I dance it. It moves through me.” (128) The source from which the poem comes is described as an external energy which the poet is able to access and shape. This shape, nevertheless, manifests to the poet in multiple forms – “the text appears as graph, script, sometimes resembling hypnagogic

⁴²⁰ Included in *Fast Speaking Woman: Chants & Essays* (1996).

writing. It often rushes on as energy pulse. It might come as an empathetic experience with a particular time, place, or being.” (129) The multiplicity of forms the poem takes in the process of creation manifests in Waldman’s work, firstly, in the poet’s commitment to performance and to the orality of poetry. As she writes in the same essay, performance “is a way to activate what needs to manifest and has been latent, abused, hidden. Power is invoked through being in touch with all the physical/psychic areas that have been previously unvoiced.” (135) Secondly, Waldman’s understanding of creativity as an energy that can – and many times does – materialize in different forms, attests to the poet’s connection with different art forms. As Waldman has put it, she is “always led by a certain heightened energy into text, and from text, which carries these patternings of [her] nervous system, into the presentation or performance.”⁴²¹ (*Vow to Poetry* 283) Seen as a supra-textual manifestation of the written word, this section explores Anne Waldman’s extension of poetry into film and video, a connection which, even if not as immediately linked the American Underground Film of the late 1950s and 1960s, still draws attention to the visual sensibility of Beat poetry.

The multidimensional qualities of much of Waldman’s poetry, as well as her appropriation of shamanistic,⁴²² mantra-like, forms of chanting and incantation, are elements that easily transition into film and video formats.⁴²³ In 1978, for instance, Waldman played “sister of mercy” in Bob Dylan’s *Renaldo and Clara*, a four-hour long film in which poetry had a leading role, and Waldman’s “Fast Speaking Woman,”⁴²⁴ with its ritualized orality, was part of the soundtrack. Similarly, one of Waldman’s first video projects – *Uh Oh Plutonium* (1982) – combines her poetry and political activism with the performance and visual properties of the video clip format, at a time when the music videoclip was still an emergent form. In *Uh Oh Plutonium* Waldman utilizes the

⁴²¹ Interview with Eric Lorberer, “I am a Poet who Is Driven by Sound.”

⁴²² In the introduction to *Manatee / Humanity* (2009) Waldman writes: “This poem takes its initial inspiration from a particular initiation/teaching – or *wang* (literally ‘empowerment’) – in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, with links to a pre-Vedic shamanic ritual, and from an encounter and meditation on the mysterious manatee, the endangered mammal of coastal waters, and the grey wolf, residing particularly in the western United States.” (i)

⁴²³ For simplicity’s sake, in this section I focus only on video and film, although Waldman has also collaborated with painters. An example of this is her collaboration with the painter Elizabeth Murray, creating poems that accompany Murray’s prints in a show entitled “Her Story: Prints by Elizabeth Murray.” In the following section, dealing with the poet ruth weiss, I focus more deeply into the connection between poetry and painting.

⁴²⁴ In *Nothing to Turn Off: The Films and Video of Bob Dylan*, Vince Farinaccio analyzes the role of poetry and music – both Dylan’s and others’ – in *Renaldo and Clara*. He sees Waldman’s poem as a way of symbolizing Clara’s freedom.

visibility of the commercial pop hit – she appears as the lead singer wearing a yellow one-in-all jumpsuit backed up by three dancing chorus girls – to denounce the radioactive contamination of the Rocky Flats Plant.⁴²⁵ Located in Boulder, Colorado – just a few miles from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics – the plant was built in the early fifties and started producing parts for nuclear weapons – concretely fission cores – in 1953. A series of accidents, which took place from 1957-1969, together with leakage produced by the normal activity at the plant, caused plutonium and other highly toxic chemical elements to pollute the plant and the surrounding area, extending even to populated areas of Denver. From the very first leakage of plutonium in the 1957 fire, the government issued no radioactivity warning, hiding the environmental hazard people were exposed to. After a second fire in 1969, civilian monitoring teams started to draw attention to the actual levels of radioactive contamination, resulting in an increased public awareness and the first protests and mobilizations to close the plant.

Anne Waldman, together with other poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, actively participated in the demonstrations,⁴²⁶ and has continued protesting over the years. In the essay “Warring God Charnel Ground (Rocky Flats Chronicles)” Waldman describes the history of accidents and mismanagement issues at the plant, as well as the different environmental and health problems the plant has caused and will continue to cause. As the poet writes, “[i]t is exceedingly difficult for the human system to flush out plutonium. Half of the original mass will remain in the body a century after its entry. ‘We’ll all be glowing for a quarter of a million years,’ I sang in protest on Rocky Flats premises in 1976.” (*Vow to Poetry* 232) In *Uh Oh Plutonium* Waldman expands this idea of “glowing with radioactivity” to connect the lyrics of the song with the visual effects offered by video technology. Extending the sentence “We’ll all be glowing for a quarter of a million years,” Waldman composes her song⁴²⁷ by listing the

⁴²⁵ The format of the commercial pop hit can also be seen as an ironic parallelism between the cheap commercialization of music and art and the commercialization of nuclear weapons notwithstanding people’s safety.

⁴²⁶ Footage of the demonstration, with Waldman and Orlovsky sitting down on the railway tracks to stop shipments to and from the plant, can be seen in the documentary *Fried Shoes, Cooked Diamonds* (dir. Constanzo Allione, narrated Ginsberg, 1979). At the demonstration Ginsberg read his poem “Plutonium Ode” (1978) and Gregory Corso read “Bomb” (1958).

⁴²⁷ The lyrics of “Uh Oh Plutonium” are an extended version of her poem “Plutonium Poem” (published in *New Directions* 36 1978). The video version changes the opening verse “Fuck Plutonium” of the poem for the softer “Junk Plutonium.”

unnatural, radioactive, glow parts of the human anatomy and other objects have acquired: “teeth glowing / microfilm glowing / pages of words glowing / underwear glowing,” or “nail and knuckles glowing / sore kneecaps glowing / ankles in despair / storm clouds glowing / hair follicles glowing / golden earlobes / the better to hear you with.”

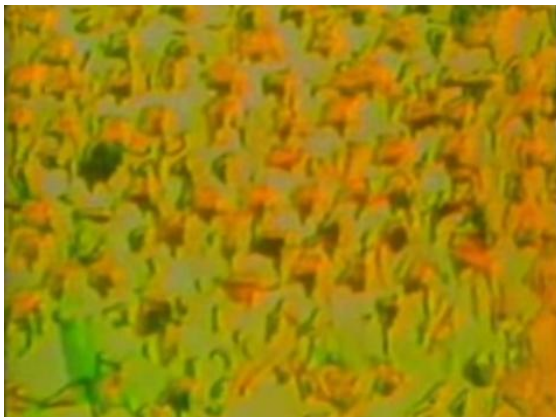


Figure 38. “Plutonium” line-up, glowing people and landscapes

Accompanying the glowing metaphor of the lyrics, the video shows different frozen images of crowds of people, landscapes, and buildings – such as the Taj Majal, the old Twin Towers or the World Trade Center – to which blue, green, red, violet and yellow fluorescent color filters are added in rapid changes that keep the beat of the music. In addition, the origin of this poem as a piece meant to be chanted or sung is described in the essay “Fast Speaking Woman and the Dakini Principle”, where Waldman writes that:

since the first publication of ‘Fast Speaking Woman,’ I’ve taught classes on shamanic and ethnopoetic literatures at The Naropa Institute, using, among other texts, Jerome Rothenberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred*, as well as Sabina’s

imaginative chants. The class one year tried out various enactments of words to create a force field of energy for protest demonstrations at Rocky Flats plutonium plant in Boulder. One evolved into an antinuclear work that was subsequently performed as a group piece. (41)

Using the oral energy of chanting translates in the song in alliterative rhythms and the repetition of incantatory verses through which the poet is empowered. Towards the end of the video – with the New York skyline seen from behind a graveyard – the poet looks directly into the camera as she walks towards it and sings: “I dedicate this day against megadeath / this Plutos wealth plus Archia rule / this rule of the wealthy / this Plutolotry / this worship of wealth / I spell away”. Drawing attention to the etymological connection between the chemical element and the God of the underworld, the poet appropriates the witch/hag position she strongly identified with in *The Iovis Trilogy* and other texts – as I have shown in the previous chapter – to cast a spell against the destruction force of those who benefit from the nuclear weapon industry. In the concluding lines – “mega mega mega mega mega mega mega mega death bomb / ENLIGHTEN!” – accentuated by the poet’s strong, deep, voice, Waldman opposes the radioactive glow of plutonium to the metaphorical enlightenment of social and political awareness.⁴²⁸ In this sense, Waldman’s approach to oration as a weapon to counterattack environmental and social issues echoes Ginsberg’s performative poetry; an appropriate example can be found in his own “Plutonium Ode” (1978):

I call your name with hollow vowels, I psalm your Fate close by, my
breath near deathless ever at your side
to Spell your destiny, I set this verse prophetic on your mausoleum
walls to seal you up Eternally with Diamond Truth! O
doomed Plutonium. (*Selected Poems 1947-1995* 311)

Like Ginsberg, Waldman wishes to enhance social critique through the power of her words. The video becomes in this context the medium through which to spread the message – and reach more people – at the same time that it complements her poetry

⁴²⁸ By the way, Waldman is still protesting against The Rocky Flats plant, in this case, arguing against the construction of a park on that ground, as she tells in a 2013 interview with Allan Flurry for “Unscripted.”

through the visuals. In what follows, I focus on Waldman's artistic connection with Ed Bowes, her husband and filmmaker, with whom she has collaborated in more than eight videos. Bowes, who has been writing and making videos⁴²⁹ for over three decades, has collaborated with poets and writers such as Bernadette Mayer, Robert Creeley, Eileen Myles, Clark Coolidge, Lisa Jarnot and the novelist Laird Hunt. In addition to this connection with poets, Bowes's visual work⁴³⁰ has a poetic quality of its own. Waldman has described it as follows:

He works with a small crew and with "actors" he calls "presenters." They are there to present the intelligence of an interiorized, almost sub-vocal language, as well as meditative states of mind. His scripts go against expectations of plot and yet provide coherent narratives, resembling experimental prose-poems. The attention to language is obsessive as he explores cognitive states and self-reflective layers of thinking, narration, temperament, as well as spatial, pictorial and emotional relationships between people themselves and between people and objects and landscapes....⁴³¹

One of Bowes's first collaborations with Waldman is the short video-poem *The Menage* (2003), which honors a poem with the same title by Carl Rakosi – the German-

⁴²⁹ His video *Romance* (1976) is one of the first full-feature-length narrative shot in video. Marita Sturken, in "Television Fictions: An Interview with Ed Bowes" (May 1986, *Afterimage*, Vol. 13, No. 10) writes that "Bowes was one of the first to think consistently in terms of creating works for television and making feature-length video stories. Bowes worked in and learned the craft of the film industry before starting to make tapes on his own, so his view of the relationship of television and video is necessarily different than that of many video artists. His perception of his relationship to the audience and his ability to manipulate them also stands in contrast to that of many artists, in large part because of the context in which he sees his audience. Bowes aims for the context of television, yet his tapes are narratives that would be startling and unusual television fare if shown on a commercial network." (n.p.n.) In this article Sturken analyzes Bowes' first films, which I leave out of my discussion to focus on those in which Waldman has collaborated.

⁴³⁰ Even while working with video, Bowes often refers to his tapes as films. In an interview, talking about his first feature movie, he said: "I wrote it as a movie, and even while shooting it on tape I imagined it as a film. But tape was cheaper and alluring; and I was very flexible. This was also the first time that I'd directed, and being able to see the final image on the spot gave me a kind of control that I wouldn't have in film." (Marita Sturken, "Television Fictions: An Interview with Ed Bowes") In this respect, Bowes's approach to T.V. as art parallels initiatives like "The Experimental Project" in which Kyger participated. On the contrary, Larry Jordan prefers film to digital video for exactly the opposite reasons: "Film always has one advantage. It slows you down. You can't make it in such a facile way as you can with digital equipment. Making digital films is not cheap. It costs nothing to actually shoot, but the equipment to make a good digital film costs a fortune. So you've either got to buy expensive stuff or you've got to pay expensive rental in postproduction." ("Jordan's Animated Journeys," interview by Doniphan Blair, August, 2013)

⁴³¹ "Infra-Consciousness: The Movies of Ed Bowes." *Vanitas* magazine, Issue 5, 2010.

born poet who was often associated with the Objectivist movement. Rakosi, who had drawn attention to the visuality of his poetry,⁴³² usually composed poems with short, humorous, lines. In the video – created for the poet’s 100th birthday – Bowes and Waldman recite – and sing – verses from “The Menage,” drawing from its very visual imagery of flowers and colors to complement the reading with images.⁴³³ Rakosi’s verses, “Up stand / six / yellow / jonquils / in a / glass / the stems / dark green, / paling / as they descend / into the water”, are accompanied by close-ups of out-of-focus flowers and stems, as well as realist portraits to back up verses such as “Enter monks. / Oops, sorry! / Trespassing / on Japanese space. / Exit monks / and all their lore / from grace”. The closeness of the camera to the objects it captures continues when a female figure enters the poem – “and in her smile / a fore-knowledge / of something playful, / something forbidden” – and is represented in the video through extreme close-ups. The blurry images, the extreme close-ups and the movement of the camera as it delineates the flowers form in *The Menage* an abstract visual representation that accompanies the poem rather than give it coherence in a traditional filmic sense.

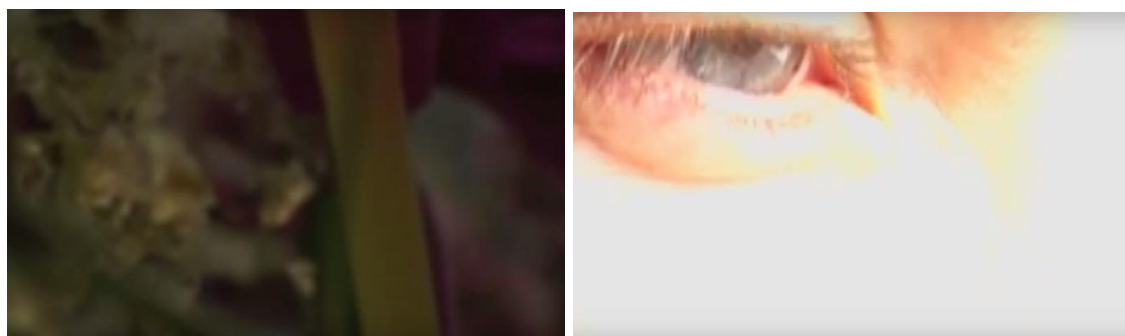


Figure 39. Close-ups of flower stem and girl’s eye

Another example of the poetic/visual collaboration between Bowes and Waldman is the short video *Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* (2004). This video is based on a poem written by Waldman in which she uses the metaphor of “colors of concealment,” that she explored in depth in *The Iovis Trilogy*,⁴³⁴ to denounce

⁴³² See, for instance, an interview conducted by Gary Pacernick, where Carl Rakosi comments: “I am a visual poet but I am also satirical at times and often meditative and those three sometimes clash, but that’s just being a human being.” (*Meaning & Memory: Interviews with Four Jewish Poets* 32)

⁴³³ The video begins with Waldman singing verses from “The Menage,” composed by quotes from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and from a nursery rhyme: “What makes you so fresh, / my Wife of Bath? / What makes you so silly, / o bright hen?” / “That’s for you to find out, / old shoe, old shoe. / That’s for you to find out / if you can.”

⁴³⁴ In the prologue to the complete Trilogy – entitled “Anew” – Waldman writes: “The title emboldened a feminist agenda toward further deterritorialization. The weapons that change colors and glint in the sun,

the torture and illegal U.S. imprisonment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. Uniting her efforts with organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, Waldman condemns the abuse of power through the association of colors – “This was a full blue gray jacket / this was a uniform of control / this was a working family / this blue line held work / the lone blue line held teal, held maroon”. The voices of Waldman, Bowes and a third, whispering, masculine voice, recite Waldman’s verses in canon, in homophony, and polyphony. As in *The Menage*, the images reinforce the poem, either by literally showing the words on screen, or by complementing the verses with abstract but colorful images that subtly suggest textures of the prison – grey of metal of fences, bars, chains or the greenish and yellowish of wet floors and walls:

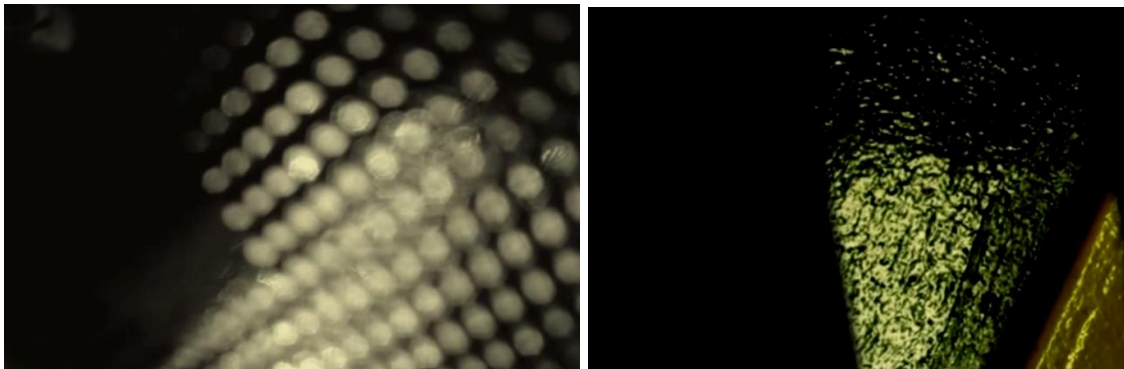


Figure 40. Color and texture⁴³⁵

Using as soundtrack music by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan – a Pakistani musician who collaborated with many western artists⁴³⁶ – and the Jazz of Don Cherry, *Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* juxtaposes the artistic collaboration between cultures with the fear and hate that led to the War on Terror. In addition, images of drawings⁴³⁷ with slogans in opposition to Iraq war – such as “no blood for oil” – situate the torture at Guantanamo in its political and economic context. The images, as the poem, express through nuances of color the torture and humiliation the detainees were subjected to: “this was an orange monkey suit / this was a lone white towel / this was a cup of water,

protective armor never enough and rarely arriving for the War Culture, the mechanisms that keep us from ourselves...that may only be studied by stateless-women-people.” (xiii)

⁴³⁵ These images match the verses: “that grey held a crown of subtlety” and “is it green? / the color of sunset, of straw?”

⁴³⁶ He collaborated, for instance, with Pearl Jam’s lead singer Eddie Vedder on two songs that were part of the original soundtrack of *Dead Man’s Walking* (dir. Tim Robbins, 1995).

⁴³⁷ George Schneeman’s art is also featured in the film, reinforcing the social critique. For an analysis of the collaboration of Schneeman with different poets – including Waldman – see *Painter Among Poets: The Collaborative Art of George Schneeman* (ed. Ron Padgett, 2004)

of dark gruel / this was a wire cage / this was not a colorful rug for prayer / cold...bare...ground”. Following a similar approach as in her video *Uh Oh Plutonium*, *Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* attests to the centrality of language and poetry in Waldman’s activism. In essays like “‘I Is Another’: Dissipative Structures,” the poet has alluded to the potential of language to be used as a weapon and to effect change in the world: “I am interested in the power language has, and particularly in how I use it out of this female body and awareness to change my own consciousness and that of the people around me. I enact language ritual as open-ended survival.” (*Fast Speaking Woman: Chants & Essays* 128)

Other moving-image collaborations with Ed Bowes include *Entanglement* (2009), *The Value of Small Skeletons* (2012) and *Grisaille* (2013). All of these videos, besides abandoning traditional modes of narration, share a preoccupation with the relationship between words and image and the relation between the mind, the imagination and reality. *Entanglement*, co-written by Anne Waldman and with poetry from Robert Creeley, Eileen Myles, and William Carlos Williams, starts with a conversation between two women about the position of words in relation to thoughts – “do events, phrases, sounds, short little sections, or practices, or series, sometimes run through your head, repeatedly?” Throughout the film, people recite poems aloud or read them to themselves – repeating verses as if memorizing them. In addition, books and sheets of paper are usually present near the four characters, as they negotiate, through the oral and written word, their connection to the physical world – “I was first considering physical space and placement...objects...distanced” states one character named “Glance.”

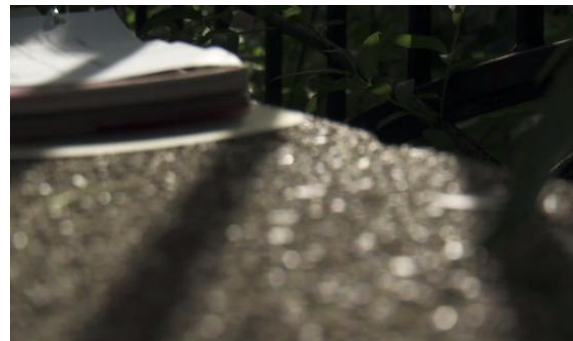




Figure 41. Writing, books and notes in *Entanglement*

Rather than communicating through direct conversation, in *Entanglement* Bowes and Waldman favor the use of short monologues in which the characters' thoughts weave an extended dialogue on the nature of thought processes, inner desires, and the words people use to express them. The entanglement of the title refers both to the interconnection between characters – there are glimpses of romantic and familiar connections – as well as to the complicated patterns formed between the characters' thoughts. The numerous close-ups of body parts – arms, feet, necks, eyes, etc – likewise add to the physical, sexual, “entanglement” of characters.⁴³⁸

The Value of Small Skeletons (2012), a work which was also co-written between Waldman⁴³⁹ and Bowes – with texts by poets Bin Ramke and Elizabeth Robinson, among others – similarly focuses on mind processes, in this case, on how we experience time, fiction and nonfiction. At the beginning of the piece, close shots of the protagonist's skin – named Merit – as well as her hands touching, pressing, skin, juxtapose the physical, sensorial, world with a mental understanding of it, as the main character meditates on “position, logic, emotion, language you don't speak, syntax, lexis, words, the shape it takes”, while moving her hands to explore the human form.

⁴³⁸ As Waldman notices in a review of the film: “Entwined logopoeic nuances of race and gender and genetics [...] and repetitive images of arms, legs, feet, hair, and odd angles of head and mouth mesmerize into a sea of erotics quivering under a surface of familial tension.” (*Vanitas Magazine*, Issue 5, 2010)

⁴³⁹ Lines from both *Entanglement* and *The Value of Small Skeletons* appear in Waldman's *Gossamurmur* (2013). *The Value of Small Skeletons* starts with a translation into Spanish of Waldman's “& Sleep, the Lazy Owl of Night” (poem included in *Fast Speaking Woman: Chants & Essays*), a poem that is also recited – this time in English – near the end of the film.



Figure 42. Bodies

As in *Entanglement*, words are pronounced with care, repeated, intoned with a poetic quality that is reinforced by the different layers of audio in the film – regular speech synchronized with the images, speech isolated from the ambient noise and the whispering voice of the protagonist. The characters speculate about the relationship between words and image – “words stored on paper, actions captured in pictures” – as well as on the connection between one’s imagination and language – “can one take a sentence, walk around in it, move it, rearrange it?” Furthermore, images of symbols from different alphabets, individual syllables and sounds pronounced by the protagonists, are used in this film to explore the relationship of language to reality and the imagination. The rearrangement – through techniques such as cut-ups – of texts such as Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, is another way in which the characters in the film approach the connection between time and thought, even if the effort leads nowhere – “volumes of books she had been referring to, in her endless investigation, that was going nowhere...pages and notes, notes...all useless. Looking into calibrations, but from where? and towards what?”

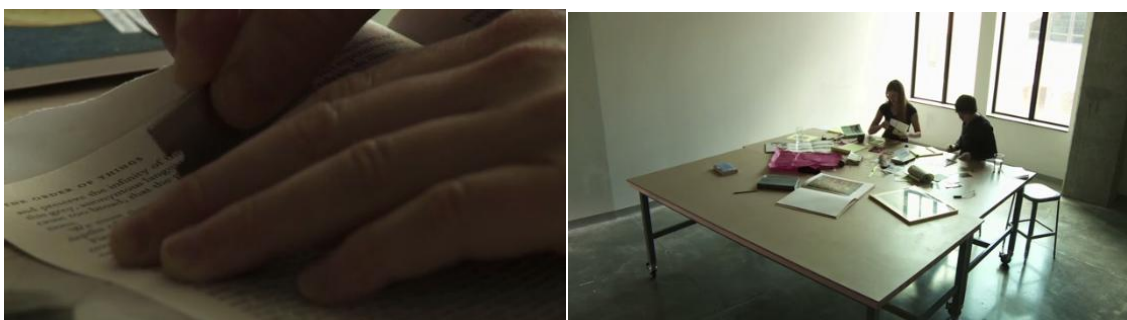


Figure 43. Dissecting Foucault’s and other texts

In *Grisaille* (2013), with poetry by Waldman herself and Robert Duncan, Bowes also favors a meditative contemplation of reality, dream and language. The term *grisaille* – alluding to a painting that is executed in different shades of, traditionally,

gray but also other colors like brown or blue – foregrounds an aesthetic association with painting found in Bowes’s latest work that is very present in this video – the filmmaker has stated that he “never start[s] a movie without looking at a lot of paintings just to have them in [his] head.”⁴⁴⁰ For *Grisaille*, he mentions the painters Willem de Kooning, Pablo Picasso and Pierre Bonnard as sources of inspiration for the colors and shapes in the film. This influence can be felt in the graininess and texture of some of the still images, in many of which, a bluish, gray, color predominates:



Figure 44. *Grisaille* portraits of the protagonists

In addition to the shades of grey that filter the representation of the five female characters – a color that often changes in intensity within the same scene – there is a stillness to the film that further emphasizes its painterly qualities. If in *Entanglement* – and to a lesser extent, in *The Value of Small Skeletons* – it was texts, poetry, books, scribbled notes, and similar, that dominated the filmic space, in *Grisaille* it is reproductions of paintings. At one point the narrator even seems to encourage the viewers to state their interpretation of a given painting – “if you look at it and make some specific notes, about what interests you in its content...now...I’ll walk away for a moment,” says one character while the image is frozen on Picasso’s painting “Boy Leading a Horse.” Even more contemplative than the previous two films analyzed, the

⁴⁴⁰ Conversation between Ed Bowes and Joan Schuman. Available at <http://www.trickhouse.org/php/ed-bowes-why-conversation>

characters in *Grisaille* rarely interact with one another physically, although they are closely linked through the narration – as they repeat the same lines and return to the same themes.

While these are just some examples of the collaborative work with film and video in Anne Waldman's body of work, in general these mediums are approached as an expansion or supplement to her own poetry and political concerns – as it is the case of *Uh Oh Plutonium* and *Mechanism in the Color of Concealment* – to the poetry of others⁴⁴¹ – *The Menage* – or, as the last three titles have shown, to more theoretical or meditative explorations of the connection between creativity, poetry and imagination. Whatever the approach, it is her poetry, and her position as one who works with words, what is emphasized in the end. Through these collaborations, as Waldman has stated in interviews, she puts her poetry in a creative dialogue with other disciplines, testing her work and its power: “For me personally there's also a delight in working with the boundaries and the magic you conjure in a recording studio or with the video process. I also appreciate the collaborative aspect – working with musicians, dancers, visual artists, engineers. There's an interesting give and take. I learn a lot about how my own work works with others through their responses, and that's reciprocated.”⁴⁴²

IV.4. Visual Arts in ruth weiss

In 1994, the New York University's School of Education organized the conference “The Beat Generation: Legacy and Celebration.” Including panels on the Beats and censorship and, more interestingly, a panel on women of the Beat Generation – with the participation of Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones, Jan Kerouac, Joanne Kyger and Anne Waldman – the conference was an important event that helped raise an unprecedented academic interest in the movement.⁴⁴³ As William Lawlor writes, “fifty years after the birth of the Beat movement on the Columbia University campus (116th Street and Broadway), the movement's founders, denounced by Columbia alumnus Norman

⁴⁴¹ Other short videos inspired by the poetry of others in which Waldman has participated include *Avalokiteshvara* (2011, video by Cordelia Brown, editing by Ambrose Bye), where she recites a poem by Reed Bye – her ex-husband – with a soundtrack by Fast Speaking Music, a collaboration with her son Ambrose Bye. Or *Akilah Oliver: 3 Readings* (dir. Ed Bowes, 2011), a tribute to the African American poet composed with Oliver's words and performances.

⁴⁴² “Interview with Joyce Jenkins” (*Vow to Poetry* 61).

⁴⁴³ Aldon Lynn Nielsen has complained about the lack of African American writers in the conference, stating that it “continued to marginalize black participation in and influence over racial movements in post-World War II writing.” (*Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* 80)

Podhoretz as ‘know-nothing bohemians,’ were being honored for their profound influence on American culture, only five miles from where the Beat Generation all began.” (*Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact* 259) In addition to the topics discussed in the panels, an exhibition presented in conjunction with the conference stressed the visual art aspect of the movement, an issue which remains, by and large, still unanalyzed. In *Beat Art: Visual Works by and about the Beat Generation* (1994), a short pamphlet summarizing the exhibition, Edward Adler and Bernard Mindich draw attention to the rich artistic atmosphere that surrounded the Beat as a literary phenomenon:

They [The beats] evolved in that great decade of ‘The New American Painting,’ fifty years ago, in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, fed by the open ended dynamics of European surrealism and Dada aesthetics. It was the decade of the Artist’s Club and the Cedar Bar, be-bop and improvisational jazz, and in 1944 Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs met in New York City.
(1)

While the importance of these art forms in the Beat community has often been undervalued,⁴⁴⁴ and Adler and Mindich rightly situate the Beats under their influence, the centrality of the masculine triumvirate to which they reduce the generation predicts the almost exclusive focus on male artists at the exhibition. Indeed, after alluding to some poets and writers who were also involved in the visual arts like O. Henry, Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde or Henry Miller, the authors move on to summarize the involvement with the visual arts – mostly painting and photograph – of Beat personalities such as Lawrence Ferlinguetti, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Michael McClure, Gregory Corso and Jack Kerouac, as well as more marginal names like Jack Micheline, Ted Jones and Jack Hirshman. Although the exhibit included some works by female artists, such as Stephanie Peek, Elaine de Kooning, or Kristen Wetterhahn,⁴⁴⁵ women – once again – were conspicuous by their absence.

A notorious absence in both the conference and the exhibition was the German-born poet Ruth Weiss. Hailed as “the goddess of the Beat Generation” by the San

⁴⁴⁴ While the connection between jazz and poetry has received greater attention, this is especially true of the painting/poetry dialogue.

⁴⁴⁵ A portrait of a young Allen Ginsberg by Carolyn Cassady, as well as pictures of Jack Kerouac and his mother taken by Ann Charters were also exhibited.

Francisco-based journalist Herb Caen, weiss has worked – and at 87 continues to work – with a plurality of artistic forms: she has authored more than fourteen poetry books, written and directed a film and participated in several, played and recorded poetry with Jazz, written more than ten plays and exhibited her water-color haiku paintings. As such, weiss embodies the artistic confluence of the 1950s and 1960s bohemia; as Randy Roark writes, weiss is “a woman who has lived as an artist for over 60 years, and whose many talents broke down the barriers between word, film, song, painting, and theatre.”⁴⁴⁶ In the following “artist statement,” which acts as a short biography and an artistic résumé of the poet, weiss herself draws attention to the multimedia approach of her poetry and work:

life is a moving picture. dates are a scramble. 1950 new orleans wore green hair
after viewing the antiwar film THE BOY WITH GREEN HAIR.⁴⁴⁷

1928 born in berlin. 1933 vienna. 1939 new york.

i've been on the run. i've been through flood. i've been though fire.

i love movies, i have made them. been in them – sometimes fiction, sometimes
fact.

return to vienna in 1998. return to that fire-thief prometheus.⁴⁴⁸

mid-fifties san Francisco. put poetry with jazz on stage.⁴⁴⁹ then come the plays.
three of them performed in vienna in 2006.

⁴⁴⁶ Review for *Can't Stop the Beat* (2011).

⁴⁴⁷ Released in 1948 this antiwar film was directed by Joseph Losey and starred Pat O'Brien, Robert Ryan and Barbara Hale.

⁴⁴⁸ weiss personal and poetical relationship with Prometheus will be dealt with in the following section.

⁴⁴⁹ For many, weiss is a pioneer in fusing poetry and jazz, which she started doing in Chicago in 1949 while living at the Art Circle. In “i always thought you black,” weiss describes this moment: “jam-sessions at the ART CIRCLE. from south chicago the / musicians. from north Chicago the musicians. it's jazz / black & white. in the clubs it is either black or white. / and poetry aloud. / ERNEST ALEXANDER long & brown listens to my poems. in my / black blue-bulb room. pulls me upstairs. sez now read / to these folks. they gotta hear this.” (17) In the introductory essay to *Can't Stop the Beat*, Horst Spandler sees weiss as “[q]uite likely the first one to experiment with the possibilities of merging the contemporary jazz style with poetry.” (xvi) He also discusses the popularity of the form as well as weiss lack of notoriety for her influence: “Reciting poetry to jazz music soon became a pretty common activity among poets, at least for a while, and it was called either ‘jazz canto’ or ‘poetry & jazz.’ Jack Kerouac, for example, published some records in this genre. Even readings by Kenneth Rexroth, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti [...] were recorded in The Cellar [North Beach bar where weiss read poetry with jazz every Wednesday during a period of time] It is almost symptomatic in this context though, that there are extensive liner notes on the record sleeve by the well-known jazz critic Ralph Gleason, but he does not credit ruth weiss with a single word as someone who paved the way, but instead portrays the two men as the big innovators.” (xvi)

oh 2006. the mayor hands me a bronze honor medal.⁴⁵⁰ i wonder if he ever read my books.

oh the books. fourteen so far. no big publisher but beautiful. some in the fort bragg library.⁴⁵¹

since 1965 every so often show my water-color-haiku.

show & tell. tell you a secret. i've barely begun. the movie goes on. since 1982 from albion.⁴⁵² (17)

Despite weiss's productive poetic career and extensive connections with the visual art world, her work is still rather unknown, having attracted scarce scholarly attention and being – in some of the cases – fairly difficult to locate. To redress this situation, this section focuses on weiss's connection with the visual art world from three different perspectives: the influence of visual art in her poetry – as a source of inspiration and also as an aesthetic method – her involvement with painting and theater as an extension of her poetry, and her contribution to film and video. Delineating ruth weiss's oeuvre through its connection with the visual arts – that as her artist's statement indicated permeates most of her creative life – allows me to map and analyze much of her work.

IV.4.1. On Poetry, Painting and Theater: Visual Arts in ruth weiss

“weiss's art throws a party for the senses. It invites the multimedia of jazz and other sounds – composed, improvised, found, and aleatory – painting, and film”
(Preston Whaley, *Blows like a Horn* 70)

In “i always thought you black,” (1993) a long poem in which weiss focuses on different black people in her life, the poet sketches through personal anecdotes, the way in which different art forms have influenced her work. Talking about the saxophonist John Handy, weiss writes: “JOHN first thought to be a painter. realized his media / in music instead. is that why his sounds hit me so / deep. most of those close to me are sculptors, painters. / my words carry pictures”. (*Can't Stop the Beat* 62) The importance

⁴⁵⁰ In October 2006 weiss was awarded with the medal of honor from the City of Vienna for excellence in cultural achievement during a festival that honored her work.

⁴⁵¹ Mendocino County Library in California.

⁴⁵² Statement included in *Mendocino Film Festival* journal, Take 3, May 29-June 1, 2008. Written on account of a projection of *ruth weiss meets her Prometheus* (dir. Frederick Baker, 2007), which I discuss in the following section.

of weiss's words lies, primarily, in her approach to Art as something that can be "realized" in different forms – here the verb has a double meaning: to become "aware" of one's media, but also to express one's creativity through a specific art form. This notion is best exemplified in her own work through a multimedia approach to art – poetry, painting, theater, film, performance, etc. – which she always sees as grounded in her poetry.⁴⁵³ Even if Handy left painting for music, weiss still "sees" pictures in his sounds; in much the same way, even when weiss is working with film, or with painting, one can still "read" her poetry. In addition, by stating that her "words carry pictures" and by emphasizing her affinities with visual arts like painting and sculpture, weiss draws attention to the connection between these forms and her poetry.

Like the poet Joanne Kyger, whose verses are often reduced to minimal units of meaning – distancing her poetics from the occasional verbal slippage caused by the influence of Kerouac's spontaneous prose⁴⁵⁴ – weiss's poetry condenses language in an attempt to get rid of less meaningful units. Nouns, and especially verbs,⁴⁵⁵ abound in her

⁴⁵³ "I always knew that I be a poet and not an author. All of my work the writing, performance, plays are rooted in poetry." ("they call me a beatnik poet: ruth weiss speaks to the editor," (*Full Circle* 166) The painter and filmmaker Carolee Schneemann defines in similar terms her multimedia approach to art: "I'm still a painter and I will always be in essence a painter....Painting doesn't have to mean that you're holding a brush in your hand. It might or it might not. It might be a camera. It might be a microphone. It might be your own body than when you go inside the frame and when you adjust your focus you see that the materiality of what you're working with might include yourself in a force field." (quoted in "Eye/Body: The Cinematic Paintings of Carolee Scheemann" by M. M. Serra and Kathryn Ramey, 103)

⁴⁵⁴ In *The Dharma Committee* (1986), a manifesto in which Kyger documents the ironic formation in 1958 of a literary group that sought to "bridge the gap between our Spicer group and the world of the Beat writer" (1), Kyger exposes many of her stylistic discrepancies with the Beats. In the "News Letter" section Kyger mocks the endless talk of the Beats, the stream of consciousness, anything-goes, dialogues that are closer to gossip than to literature: "Joe Dunn has been on vacation this week. Who was that girl we saw you with the other night, Joe. (Yak-yak-falling-down-flat-on-my-face-drunk-hair-afire-stark-naked-I'm-losing-my-mind) SHIELA (B.B.) (BIG BLACK) said she is Not pregnant. But she was still wearing a maternity dress the other night. (Talk talk talk yak yak is that all you ever do?) YES." (5) In much the same way, she mocks the empty stream-of-consciousness in "DHARMA COMMITTEE NEWS LETTERS # 2": "J. Dunn wants an untrained nurse, but I, J. Kyger, cannot understand this and R. Fitzgerald made no comment whatsoever except that we are all puritans, but this was later on to Jack Spicer about something else and is of course completely irrelevant but I just felt like, J. Kyger, rambling a bit since it does strengthen the unconscious vowel sounds." (6) In its ironic and satiric style, as well as in the different sections it is divided into, Kyger's *The Dharma Committee* is closely related to Bob Kaufman's *The Abomunist Manifesto* (1958), where he similarly mocks the literary and social phenomenon through a false manifesto.

⁴⁵⁵ In a personal interview with the poet, which took place at Mythos Fine Art Gallery, in Berkeley (California), July 10th 2015, weiss stated that she prefers verbs because "they're action, they're movement. They create dimensions. Whereas a noun is more like an object, and it stays in one place. You have a noun and you see a picture you take a noun and you make it into a verb, you can see movement on many levels."

poetry, often isolated from adjectives, adverbs or determinants which Weiss avoids as much as possible, or even modifies to turn them into what she needs them to be – in her poetry adjectives become nouns, nouns become verbs, prepositions turn into nouns.⁴⁵⁶ The way she plays with the English language, in the context of her German native language, can be analyzed as the celebration of the freedom she attaches to the language in which she emerged as a poet, a crafter of words.⁴⁵⁷ But there is more to it: unlike German, whose rules Weiss sees as strict and confining – she spells her name in low caps in opposition to the German language capitalization of all nouns – English is, as she wrote for an introductory speech for a class she taught at the *Schule für Dichtung* in Vienna, “[her] favorite language for writing [...] because it is a new + crude language. therefore its rules are riddled with exceptions – unlike older tongues that make for rigid tradition.”⁴⁵⁸ In this speech, the poet also encouraged the students to trust their own voice, to avoid “explaining” in poetry when they can “show”, and to have things happen in poetry: “take out unnecessary repeats that explain. repeat those lines or words that ask to be repeated. like jazz – not to explain – have it happen. elaborate, announce – or whatever – after the fact.” (n.p.n)

Painting and sculpture – as well as other art forms – in their immediate visuality, become for Weiss examples of the ability of art to “show” rather than “explain” and, in the context of her poetics, they become not only sources of inspiration, but also aesthetic modes to express her poetic vision. In this section, I look at three ways in which this influence materializes in her poetry. Firstly, I look at some poems that act as direct responses to visual arts works like painting, sculpture, and lightshows. Secondly, I move on to poems that in their visual representation of women – mainly artists and poets – stand for paintings or poetical portraits. While these subsections serve to situate Weiss’s interest in the visual arts and her approach to the different forms through her poetry, in the last part of this section I explore Weiss’s own involvement with the visual arts through painting and theater.

⁴⁵⁶ See, for instance, the following excerpt from *Blue in Green* (1960): “rock the many / ocean / one to still each / again-wave / to sand and sand / of spinning / wind-from / the storm is now / zig / the lightening / zag / side on side / and whale-clouds / spout the sky to sea.” (3)

⁴⁵⁷ Her first poem, nevertheless, was written in German at the age of 5.

⁴⁵⁸ Introductory speech for a class she taught at the *Schule für Dichtung* in Vienna, archived at Bancroft Library in UC Berkeley, California.

Painting, Sculpture and Lightshows: Poem as a Response

“i enter the paintings of Marianne Hahn and give voice to them in three languages” (1953), a series of poems weiss wrote inspired by paintings, is an early example of the way in which visual art has had a direct impact on her poetry. Marianne Hahn was an abstract and portrait painter who was introduced to weiss when the poet was in her early twenties through a mutual friend because of their common history of escaping Nazism. Unlike weiss, who managed to escape with her parents just in time,⁴⁵⁹ Hahn was in a concentration camp and was “given a number,” as weiss recalls.⁴⁶⁰ The painter was in her late eighties when weiss met her; they spent several afternoons together in which weiss would often read her the poems she had written. Since unfortunately none of Hahn’s paintings are locatable,⁴⁶¹ weiss’s poems offer an insight into what may probably be lost artwork by now. Conceived as “homage to [Hahn’s] alchemy,”⁴⁶² (unpaginated) as weiss writes in the prelude to the last poem in the collection, the poems transcend a two-dimensional description of the paintings in favor of a more complex approach in which the images are transformed and reshaped in its new art form: weiss’s poems. For instance, while some of the poems describe more or less static images – “still / is a mountain – shadow / trees / voice wind / and a sand –flanked dwelling / is content” – in general the poems expand a physical and emotional movement located within or sparked by the paintings. As a response to Hahn’s paintings, some of the poems reproduce weiss’s process of “seeing”: “haunted / i stream forth / thought – caught / in a vapor – vice / of vision.” Notions of vision not only affect weiss as the one contemplating the paintings, but also those captured within Hahn’s portraits who now, through weiss’s poetry, are reproduced as looking “beyond” the canvas:

⁴⁵⁹ This story is best shown in her poem “Single Out” – her refugee story – which was written in 1958.

⁴⁶⁰ In the second volume of the five-hour long interview weiss did for the Holocaust Oral History Project (1993), the poet says that Hahn “showed [her] her number,” and although they did not talk much about that part of their past, they knew they shared a story. In this interview she also draws attention to the poem she wrote to Hahn in *Gallery of Women* – a collection I analyze in the following subsection – where she writes of the disillusionment Hahn suffered in the last years of her life: “a death-camp could not kill her / at sixty it was still a long long / time a country hard and cardboard / made her sadder / when she died it was time” (n.p.n.).

⁴⁶¹ This means none, of course, that I have been able to locate. In a personal interview with weiss she stated that she did not think the paintings “ever went anywhere” – as far as exhibitions or similar events go – and also drew attention to the difficulty of reproducing works in those days, which has caused many art to be lost.

⁴⁶² All poems in this collection are unpaginated.

entwined
 in ivy – vines
 in twisted willfulness
 he gazes
 THROUGH ---
 the prophet

In a different poem, a clown is portrayed as “curled / in [its] centered seeing,” and what the clowns senses fuses with weiss’s own vision and her sensorial depiction of the paintings: “sensing the sorrow / sensing the comic / sensing the cosmic.” The poems, then, “give voice” to the paintings as far as they open up a dialogue between weiss’s contemplation of the paintings and the paintings themselves; a contemplation that, in any case, is not unerringly equated with seeing, but with an extended, sensorial, perceptual response to the paintings. Ultimately the poems celebrate the artistic and intellectual communion between the two women, as well as the process by which creativity takes or, to go back to the example of the musician John Handy, is realized in different forms: “those golden afternoons in San Francisco / the sound of fog – horns / while we put thoughts into words into images / when you died at 89 / i was 25.”

Just as painting, the influence of other visual arts like sculpture, decorative or utilitarian crafts and other historical artisanal artifacts, is also felt elsewhere in weiss’s poetry. For instance, the poem “Richard Yaski, his Sculpture” (1990) – honors the work of the Mendocino Coast artist Richard Yaski, a metal sculptor whose contribution was essential for the creation of the Shibui Sculpture Garden in Little River, Mendocino. The Japanese term *shibui* refers to a specific aesthetic in which outward simplicity and subtlety or economy of form are valued over complexity or abundance – even if the subtle details show a conceptual or artistic richness. All of these aesthetic elements can be applied not only to Yaski’s sculptures, but also to weiss’s overall poetics.



Figure 45. Yaski's "Circle of Six"

weiss's poem, printed with a reproduction of Yaski's "Circle of Six", revolves around the power of the artist to give shape to an idea or feeling – "through the frame of one's mettle / a search from the heart made tangible"⁴⁶³ – and the creative process through which the simplest of elements – in this case the point – is transformed into a complete work of art: "the point become line become circle / wheels what was into what will be / reflects as is." This poetical response to Yaski's sculpture echoes weiss's long poem *Desert Journal*⁴⁶⁴ (1977) – written between 1961-1968 – in which the inner journey through the desert often leads the speaker through changing landscapes in which forms transmute, evolve, and turn on themselves in the desert's endless cycle of death and re-birth or, more to the point of weiss's poetry, of destruction and creation. The first verses of "Fifteenth Day", for instance, display the creational power of the mind:

point-period-dot

⁴⁶³ UC Berkeley Archive.

⁴⁶⁴ In addition to the visuality of *Desert Journal*, the drawings included in the collection by Paul Blake point to an example of the synchronicity weiss firmly believes in. While the images were not drawn for the collection, they apparently belonged together and brought the two artists together. In the following interview, weiss relates this story: "ruth: "when Paul and I met I was working on *Desert Journal*. And at the Post Office...(laughs) The book was published in 1977 and Paul's drawings are also in the book. Everybody thinks these drawings were done for the book. The drawings were done before we even met. And that's part of our romance..." ("Four Thousand Years of Romance: an Interview with ruth weiss / PAUL BLAKE / ruth weiss /PAUL BLAKE /ruth weiss", *Mendocino Art Center/Arts & Entertainment Magazine* 8, May, vol. vii, no. 4, 1983 8-13).

the desert-wanderer comes to a stop
the journey a line begun
as a dot
as a dot become

recall makes vanish
a dervish-dance
devised to spin one to a point
where quests & discovery
end at a period
that lasts until the line of the journey
forms once more (n.p.n.)

In weiss's poem the point becomes the elemental creative unit of Yaski's sculpture, giving shape to the whole piece. Delineating the movement from point, to line, to circle – just as the dot in *Desert Journal* that becomes a line and shapes the path of the wanderer – weiss interprets the sculpture as opening up paths: “we've come to the last gate / IT IS OPEN!”

The poem devoted to Yaski's sculpture is by no means an exception. The first section of *South Pacific* (1959) consists of twenty-two short poems which seem to be direct responses to pieces of craft and other artifacts exhibited a museum.⁴⁶⁵ Indeed, the titles of the poems – if not the way they were labeled in the exhibition – are explicit descriptions of the different objects, such as “ANCESTOR FIGURE,” “PAINTED BARK CLOTH,” “SUSPENSION HOOK WITH BIRD FORM,” OR “TURTLE-SHAPED PLATTER.” Correspondingly, some of the poems are graphic descriptions of the objects, like “BOWL WITH CARVED FIGURES AS HANDLES,” which describes the object as “smooth sensuous / without a nob / held taut / by the male and the female / held tensioned / and flowing.” (n.p.n.)⁴⁶⁶ In the vast majority of the poems the presence of the poet as the one interpreting the pieces of art disappears, allowing the poem to

⁴⁶⁵ In an essay entitled “Creative Writing Life” Waldman encourages direct exposure to other art forms as means to creativity: “Write while you listen to music. Any kind. / Write on top of a classic movie. Appropriate the language. / Stand and write in front of a painting or sculpture in a museum for half an hour.” (*Vow to Poetry* 299)

⁴⁶⁶ All the poems are unpaginated.

become the medium through which the objects are granted a voice. Through this technique, the objects are able to tell their own story, like the “DRUM BASE FIGURE” which through the poem expresses its wish to keep making music and telling stories – “i want the earth to listen / i want the earth to hear / i want the earth to know.” Other poems, like the “MUSUMUSU’ CANOE PROW FIGURE” express the fear of failing in the task they are supposed to perform – “i pray / i will not sink / and clench / the head / that hold me.”



Figure 46. Canoe prow figure head,⁴⁶⁷ Museum Fine Arts Boston

Once the objects speak for themselves, they are able to challenge the historical appropriation committed by museums, as well as the position of the visitor who confronts the objects in a decontextualized space in which they cease to have a function or purpose, being merely valued for their historical or aesthetic worth. Such is the case of the “INCISED CLUB” which, now useless, and simply attractive to the eye, still reclaims its nature as a weapon: “i am beautiful / simple / but beware / my embrace.” In much the same way, in “DAGGER SHAPED AS BIRD” the recontextualization of a weapon into a work of art causes the object to doubt its very essence: “a fear-bound / clawing pelican am i / would you say / that i am / dangerous?” The poem “TALE’ CARVED DOOR JAMB,” likewise challenges the readiness or availability of the stories “told” by objects in museum. The quotation marks of the “tale” of the title contrast with the actual lack of information the carved door offers – “my ridges / design / to shut / the world / out.” Quite the contrary of what one would hope to find in a museum, this door refuses to let us in.

⁴⁶⁷ Small figures like this one – representing spirits who protected men from danger – were tied to the prows of canoes.

In this collection, the poems seem to be “received,” with weiss acting as an intermediary from which to give them expression. A story told in “i always thought you black” (*Can’t Stop the Beat*) – thematically closely related to the first section of *South Pacific* – follows a similar approach. In section XII, which starts with the poem “Africa,” weiss relates through the use of analepsis and prolepsis – flashbacks and flashforwards – the story of this poem in two different spatio-temporal settings.⁴⁶⁸ The first part describes a visit “sometime in ‘59” (43) to a museum⁴⁶⁹ in which she saw an exhibition with “small sculptures from Africa. / and masks.” (43) In a language reminiscent of the process she followed with Marianne Hahn’s paintings, weiss writes:

i enter. the pieces begin to loom larger & larger
 their shadows touching one another. weaving the story.
 TELLEM. KENYAH-KEYAN and on.
 BAKONGO BAKOTA YORUBA BENIN.
 they begin the one story. the story goes on. i’m in the
 room. the room is gone. (43)

In “Africa,” weiss goes through the African tribes and region mentioned above – among others – to construct a kind of loose creation myth inspired by the sculptures and masks she sees at the museum. In the foreword to an edition of the poem published by The Bancroft Library Press,⁴⁷⁰ weiss described her method as follows: “i move from piece to piece. each gives me a poem. then go around again. this time to record the names of origin. on a separate sheet. that night at home. i spread out the poems. i spread out the names. weave them into a story using the names as sound.” (n.p.n.) More than a coherent or didactic account following a traditional narrative line, weiss’s myth is constructed through symbolic and sensorial connections to the objects she sees. Starting with the animation of nature – “earth-mouth-fire / tooth / out of the river-mouth / eye /

⁴⁶⁸ The story begins with the poem, written in 1959, then jumps to a conversation which took place in 1967 in a bar in North Beach, only to take the reader back to the moment in which she wrote the poem, to eventually go back to 1967, where the full context of the previous conversation is provided. Such flexible, essentially filmic temporality, frequent in weiss’s longer, narrative, poems, make the words from her artist statement ring true: “i love movies, i have made them. been in them – sometimes fiction, sometimes fact.”

⁴⁶⁹ “the museum in golden gate park,” (43) she writes in the poem. It was, in fact, the de Young Fine Art Museum of San Francisco.

⁴⁷⁰ The edition also includes two drawings by weiss – probably made while taking notes at the museum – one of a mask and the other of a tool with spears.

as sun to sun” (37) – the poem moves on to animals and their connection with nature, and finally to the origin of human life: “13 birds turn / rope is iron / 14 split his wing / became king.” (37) weiss continues with the description of the attributes of this king, most notably, his “beak of bird inside” (38) – a common symbol which represents the connection between man and bird, the latter symbolizing the soul. Noteworthy in the poem are also the descriptions of different animals; while sometimes weiss seems to simply enunciate what she sees – “2 crocodiles / 3 crocodiles / 5 upon the wooden gate” (38) – other times she elaborates the descriptions into condensed stories – “that bird / his father-duty done / returns to his / euphoria tree.” (39) Other depictions of objects include the animal mask, which “gives eyes / to the back of the head,” (40) or the “monkey hold the vessel / to be filled” (41), which weiss uses as a bridge to connect to her own situation: “what will fill my bowl / what will fill my fate” (42). Near the end of the poem, weiss refers more explicitly to the connection created between the African sculptures and masks and whoever is confronted with them:

look deep

look deep

as water speak

rich clay rich mud

old moon

new flame (42)

Looking deep into the clay and mud with which the sculptures were created, and letting the objects tell their story, weiss manages to make the “old moon” of their history spark a “new flame” in the form of her poem.⁴⁷¹ However disconnected and fragmentary weiss’s story might seem to be, a jump in time to an event which took place in 1967, when weiss met a South African dancer⁴⁷² and read him her poem, functions in the story as an assertion of the power of those objects to efficiently tell their story. The moment in the museum in which the room disappeared while she was “receiving” the story is reproduced in the reading of the poem:

⁴⁷¹ In “i always thought you black” she writes that she completed the poem after watching a Telenews with a special program on Denmark and Africa – “i cry with the colors. the shape / of a bird enters the poem. the poem is done. but not the story.” (43)

⁴⁷² In the 2003 edition published by The Bancroft Library Press she writes in the foreword that he was “the manager of a dance troupe performing in the city [San Francisco].” (unpaginated)

i'm in the poem now. the words sing out. is this my voice.

his eyes are closed. i hear a car park. i hear my heart.

very loud. he opens his eyes. filled with tears. then

his voice. from far away.

but that is the story of my village. how do you know this.

it was given me. (45)

This story stresses weiss's understanding of poetry as capable of building a "bridge across continents" (46) as well as her long-held belief in the synchronicity of apparently unrelated events.⁴⁷³ The dancer, sensing the connection of weiss's poem to the history of his native land, "slowly removes his tiger-eye ring. / from his finger / places it on" (45) weiss's, telling her: "this is for you. it will help your work go out."⁴⁷⁴ (45) The energy captured in weiss's "Africa" – energy first borrowed from the ancient objects at the museum – erupts while she reads the poem to the dancer, actualizing its meaning and culminating in the ring as a symbol of the artistic communion and an amulet for her poetry.

While both *South Pacific* and "Africa" deal with the connection between ancient objects and the present bridging the gap through art, weiss's poetry was also influenced by more contemporary forms of visual art.⁴⁷⁵ Her collection *Light and other Poems*

⁴⁷³ The synchronicity aspect of the poetry is very present in *Desert Journal*, especially when weiss reads and performs the poems. Before the reading, weiss would always ask the audience to "call out a number" – referring to the 40 days in which the poem is divided – and then she would read the poems selected. This process not only draws attention to the improvisational nature of her performances, but also attests to the poet's belief in the synchronicity of events. An introductory poem to the collection reads: "flame & cloud / things with wings / call your number / read your day / see if it talks to you alone / like stone or bone / in sand" (n.p.n.). As Fred Pietarinen writes this is "sometimes called synchronism or 'synchronicity' & is related to the belief that randomness has its own particular logic. The linkages between a given poem & its number in the sequence are uncovered in the person who 'calls' a given number & it is ruth's belief that if the 'caller' is receptive enough the poem will speak with specific resonances to that person alone & this has something to do with the nature of time itself, not that its organic flux can be pinned down by a number, but that the number serves as a symbol of the bridge between what is hidden & what is known, what is specific to the individual and what is universal." ("ruth weiss, 'A New View of what Matters'" 15)

⁴⁷⁴ A ring that was, as weiss tells in the poem, later stolen by her husband: "ROY the second husband the junkie the con. / ROY stole that ring. knew what it meant. / today i reclaim it in the telling." (46)

⁴⁷⁵ In an interview conducted by Nancy Grace, weiss commented that she also wrote poems in response to films: "there was a movie theater called The Vogue that showed these new films. The Vogue still exists;

(1976) includes a series of poems in response to lightshows by the visual artist Elias Romero. The liquid lightshow, and art form that became very popular in the mid 1960s with the rise of the psychedelic rock culture, can be traced back to its origin as an expansion of Abstract Expressionism, a visual aesthetic which, together with art nouveau or surrealism, was very influential in the counterculture.⁴⁷⁶ Elias Romero, a Bay Area artist who is often referred to as the godfather of lightshows,⁴⁷⁷ conceived the technique in order to explore the possibility of combining movement with painting. Thomas Albright has commented how Romero, together the painter Bill Ham – with whom he collaborated – first saw the lightshows “as a form of kinetic painting, a way of making Abstract Expressionist painting move. But they soon explored the possibilities of incorporating more explicit imagery and symbols, adding rotating color discs and slide projections to their battery of techniques.” (*Art in the San Francisco Bay Area* 170) In addition to the connection with Abstract Expressionism,⁴⁷⁸ the lightshows are also linked – both in aesthetic and in collaboration – with the Beat Generation. Besides the emphasis on improvisation, many of the lightshows were accompanied by jazz music aiming, in some cases, to a synchronicity between the images projected and the rhythm or intensity of the music. In *Swinging City*, Simon Rycroft writes that the:

Lightshows developed [...] as very much part of the Beat era, and were characterized by the same kind of free form modern jazz improvisations favoured by the Beats. Indeed an even earlier [than Jordan Belson and Henry

it's in San Francisco. I lived on nothing. I had no way to pay the two-dollar entrance, so I phoned The Vogue to talk to the manager, representing myself as a reviewer. I didn't do reviews, but I wrote poems in response to the films.” (*Breaking the Rule of Cool* 62)

⁴⁷⁶ Because of the transitory nature of lightshows, which in their ephemeral nature are closer to performance than to paintings, tracing its origins can be tricky. As Simon Rycroft writes, “Lightshow performances, their history and aesthetics are exceedingly difficult to trace. With the notable exception of a few pieces housed in the IOTA centre in Southern California, they tend not to be collected together and archived. They were by definition transitory, of the moment and all in the mix, so it is perhaps not surprising that this is the case.” (*Swinging City: A Cultural Geography of London 1950-1974* 146) While there are not many slides or pictures of Romero's lightshows, an example of his lightshows can be seen in three films he directed, *Stepping Stones*, *Za* and *Lapis Lazuli*, now available in DVD through the Center for Visual Music store.

⁴⁷⁷ In *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (2005) Charles Perry refers to Romero as “the real Johnny Appleseed of light shows”. (68)

⁴⁷⁸ Peter Mays – member of the 1960's lightshow group Single Wing Turquoise Bird – has similarly emphasized the connection between the lightshows and Abstract Expressionism: “I see the whole history of visual art in one historical progression and the light show occupies a very crucial position in that line. It seems that the spirit of Abstract Expressionism has been distilled into a pure form in the light show; sort of carrying on the tradition while at the same time transforming it into something more universal.” (quoted in Eugene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* 396)

Jacob] San Francisco lightshow was devised by Elias Romero, using liquid projectors and film to create an environment for Beat performance. (149-150)

In this light – no pun intended – weiss’s collection can be seen as an example of the connection between Beat poetry and this form of visual art. Written in the dark in seven sessions which took place on seven consecutive Sundays at Elias Romero’s house,⁴⁷⁹ weiss’s poems follow no clear structure besides the division of each poem per session attended – some sessions are further divided into different responses.⁴⁸⁰ As with “Africa,” in which a visual input provokes in weiss a specific poetic response, *Light* also seems to call for its own shape. In a personal interview with the poet (July 2015), weiss commented how, on the eighth Sunday she arrived at Romero’s house, she told him: “I’m finished with my poem so I don’t need to look at it [his lightshow],” to which Romero replied: “I was just finished with what I was going to show you.” Similar to the story told by the sculptures and masks in “Africa,” the poems in *Light* also follow their own logic and structure, demanding being told in their own way.

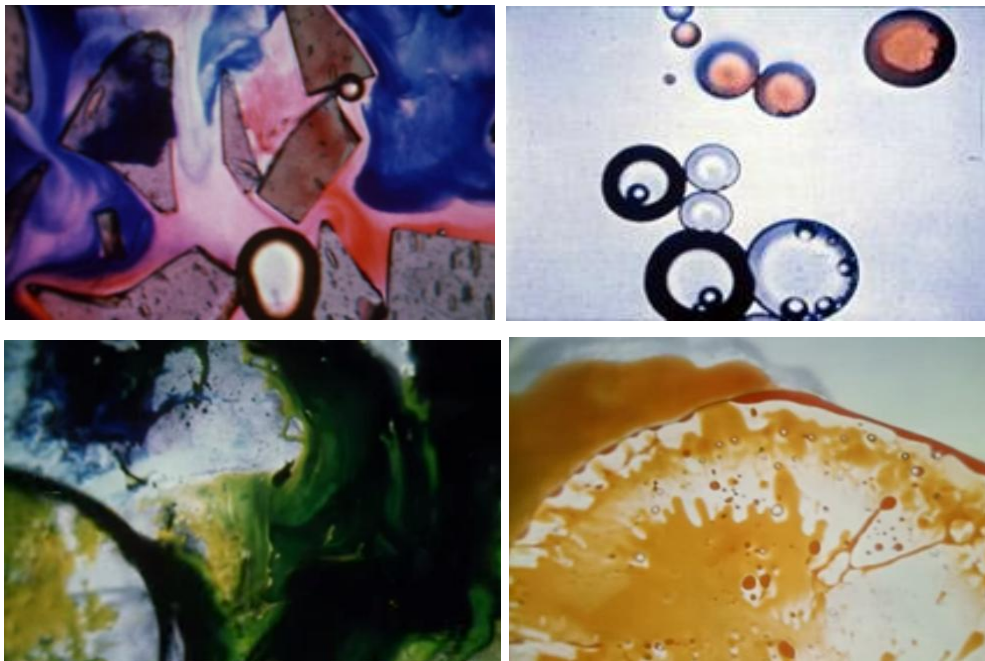


Figure 47. Stills from Romero’s *Stepping Stones*

⁴⁷⁹ Alice Echols, in her biography of Janis Joplin, writes that “Romero was living in a funky house on Pine Street managed by Bill Ham, a painter. The two began collaborating and by the spring of 1965 Ham was presenting light shows in his Pine Street basement, sometimes to classical music and sometimes with a group of jazz musicians from an after-hours club around the corner.” (*Scars of Sweet Paradise* 106)

⁴⁸⁰ For instance, while session one produced just one poem – entitled “ONE” – session two is divided into “TWO A,” “TWO B” and “TWO C.”

Like the lightshow itself, the poems in *Light* are composed through loose forms and images suggested by the changing colors and shapes of the show; these forms do not necessarily acquire precise shapes or provoke distinct emotional responses on the poet, although sometimes that is the case.⁴⁸¹ Throughout the collection weiss favors short lines – as short as one word or syllable – which emphasize the fast changing images projected in the lightshow. “ONE,” for instance, begins like this: “the wait / ZING / in a strum of past / the heart is / bird / beak / point / and stretch wing man / the wing in a heart / the eye / dawn & night / the is & is / of fire-love / bird gone.” (25) The rapid-changing image of a bird – suggested through details of its anatomy – is soon metamorphosed into a bird/man who, as the color green invades the screen, turns into or is placed into a forest – “green is stretching wonder / in an original forest / wild rose running”. (25) In much the same way, just as weiss records the shifting images, her poem also illustrates the changes in colors and nuances of light used to accentuate or decrease intensity of the color:

it is morning
and leaves run red
blister blister yellow
is spread to naked next to
when the inundation is
and inundation
spread slowly to the light
in a lemon-sky
of hot hot now-season (27)

Charles Perry has written that “each light artist had a distinct approach. Romero was known for brilliance and saturation of colors in his all-liquid shows. [Bill] Ham, like Romero, came from an abstract expressionist background and liked working with

⁴⁸¹ In an interview conducted by Patrick Grizzell, weiss states that *Light* is “not exactly language poetry, but it may have some of that seeming incongruous words thrown together. I think it’s part of my Germanic background that ultimately the whole thing has to make sense. Maybe I’m doing a Dada thing, opposite. Instead of trying to splinter it apart, I’m trying to take these dichotomies of words and throw them together and make them actually cohesive.” (*The Tule Review A Literary Quarterly*, Spring & Summer 1994, Special Prose Issue 4)

jazz musicians so the lights and the music could be a combined improvisation.” (*The Haight-Ashbury: A History* 69) weiss not only considers the different tones and intensities of color but, interestingly, also equates the first session of the lightshows with a creation myth; half way through “ONE,” the paths created by the leaks and streams of paint become in the poet’s eyes rivers that shape new life: “rivers flow / imprint rocks / from too long ago / to know / and yet they tell / imprint of origin.” (26) In much the same way, with images reminiscent of her poem “Africa,” weiss sees in the forms projected on the screen the story of evolution:

fish from cell
to sea-thing
to bird
to tree
to animal not-yet

live low
below the sun
it is dark now

in the begin
evolving world (26)

In the context of poems written as direct responses to lightshows – an art form which by nature is spontaneous or, at least, executed on the spot – the recurrent metaphor of birth and creation in *Light*, besides serving as a connecting thread between the poems, simultaneously addresses the notion of poetic creation; her poem is, as the lightshow, being created on site. In the poem “TWO A,” weiss keeps developing the evolution story – “mad eyes / egg of dinosaurs / worlds darkening / blot out” (29) – interpreting the rapid changes in light as a powerful creation force: “fear not / if the sudden light-center / glows to birth” (29). As if her own consciousness had now become aware of itself after creation, from “TWO C” onwards, the presence of the speaker, as well as the addressee “you” the speaker refers to, become much more discernible. They are, in any case, very volatile presences which appear – as the colors and shapes of the lightshow – in constant state of flux. In “TWO C,” the interaction between the two

sparks an undefined action: “i smile / you smile / it is begun in a smile / the eye & heart / to you whoever / i you / it may be / maybe there are others too” (34). And in “FOUR A” weiss foregrounds the role of the speaker as the one emotionally responding to the lightshows: “hover-sun / animal-cracker-vision / when thought begins / in meeting itself / swallow your vision / take me away now” (39).

In *Light* weiss not only illustrates the rapid changes in shapes and colors but also, in poems like “FIVE A”, draws attention to the texture that was added to the painting through the use of glass and other materials⁴⁸² – “before night / is wondrous green / and light soars / stars & stars / are looking down / upon the stone-carved / broken splinter glass / and bubble bubble glass” (44). Once again, these images are loosely linked to experience of the speaker or viewer, as they appear to her “trembling to be recognized” (44). Nevertheless, even if the images seem to be directed to the speaker of the poem – “the bird squat / one tear & quiver all resolve / to frenzy on my eye world” (50) – this “I” is far from a stable entity, but rather changes and dissolves as fast as the images themselves; in “SIX A” the speaker is “a 1000 thing,” and in “SEVEN A,” the images lead to “a final none eye” (54). The eye/I, performing the double function of the spectator and the poet, finally dissolves at the end of the collection. In “SEVEN B,” in the context of a continuous flow of time – “the now is always past / the now is always once again” (56) – the speaker, and with her, her interpretation, disintegrate: “i am melting melting / no more me / no more / nulla-la” (56).

Painting with Words: Visuality in weiss’s Poems

Moving on from weiss’s direct poetical responses to painting, sculpture and lightshows – where an external work of art inspired the creation of another – a different approach can be found in those poems that, by imitating the aesthetics properties of other art forms – in this case painting – function themselves as something else; while remaining poetry, they are closely related to painting. Two collections – *Gallery of Women* (1959) and *For these Women of the Beat* (1997) best exemplify this approach in weiss’s poetry. *Gallery is Women* is an example of the many times weiss collaborated with her close

⁴⁸² Romero’s lightshows were frequently accompanied by music, and although weiss’s poems focus primarily on the visual aspect, the beginning of the poem “THREE” points toward an audiovisual experience: “balloon melody / torn anger / open wide your gate / in a dark / golden horn / in a soon eye-centered / when the dark swallows / echo-chambers / swallowed by desire”. (37)

friend, the painter Sutter Marin⁴⁸³ – whom she met soon after hitchhiking to San Francisco in 1952.⁴⁸⁴ The collection is composed of forty-four short poems dedicated to women weiss knew and/or was influenced by, and nine accompanying drawings by Marin. These “poem-portraits,” as Brenda Knight calls them in *Women of the Beat Generation*,⁴⁸⁵ rather than offering direct descriptions of the women portrayed, or summarizing weiss’s relationship with them, delineate subtle sketches which deal with different external or internal traits of the women, forming abstract representations. In a personal interview with the author, weiss referred to the visuality of her poems as a distinct approach in which she renders images with words. As an anecdote, weiss used the example of poems she has written for deceased friends and read them at the memorials, stating that in those poems she “never say[s] [she] knew this person did that...” but rather “create[s] the person within the words, so the person is visible to those at the memorial.” For weiss, representing the person visually in poetry is attained, firstly, by canceling as much as possible her own subjectivity – “I make the picture of the thing, I put myself away and I make my best to make this person appear, and do their own voice” – but also by, in keeping with her habitual economy of language, eliminating those words that separate the image represented from the actual moment in which it happened.⁴⁸⁶

In *Gallery of Women*, weiss uses this approach to sketch the portraits of close friends like the photographer Anne Mckeever, the piano player Boo Pleasant, the poet and visual artist Aya (Idell) Tarlow, the painter Marianne Hahn or the dancer Fumi Spencer. Linking the images of these women through metaphors of flowers blooming and secret gardens – imagery traditionally associated with women – weiss often complicates the clichéd simile of the blooming female artist, through the specific details

⁴⁸³ Sutter Marin (1926-1985) was a Californian painter and poet often associated with San Francisco’s North Beach artistic scene and the Beat movement. In his paintings he favored a figurative and abstract style. Marin plays “He” in weiss’s film *The Brink*, and he also acted in her plays. In the acknowledgement section of *No Dancing Aloud* – a book which included five of her plays – weiss writes: “no dancing aloud: artist & poet, sutter marin. victim of AIDS who played HEINZ in all its productions., who never stopped dancing & now dances with the heavenly flowers.” (269)

⁴⁸⁴ *Breaking the Rule of Cool* 63.

⁴⁸⁵ A collection which, by the way, weiss considers as a turning point in her career and that of other writers included, as the collection helped raise awareness of her work.

⁴⁸⁶ In my interview with her, weiss offered the following as an example of what she means by showing, instead of explaining: “I don’t say I see this or I see that...I just...I try my best to create that the image comes to life. You know, instead of ‘I see her dark hair moving in the breeze’ or something. Instead I say: ‘she stands / black hair / moving / in the wind’.”

of the lives and art of the women. Many of the poems portray strong women who follow independent paths in life and art; in “IDELL” – written for Elias Romero’s (ex)wife Aya Tarlow – for instance, the woman becomes the flower, “the lily-face” (n.p.n.),⁴⁸⁷ who “closes in the shade.” While both “close” and “shade” could point to a forced silenced position – especially bearing in mind that the poems portray female artists working in the late 1950s – the poem stresses Idell’s determination to make her own path: “she walks the shaded path / the well-kept garden magics / to jungle / where strange flowers burst.” Choosing the shade, Idell renounces the opened-up-by-the-sun lily, in favor of the “strange flowers” the alternative path leads her to.

Just as Idell, who rejects her description as a lily by avoiding the sun, weiss’s portraits escape fixed representation and definitive states. For instance, going on with the flower metaphor, “blossoming” is not a mandatory process all women must go through, but an option available to them – the short poem “SUEKO” suggests different possibilities of growth: “blossom / will you / be flower?” In other poems weiss further disrupts the flower/woman symbology by situating, within the parts of the flower, a threatening presence – in “KITTY”, weiss writes: “the delicate / monsters / for you / to exorcise / SPADIX WITHIN THE SPECTACLE OR CALLA.” Similarly, specific female experiences, like motherhood, are also addressed in the portraits in different ways. In “LESLIE” the female body becomes the canvas she uses to project growth – “she played colored glass / against colorless glass / she / fathomed an island” – a growth that is achieved through giving birth: “only in birth did her core / blossom again to itself.” While birth is celebrated and linked with creativity in “LESLIE,” in “PATTIE” motherhood – or rather the domestic responsibilities tied to it – is rejected. Pattie, as weiss tells us, would rather go dancing than stay home and take care of the children:

pattie cake pattie cake

home momma home

don’t wanna be a momma

no more

don’t wanna sew

⁴⁸⁷ All poems in *Gallery of Women* are unpaginated.

all the lost buttons

no more

the dance

calling me

calling

Preston Whaley sees “PATTIE” as a “jazz poem [that] begins with a familiar colloquialism, in this case a nursery rhyme,” (*Blows like a Horn* 63) to represent Pattie’s wish “to surrender domesticity to the jazz dance” (62) – a wish he sees as unfulfilled or rather, as unrepresented, in the poem. Although at first sight Pattie is, indeed, left in a state of wanting, in light of weiss’s commitment to the jazz in her poetry, I see “PATTIE” – the poem itself – as standing for the jazz she craves. Jack Hirschman, in an often-quoted review, sees weiss’s poetry as *being* jazz, rather than being accompanied by jazz: “No American poet has remained so faithful to jazz in the construction of poetry as has ruth weiss. Her poems are scores to be sounded with all her riffy ellipses and open-formed phrasing swarming the senses. Verbal motion becoming harmonious with a universe of rhythm is what her work essentializes. Others read *to* jazz or write *from* jazz. ruth weiss *writes* jazz in words.”⁴⁸⁸ In this light, “PATTIE” may not only reproduce her wish to go dancing and listen to jazz but, by being itself jazz, the poem is reproducing Pattie’s success. A similar movement is found in “WORDS NO WORDS FOR A DANCE FUMI,” a poem that, as the title suggests, is not concerned with the meaning of the words as much as what they do in relation to the dance performed by Fumi Spencer.⁴⁸⁹ Composing a poem based on sound rather than meaning, weiss’s poem is still extraordinarily evocative of the dance movements. For instance, the continuous and elongated movement suggested by the “leap-a-ling low” verse is contrasted with the faster, broken, syllables of “racky racky rall-ta-ra”, which uses sounds that represent a completely different dance move. By playing further with words and syntax – “deve lop / lop leap / lines long / aka aka wah” – weiss does not use the poem to describe Fumi’s dance, but rather has the poem *become* the dance. A few coherent lines situate the reader back in a world where denotative and connotative meaning still applies, while the rest of the poem signifies –

⁴⁸⁸ Quoted in *Women of the Beat Generation* 247.

⁴⁸⁹ Fumi Spencer collaborated in some projects with Elias Romero in the San Francisco Mime Troupe Theater, a company founded in 1959 by RG Davis.

in its reproduction of the dance – through the rhythm and sound of the words themselves:

head-over head under

the leap is low

LAHATAH

helio holicum

larantara

bouncing the cones are the tree

Like these poems, in which art forms like music and dance are celebrated, creativity is central to many of the poems in the collection, often transcending any other activity – work-related or otherwise – women engage in. For instance, in one of the poems weiss writes for the photographer Anne Mckeever, who also worked as an English teacher in Mexico, the power of her creativity ends up dominating the lesson: “i saw a dragon / you saw a dragon / it and we are / a dragon.” In the short “TO V W,” Virginia Woolf’s creativity also allows her to go beyond her own death – “virginia walked / into the waves / and kept on walking.” Furthermore, women are shown as craving a knowledge they possess but cannot fully grasp or are unable to reproduce. In “SANDY” the woman’s need to conform to external appearances – through smile and make-up – force her to perform her life through a spectacle that ultimately blocks her access to knowledge: “smiling unsmiling / her grave painted eyes / a mask not masking / her wisdom she wonders ungrasping”. In the case of “PHYLLIS,” the woman is portrayed as seeking a secret knowledge or creativity she once witnessed but has ever since been unable to duplicate:

when she was born to (as)

Phyllis, a sea-horse wrought

a song that roared beyond

water but could not go beyond

shore the sea-horse never

to sound again swam away

Although Phyllis' predicament is not resolved in the poem, her achievement lies in the commitment to make "the sea-horse song" her life-long quest: "the shore the cradle / and Phyllis still seeks that / sea-horse burst-sound but once / for her." Phyllis, like many of the women included in *Gallery*, is described as "thirsty" for a knowledge or creativity that remains unnamed, merely represented through craving. Examples of this can be found in "TO PHYLLIS ONE JANUARY" – "frail / is a flower / deep is a root / deeper the thirst" – or in "RITA" – "the root of / a red flower is thirsty / though the flower has gone." The longing illustrated by the image of the "thirsty root" is, nevertheless, counterbalanced in the collection with the association of women with the force of floods; examples of this can be found in the poems "BEVERLY" – "think fickle / trickle i am / you cannot guess / my flood" – and "JEAN" – "when the world is cement and the / rain has not into there are / floods" – or "PHYLLIS ONE JANUARY," where her thirst, "a storm-flood / will quench it."

In his accompanying drawings,⁴⁹⁰ in accordance to weiss's poetical portraits, Sutter Marin deviates from a realistic, objective, representations in favor of an abstract approach in which women's bodies are fused with the recurrent themes of flowers, gardens and nature present in the collection. In some of the portraits the female body is so diffused and ingrained in nature that it almost disappears, turning the alleged portrait into a landscape painting – the only immediate link with the woman portrayed and reality reduced to the names which serve as the title of each drawing. Indeed, while some portraits – like "Diane" or "Anne" – depict the women with more or less recognizable features, in other portraits Marin chose a much more abstract style.

⁴⁹⁰ In 1967, while weiss was living with Paul Blake in Eco Park in LA., Sutter Marin visited them and together with weiss, they plan a new artistic collaboration – a "gallery of women revisited." For this new version, Sutter Marin did about thirty more portraits to accompany weiss's poems. The collection, unfortunately, remains unpublished.



Figure 48. “Diane” and “Ana”



Figure 49. The more abstract “Shirley” and “Pier”

Similarly, while the portraits “Shirley” and “Pier” abandon completely realism or naturalism in style, other portraits – such as “Idell” or “Boo” – turn away from a physical description of the women in favor of symbolic representations that is closely related to weiss’s poetical portrait. Aya (Idell) Tarlow, whose poem presented her as “lily-face” walking towards “well-kept garden magics”, is in Marin’s portrait an airy creature that fuses with the “strange flowers” that support her. Boo Pleasant’s portrait,

in much the same way, is illustrative of weiss's poetical representation rather than Marin's physical depiction of her. Showing no trace of a human form in weiss's poem, as in Marin's portrait, Boo is "a bird / wing-sure / red-wing-tipped / to the sun"; a bird that flies, not towards the sun but, as the poet emphasizes, directly "INTO / the sun".



Figure 50. "Idell" and "Boo"

In *For these Women of the Beat* (1997), weiss is not as directly invested in the painting metaphor as in *Gallery of Women*, but she nevertheless follows a similar approach by sketching – through short poems entitled after the women they honor – portraits of women associated with the Beat Generation.⁴⁹¹ The origin of the book can be traced back to Brenda Knight's *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996) and to John Hunt, founder and CEO of Audio Literature, who asked weiss to write and record short poems that were used to introduce each of the women for the audio version of the book. Unlike *Gallery of Women*, where the vast majority of women portrayed were artists and close friends of weiss, *For these Women of the Beat* highlights the secondary position of these women in the Beat canon as well as the lack of communication between them. In the foreword to the collection, weiss discusses this problem in terms of a disconnection between female artists that only recently seems to be disappearing: "I only met Jan Kerouac at a benefit for her, a year before she left us. I knew her father better in the '50s. I also knew Bob Kaufman better than Eileen. I knew Michael then & not Joanna

⁴⁹¹ Horst Spandler refers to these poems as "poetic mini-portraits" (xix) in his introduction to *Can't Stop the Beat*.

McClure. And now, sharing readings again & again for WOMEN of the BEAT GENERATION, we are entering each other's stories."⁴⁹² (n.p.n.)

Through the repetition of the first verse – “the beat the beat the beat” – weiss portrays the women by focusing either on their work or on their personal connections with men. As a case in point, a group of poems dealing with “the wives” focuses on the position they occupied in relation to the man they married. Ilse Klapper, the German Jewish woman William Burroughs married in 1937 so that she could get a Visa and escape Nazism, acts in weiss's poem as a counterpoint to Joan Vollmer's fate in the hands of the same man: “who will tell that the very hand / of that fatal shot in '51 / had made a bridge in '36 / for one fleeing the guns of an army” (4). While Joan Vollmer can hardly escape her victimization – after all, not much besides her death has transcended in history – weiss avoids showing these women as victims of their relationships with men, instead situating them as women choosing alternative modes of living. The poem written for Jack Kerouac's first wife, Edie Parker, is an example of weiss's approach: “the beat the beat the beat / some heard it / and married adventure.” (12) In much the same way, LuAnne Henderson and Anne Murphy – Neal Cassady's first wife and late girlfriend, respectively – are portrayed in command of their own destinies, with a simple gesture of their thumbs signaling their freedom to choose: “the beat the beat the beat / put your thumb down / you're trapped / put your thumb up / you're on”.⁴⁹³ (11) Even Brenda Frazer, whose involvement with the Beat world most negatively affected her personal life, is portrayed through the pain and joy of the life she, to some extent, chose:

the beat the beat the beat

the soul leads on

up & down & up again

⁴⁹² In the foreword weiss also writes: “Some of the women I never knew. Others I had met, did not connect. With some it's happening now – a sisterhood emerging.” (unpaginated) Bearing in mind the atmosphere of secrecy and shame that often surrounded the literary ambition of many of these women, as I analyzed in the first chapter through their memoirs, it comes as no surprise that little or no connection existed between these poets and writers during the 1950s, and that it is only decades later, in light of revisionist and feminist re-evaluations of women's position in art and literature, that they find a welcoming space to create those connections.

⁴⁹³ Helen Hinkle's poem – most likely influenced by an event told in *On the Road* relating how her husband Al Hinkle abandoned her at the Burroughses' house while he drove away with Neal and LuAnne – similarly highlights the options available to her, rather than focusing on her victimization: “the beat the beat the beat / walk it or wait / buy a ticket or take a car / put your thumb out / or stop where you are.” (9)

the path is stones
 the foot is blood
 but oh such blooms along the way
 the stream is cool
 now so am i (32)

Of course, not all the women portrayed found freedom in the alternatives lives they led; most dramatically, Elise Cowen exemplifies the negative outcome of the social and artistic confinement these women were subjected to – “the beat the beat the beat / some flew the coop with broken wing / and crashed” (20). But even then, weiss levels things out by providing successful examples of parallel “flights,” as in the case of Janine Pommy Vega, who “flew the coop / into the wild / and did not crash.” (27) In other poems, weiss mixes the women’s artistic achievements with sketches of their lives, as in “LENORE KANDEL,” a poem containing references to *The Love Book* (1967), as well as her involvement with the Hells Angels and the motorcycle accident she suffered.⁴⁹⁴ In Jay DeFeo’s poem weiss also focuses on the art, playing with the monumental *The Rose* and the fact that it “rose” the artist to fame, even if it was after her death: “the beat the beat the beat / she dances her death / brushing petal by petal / circling ‘round & ‘round / from the center of her life / rose to her fame.” (37) The title of the poem “DIANE di PRIMA” uses the well-known name of the poet as an answer to the very question it poses – “the beat the beat the beat / it was as said there was a breakthrough / where were the women?” (18). With this, weiss stresses di Prima’s strong presence within the movement, but also the overall secondary position of women – if di Prima, being one of the best known female names of the era, is still a marginal figure in comparison to Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, the position of the less known writers and poets is even further obscured. An exception to this is Anne Waldman, who is described as having had an easier transition through the Beat poetic world becoming, in weiss’s poem, the rightful heir to the Beat tradition: “the beat the beat the beat / some flowed easy into the stream / the influenced becomes the influential / a natural progression” (34).

⁴⁹⁴ “the beat the beat the beat / body as a temple the words / sing to wheels / crashing sand / countless sand-grain-hands / clasping KALI-MA” (33).

Independently of the focus given in each poem, *For these Women of the Beat* functions as *Gallery of Women* as far as it presents poetical portraits of different women – once again, mostly artists, writers, poets, etc. As in *Gallery*, the poem becomes the canvas which allows weiss to exhibit or reveal these women to the world. The simile between canvas and poem is, in addition, recurrent in weiss's work; in the poem "White Is all Colors,"⁴⁹⁵ (2004) for instance, the white page explicitly becomes the space of creativity – "she knows what she knows / she knows nothing / she travels book in hand / the pages are blank / the story is about to be born" (n.p.n.). Even if white is achromatic – a color without color – in weiss's poem it becomes all colors, contains all possibilities. The white page, as the white canvas, is in the eyes of the artist a space of infinite potential: "the stories are the milky way / beyond borders / beyond colors / white is a color / white is all colors / white gold the soul / the goal to its perfection."

*Poetry by other Means:*⁴⁹⁶ *Painting and Theater*

In *A Fool's Journey*, weiss takes the metaphor of the poem as a canvas a step further by actually combining her haiku poems with watercolor paintings. The haiku, an original form of Japanese poetry, started to be adopted formally by American poets during the 1940s.⁴⁹⁷ Jim Kacian, in "An Overview of Haiku in English,"⁴⁹⁸ places the work of Reginald Horace Blyth – who published the volumes *Haiku* (1949-52) and *History of Haiku* (1964) – as a fundamental step in the connection American poetry with the Japanese form.⁴⁹⁹ Kacian writes that "Blyth's writings sparked a broad new activity in haiku, and, coupled with a postwar renaissance of interest in Eastern philosophy and religion, especially Zen, appealed in particular to the emerging Beat generation." (322) In a brief summary of the importance of haiku among Beat poets, Kacian delineates a map of influence of haiku as it spread among the poets: from Kenneth Rexroth to Gary Snyder to Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. While he briefly mentions other Beat-related poets who wrote haikus, such as "Gregory Corso, Lew Welch, Jack Spicer,

⁴⁹⁵ *White Is All Colors – Weiss Ist alle Farben* (2004).

⁴⁹⁶ The title of this subsection is a tribute to Pavle Levi's *Cinema by Other Means* (2012), where he focuses on works of art that using the tools, techniques, aesthetics, or approaches of cinema, explore the cinematic medium by means other than film celluloid. "Poetry by other means," draws attention to the centrality of poetry in weiss's aesthetics, independently of the medium she uses.

⁴⁹⁷ Previous to this era, other writers and poets such as James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Amy Lowell, Marianne Moore or Ezra Pound, had explored the form.

⁴⁹⁸ In *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years* (eds. Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland and Allan Burns).

⁴⁹⁹ The Imaginist poets – Ezra Pound is often said to be the first American poet to publish a haiku – had already adopted and used the form.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Albert Saijo, and Diane DiPrima”,⁵⁰⁰ (323) he sees Kerouac as the poet most invested with the study and practice of the haiku form.⁵⁰¹ In his opinion:

the quality of Kerouac’s haiku was consistently higher than anyone else’s in the preceding thirty years. Even the best work published by his contemporaries fails to approach his variety, tone, energy, and understanding of what was essential to haiku. The quality and volume of the poems he produced makes the first sustained argument for haiku as art in English. (323)

Once again, the absence of Ruth Weiss,⁵⁰² who has been writing haikus since the mid-fifties – draws attention to her marginal position within poetical circles. A frequently-told anecdote situates Weiss’s and Kerouac’s interest in haiku as parallel events, at the same time that it suggests Weiss’s alleged stylistic superiority. In 1955,⁵⁰³ when Kerouac met Weiss, he had only published *The Town and the City*, but the two shared a passion for haiku and spent nights writing and reading their work to each other. Many times, so the story goes, Jack would tell Ruth: ““You write better haiku than I do.”” (Spandler, *Can’t Stop the Beat* xii) While the aim of this subsection is not to prove Weiss’s superiority to Kerouac, the anecdote serves to illustrate Weiss’s commitment to a form she has been practicing for over fifty years. The haiku’s concise language and juxtaposition of images or ideas, not only falls comfortably within Weiss’s poetics, but also within her interest in the visual arts. For Weiss, haiku is “a fabulous discipline for making each word succinct, meant, cutting out the fat, a perfect exercise for poetry” (*Breaking the Rule of Cool* 65). This translates in Weiss’s poetry in the exercise of the 5-

⁵⁰⁰ Di Prima’s *Haiku* (1967), with illustrations by George Herms, is a rare text that documents her interest in the haiku form as well as her collaboration with artists (printed by the artist in an edition of 100).

⁵⁰¹ It is somewhat surprising that it is Kerouac, and not Gary Snyder – who actually studied Japanese, lived in Japan and wrote and contributed to the form – the one regarded as the most invested in the haiku form. In fact, in 2004, Snyder was awarded The Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Grand Prize for his contribution to the art of haiku.

⁵⁰² Joanne Kyger’s absence from this history is also shocking, as her poetry is highly influenced by Zen Buddhism and Japanese forms. Even in her journals, as Jane Falk has stated, Kyger shows the influence on Eastern forms: “The journals, themselves, can be considered a kind of hybrid of Eastern and Western forms, as they take on the appearance of the Japanese poetic diary. Entries combine a narrative of her life with free verse, haiku, or senryu, what she considers ‘a way of putting a short lined sketch into the text.’” (“Two Takes on Japan: Joanne Kyger’s *The Japan and India Journals* and Philip Whalen’s *Scenes of Life at the Capital*” 104)

⁵⁰³ In the introduction to Kerouac’s *Book of Haikus*, Regina Weinreich writes: “Jack Kerouac’s selection of haiku for publication were placed in a black folder marked ‘Book of Haikus.’ Most originate in the pocket notebooks starting in 1956. While no date is given for the contents of this folder, it is clear from journals and letters that Kerouac meant to publish them.” (2) If that is correct, the Kerouac’s first surviving haikus are dated a year after his “haiku dates” with Weiss.

7-5 structure – three lines of 5,7, and 5 syllables – even if she understands that it can be “kind of phony, because it’s a Japanese form and it’s their 5-7-5 which is not the same as in English.”⁵⁰⁴ Just as weiss, Kerouac also saw the difficulties of appropriating the form, opting instead for an Americanized version. As Regina Weinreich writes in the introduction to Kerouac’s *Book of Haikus* (2003), Kerouac:

finding that Western languages cannot adapt themselves to the “fluid syllabillic Japanese,” [...] sought to redefine the genre: “I propose that the ‘Western Haiku’ simply say a lot in three short lines in a Western language. Above all, a Haiku must be very simple and free of all poetic trickery and make a little picture and yet be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi Pastorella.” (x)

weiss’s haikus, besides being “airy and graceful” in the use of language, do follow, in most of the cases, the 5-7-5 structure – which she sees as an exercise in poetic discipline. In addition, by accompanying the poems with water-color paintings, weiss stresses the visual element, the juxtaposition of images or the “little picture” – in Kerouac’s words – at their core. Since 1965, weiss has exhibited her water-colors at least on three occasions: in 1965 at Joker’s Flux Gallery in North Beach, where she did a group show; in 1980 in a solo show entitled *Banzai!* at Gallery Become (San Francisco), and in 1994 in a show called *A Fool’s Journey* at Mendocino Moulding Gallery. Nonetheless, the poet’s first experience with watercolors dates back to when she was just eleven years old – when she arrived in New York with her parents – and was sent to a children’s home in Harlem so that she would be taken care of while they worked.⁵⁰⁵ In part I of “Single Out” (1958) – entitled “Little Girl” – weiss fondly remembers one “night-nurse” (n.p.n) who took weiss under her wing, teaching her English and giving her watercolors to paint with. The language in this poem, as if to compensate for the break in verbal communication between the German-speaking girl and the nurse, relies heavily on visual and sensorial elements. When the nurse leads the young girl to the bathroom, she sees “many toilets & showers & white tile tiny / making dizzy eyes.” There, the nurse hands her a watercolor set – “white to black & all yellow orange red green / blue purple inbetween & all the poets / are still saying don’t use color all the time / and not as adjective either.” As this memory indicates, not only was paint

⁵⁰⁴ Personal interview with weiss, July 2015.

⁵⁰⁵ Her parents said she was eight, and not eleven, so she would get free food and bed.

important to her as a child but,⁵⁰⁶ the fact that it is through her poetry that she gives shape to this story many years later, using the same visual emphasis as if she had been using water colors, points to the poet's preoccupation with visuality in poetry.⁵⁰⁷

More direct approaches to fuse poetry with painting include the exhibition *A Fool's Journey: Watercolor Haikus*. For this show, Weiss transformed her poem "A Fool's Journey"⁵⁰⁸ – composed of three and two-line haikus – into snapshots which work individually but also within the larger narrative of the poem. Significantly, the poem celebrates the creative impulse of the artist,⁵⁰⁹ the "fool" of the title, through a female figure who stands "one foot off the cliff / the other on solid rock / her heart in her mouth" (14). In the context of a celebration of creativity and imagination, the marginal vision of the fool is reinterpreted as essential for humanity – "night breaks into dawn / a fool sees stars in the day / red-twinkling in the sun" (14).



Figure 51. Watercolor haiku

The ability to see stars during the day, or to imagine light when it is dark – "is this really dark / no moon & the milky way" (14) – is grounded in a creative process by

⁵⁰⁶ Through the watercolors she found a way to explore her creativity: "painted dragons & knights & princesses / flowers & mountains & faces faces faces / she said one / i said einz / she said monday / i said montag / and we were one long blue monday through the night."

⁵⁰⁷ Color is also a central element in her plays, as I show later in this section.

⁵⁰⁸ Published in *A Fool's Journey: Poems and Stories – Die Reise des Narren* (2012).

⁵⁰⁹ The book is dedicated "to all the fools that paint & write & music make from the inside out" (unpaginated).

which materiality is rejected and replaced by an artistic approach to life. The fool travels the earth in pursue of a creative force to fill the blank pages of her book – “in search for her word / she travels book in hand / the pages are blank” (14) – and seeks that knowledge not in the exploitation of nature, but in the appreciation of the resources it offers – “the dance of the flame / the picture in the embers / tell all ever known” (14). For all of these reasons, weiss positions the fools’ way of living as a reconciliation with Mother Earth, as a haiku-painting shows, where the “the fools are encircling” Earth “with love returning.” At the end of the poem the female protagonist becomes the source of her own creativity, “peeling” her layers away and finding the poetry in the juxtaposition of images.

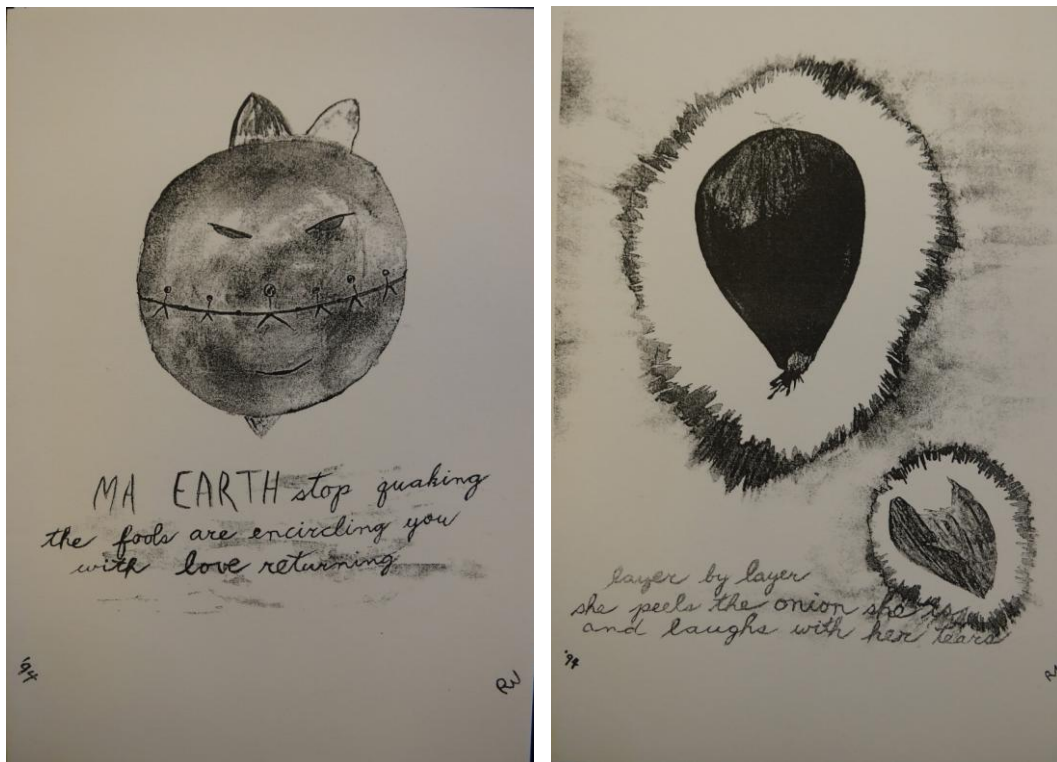


Figure 52. Ma Earth and onion

In much the same way, *BANZAI!*, the title of another series of watercolor haikus, attests to the poet’s dedication to visual metaphors. The gallery press release for the exhibition highlighted the potential of her poetry to give expression to change, to moving images and to states of transformation: “[a] rabbit cloud. A dragonfly. Born before the beginning of the new, she has seen that those who are becoming are becoming from. She is drawing a circle around that which is beautiful, not to contain it, but to point it out, to ‘circle out.’ Her poetry speaks for itself, filled with hidden magic

and beauty. The watercolor-haiku does this also.” The following haiku, following the 5-7-5 structure, exemplifies weiss’s hidden magic.

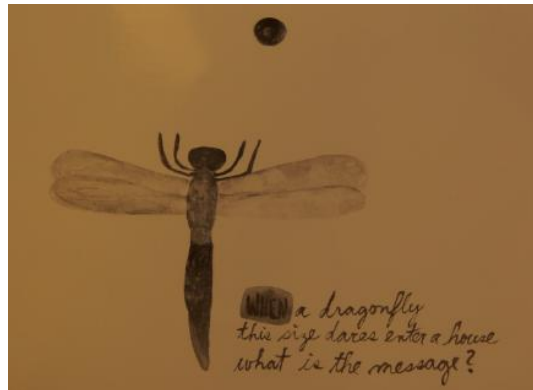


Figure 53. Sample from *BANZAI!*

In addition to *A Fool’s Journey* and *BANZAI!* – her two major solo exhibitions – weiss has also regularly collaborated with the artist Paul Blake – her former partner – in a series of haiku poems illustrated with serigraphed images. Examples of this collaboration include a series of haikus to commemorate – or welcome – the Chinese Zodiac years like the pig’s, the snake’s, dragon’s, bull’s, etc. Some of the poems, like the one celebrating the tiger-year, even reproduce the traditional vertical orientation of Japanese haiku – instead of keeping the Americanized horizontal lines. The following haikus celebrate the years of the rat and the bull.

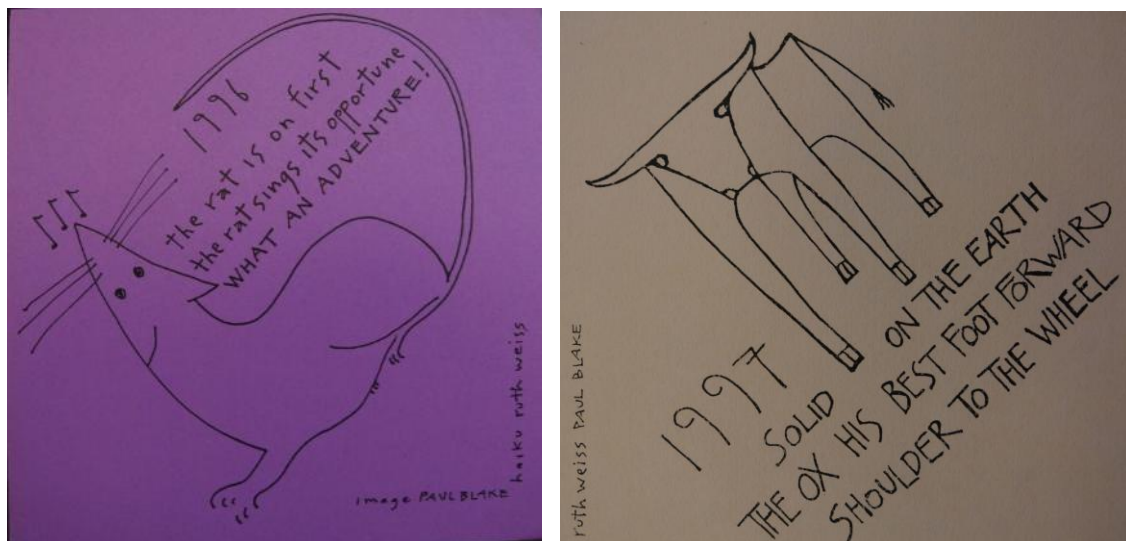


Figure 54. Haiku/drawing collaboration with Blake

In addition to painting, weiss has also explored theater as means to expand her poetry and creativity. She wrote her first play – *Figs* – in 1960 while she was sitting in a

bar in North Beach. Always a notebook with her, she related in a personal interview how, all of a sudden, without consciously thinking about theater, “out came this play, this dialogue.” (July 2015) She enjoyed writing the play so much that by the end of the following year she had written another ten plays, and in 1981 she wrote what she considers to be her best play – *The Thirteenth Witch*. Many of her plays have been performed since 1961, and in 2006, Edition Exil published a collection containing five of her plays. As weiss has often stated, her plays, as any other medium she has worked in, are “rooted in [her] poetry.”⁵¹⁰ While this assertion is valid and pertinent to the analysis of a shared aesthetic of, for instance, her poetry, painting or film, many of weiss’s plays have some thematic or stylistic characteristics that are not as frequent in her poetry. An example of this is the allegorical nature of many of her plays; unlike her poetry, which tends to be autobiographical or inspired by people she knows, in plays like *No Dancing Aloud* or *One Knight and One Lady*, characters act more like symbols than full-rounded characters, even when they are based on real-life people. Such is the case in *No Dancing Aloud* (1972), a one-act play where the four characters are symbols of people “on their soul-path.” (16) The old vagabond Heinz – a character based on a homeless man weiss knew – is “experience & wisdom” (16); Kerard, a black knight with a black off-stage horse, “is romance on his quest for his elusive anima” (16), and the inexperienced Greengrass and Youngblade – as their names suggest – “are the naïveté of very young souls.” (16) The dialogue, in much the same way, is philosophical and symbolic; as weiss writes in the summary of the play, the characters “philosophize on life & death” – (16) each, of course, from the position they occupy within the naïveté-wisdom spectrum. Greengrass’s dilemma in the play is focused on her need to choose between Youngblade – who is “from her familiar & ordinary background” (16) and as such represents “the illusion of security” (16), or Kerard – “who is the step into the unknown, romance & mystery.” (16) Heinz, the voice of wisdom, often exposes both men’s superficiality. See, for instance, the following scene:

GREENGRASS: i expected a carriage with 10,000 horses barking diamonds.

KERARD: my horse is a black diamond.

YOUNGBLADE: coal!

⁵¹⁰ In “they call me a beatnik poet: ruth weiss speaks to the editor”, she writes: “I always knew that I wanted to be a poet and not an author. All of my work the writing, performance, plays are rooted in poetry.” (*Full Circle* 166)

HEINZ: ace in the hole!

the old thick woods felled & groanin' paloma...baby-lonia that was so long ago the giraffe said to the griffin --- how's the sawdust, stardust?

GREENGRASS: you're the only one understands (28-30)

Heinz is also the one to teach the three younger characters lessons on materiality and greediness – “the needy are seedy. to want is not to be free” (32) – as well as on the importance of experiencing things first hand. In one of the out-of-the-blue dialogues so frequent in weiss's plays, Heinz asks Kerard if when he was a kid, he ever chewed tar; Kerard asks the old man if it tastes like licorice, to which he answers: “you think because it's black it tastes like licorice ---you & your associated stations!” (40). The ultimate advice he offers the lonely Kerard right before the end of the play – Youngblade and Greengrass had already left hand in hand – is: “if you want no evil spell it backwards.” (44)

Heinz's role in *No Dancing Aloud* is very similar to Anna's – the “old gypsy” (48) – in *One Knight and One Lady*. Besides Anna, the only other character in the play is Kerard, the black knight, who “is still in his search on his soul-path” (48), and who appears angry and disillusioned at the world. In his opening monologue he complains about the nonsense and miscommunication that dominate human interaction, and expresses his wish to retreat to individualism – “my ears are so fine-tuned / i hear all that babble from that TOWER OF BABEL / and all this time / i seek only to find & create / what speaks from within.”(50) As Heinz – who through his disconnected pieces of advice tried to instill some sense in the younger generation in *No Dancing Aloud* – Anna also tries to use her wisdom and power to guide Kerard on his path. While Heinz used his experienced-based, street, knowledge, Anna's wisdom is connected to magic and nature.⁵¹¹ Kerard, tortured by existential questions such as “why was i born? why am i here?” (60), is advised to abandon his anger, and to use that energy to live – “fire for warming as spark for your life but this is the warning not as fuel for strife. what you fight you become.” (64) Even if Kerard rejects Anna's advice, choosing to find his path on his own devices, the allegoric nature of *One Knight and One Lady*, as *No Dancing Aloud*, is much more explicit than elsewhere in weiss's work.

⁵¹¹ When Kerard asks her for the garden where she grows the herbs she carries in a basket, Anna answers: “i own no garden but i have been given all the fields and the forest of the earth to gather from.” (56)

On account of the lack of realism in her plays, Spandler has written that weiss “preferred the poetic drama, used elements of fairy tales and myths, and concentrated more and more on archetypal figures present in Jung’s theories and the tarot, e.g. the old man, the wise old woman, the knight, and the animus and anima, and dealt with the relationship between people, especially the sexes, in that way.” (*Can’t Stop the Beat* xxiii) Other examples of this archetypal theater include *Figs*, in which the two characters – simply called “He” and “She”⁵¹² – represent in the play as universal masculine and feminine entities. As the first play weiss wrote, the poet resorts to the archetypes of Adam and Eve in a metaphorical approach to her own creativity: “how does one start? just begin. see where it leads. why not with the first he & she. ousted from paradise. in exile. where do we go from here?” (106). Like the characters in *No Dancing Aloud*, He and She discuss metaphysical concerns such as their position in the world, and the relationship to each other. The play begins in medias res with She naming the fig tree, the only prop of the play – “we’ll call it figs” (108) – but the dialogue soon turns into a metanarrative exploration of their own function in the story. For instance, when She asks He if he “want[s] to come up & write a play sometime” (108), He answers that “it’s being written.” (108) In this context, they lament the inadequacy of art to reproduce reality – She says that “it doesn’t sound the same when i write it [the dialogue] down” (108), as well as the arbitrariness of reality as man knows it – She says “it’s a fig to me besides what makes figs, figs” (110), and He wonders “what would a fig be if it wasn’t a fig?” (110). In addition, unlike the other characters in weiss’s plays, He and She are aware of their archetypal nature and see their lives, even while resisting their design, in terms of the conventions that regulate it. In the following dialogue, for instance, they expose – through the use of clichés – their allegedly “god-sent” romantic involvement:

SHE: you said two

HE: but you’re a thousand women

SHE: 1001

HE: all right, 1001. you are ---

SHE: your sunshine

⁵¹² Her narrative poem “The Brink,” which she transformed into a screenplay for her movie, also deals with “he” and “she” as archetypal, universal, versions of man and woman.

HE: yes my sun my moon my star

SHE: *peevishly* always yours

HE: but you want it that way

SHE: don't you ever think of others

dreamily

ME ME ME (114)

At the end of the play, with the apparition of a group of Aeons – entities which are often associated with creation – that prevent She from naming the animals the way she wants to, She laments her powerlessness and wishes to return to paradise: “i want to wear my jewels again / and all my furs / i am of rain & sun in rain / and animals not named yet.” (116) Stubbornly refusing to listen to He or the Aeons, the play concludes with She's invented language: “ECO LAMA ETO HEY / AMA SEYNO ERRATA / COMMAH SEYNU / AHN TA / LA / LA LA LA / ELI ELO / ELI ELO” (118).

The Thirteenth Witch (1981) shares with *Figs* a preoccupation with its own form and with the source of creativity. To tackle this subject, weiss rewrites the Grimm Brother's sleeping beauty fairytale, setting it, as weiss states, “into its opposite context.” (122) Macumbre, the thirteenth witch who was not invited to the princess's feast in the original tale, does not seek revenge in weiss's play – by cursing the princess with a hundred-year sleep – but rather wishes to give her the gift of love and creativity. Unlike the other witches' “temporal” (122) gifts – such as beauty or riches – Macumbre's gift represents “transformation in a rigid-rule world.” (122) In weiss's reworking of the play, *Sleeping Beauty*⁵¹³ stands for “EARTH & ART [...] the testing-ground for these opposing forces.” (122) In addition, whereas in *Figs* weiss used the dialogue to discuss metanarrative elements, in *The thirteenth Witch* the poet explicitly draws attention to the play's aesthetic approach and theoretical background. Indeed, she writes that the play is “in the genre of poetry drama. (i.e. STEIN, SITWELL, AUDEN etc.) in the intention of an alchemical form as ARTAUD projects in his THE THEATER AND ITS DOUBLE (chapter III the alchemical theater).” (122) In *The Theater and its Double*, Antonin Artaud championed the “Theater of Cruelty” as a new form of theater that touches the

⁵¹³ weiss also adds that “SLEEPING BEAUTY --- THE PRINCESS (of the fairy-tale) is both planet EARTH & ART. though presented in static paper-maché. she embodies creativity, the potential of change and fulfillment” (124).

senses before it does the mind. Through symbols and other techniques' available for the director, Artaud hopes that this new form will allow the staging of metaphysical questions, provoking in the audience unconscious responses to their fears or nightmares. In her plays – especially in *The Thirteenth Witch* – weiss turns away from theoretical or self-analyzing dialogues aimed at exploring individual psyches, in favor of – in keeping with Artaud's vision – a more sensorial, visual, approach in which language often functions in a metaphysical realm. Indeed, Artaud's views on the metaphysics of language are relevant to weiss's style in theater, as well as in much of her poetry:

To make metaphysics out of a spoken language is to [...] make use of it in a new, exceptional, and unaccustomed fashion; to reveal its possibilities for producing physical shock; to divide and distribute it actively in space; to deal with intonations in an absolutely concrete manner, restoring their power to shatter as well as really to manifest something; to turn against language and its basely utilitarian, one could say alimentary, sources, against its trapped-beast origins; and finally, to consider language as the form of *Incantation*. (46)

Macumbre's speech in *The Thirteenth Witch*, rooted in myth, poetry and dreams, is close to Artaud's incantatory language – something that the Chorus of Twelve, or the "good" witches, both mock her and fear her for. Macumbre, who introduces herself as "a maid in poetry" (136), relies on language and myth to revert the power of old stories. While the Chorus shouts in synchronicity slogans like "MYTHS ARE NOT RELEVANT" (150) or "ART IS NOT RELEVANT" (150), Macumbre knows that the way to overthrow the Chorus' power is through art and poetry: "art is the myth made timeless" (150), she softly answers.⁵¹⁴ Through repetition, Macumbre makes different passages acquire a powerful incantation form she uses against the dominion of the chorus. For instance, Macumbre repeats – in different forms and with slight variations – the story of Sleeping Beauty, condensing the power of her speech in the following

⁵¹⁴ The Chorus also tries on several occasions to make fun of Macumbre's language: "MOONSTRUCK ! THAT'S WHAT! It's a crime how she rhymes and gives her words meaning upon meaning" (151-152) In any case, the chorus's mocking of Macumbre's language is clearly rooted in their fear of her, as the following dialogue shows:

"MACUMBRE: skipping stones upon the magic pond / laughing is louder than fiction / no more about / but at / shallots & scallops / and hot potato salad.

CHORUS: what a metaphor mix / she's up to her tricks / it's time to get to the point / there's a deadline to your story." (178)

mantra: “a new view of matter / or an ancient one regained / only a new view of what matters / will break the trapped pattern”.⁵¹⁵ (150)

In addition to Macumbre’s use of language, *The Thirteenth Witch* expands the sensorial reception of the play through its use of light and color as visual complements to the language and actions. As weiss has stated, with this play, she “was very involved with what [she] wanted the sets to look like. They weren’t the usual kind of sets, there were certain kind of lights...blue lights... [she] knew exactly what [she] wanted.”⁵¹⁶ While light is present in most of her plays,⁵¹⁷ in *The Thirteenth Witch* it features more prominently; from the very beginning of the play – “no curtain --- stage dark except for faint diffused white light on the stage” (130) – different colors and intensity of light carry different meanings, and are linked to different characters. See, for instance, the stage directions for the first scene:

MACUMBRE *dressed in a purple robe edged with copper-gold majestically enters from center back-stage coming forward through the opened gate & stands centered. a sudden bastard amber light follows her entrance & rests on her – a sudden purple light cover the CHORUS OF TWELVE rendering their gray robes mauve. a soft green light gradually delineates the form of SLEEPING BEAUTY.* (130)

A strong purple light is associated in the play with the Chorus’ anger at Macumbre, just a red light emerges every time ZIMZUM – Macumbre’s guardian dog – counterattacks the Chorus.⁵¹⁸ In addition, a “blue spot focuses on the face of MACUMBRE” (158) when the Chorus leaves and she reads the “Twenty-third day” of weiss’s *Desert Journal*.⁵¹⁹ Near the end of the play, when Macumbre waits for Sleeping

⁵¹⁵ *A new view of Matter* (1999) is also the title of weiss’s first collection of poetry published in Europe (translated into Czech), as she writes in the dedication.

⁵¹⁶ Personal interview with the poet, July 2015.

⁵¹⁷ In *No dancing Aloud*, for instance, the set is “a dimly-lit dead-end alley. a few bulbs (soft colors) hang from cords. brick wall. litter. ashcans ---one crumpled flat & hung on wall. 4 wooden crates.” (18) *m & m*, for instance, takes place in “a deserted desert-road black sky gray road white line road starts at front stage narrowing towards back. focus lighting on mead & markow.” (72)

⁵¹⁸ “red light comes up as ZIMZUM / clangs his metal forcing the CHORUS / to sit down again --- then purple & red lights dim” (146). Zimzum was the name of weiss’s dog, which features in her poetry – most prominently, in *Compass* (1958), and also in her film, *The Brink*.

⁵¹⁹ This poem is relevant in the play in the context of getting rid of a past tradition – or narrative – to install a new regime: “one must fly to the desert / to shift / there / even the demons / lose their distortions /

Beauty to wake up, “a white pin-spot” focuses on a red rose that has been placed on the princess; while the witch dances around Sleeping Beauty she blocks and interacts with the light, transforming it with her body: “*MACUMBRE (drawn by light) turns slowly toward the princess & approaches in hypnotic measured steps to weave a slow dance around her. circling her one in a wide arc, MACUMBRE stops, blocking the spot so that it haloes her from behind.*” (188) In *The Thirteenth Witch*, as Artaud wrote in *The Theater and its Double*, “[l]ight, instead of decorating, assumes the qualities of an actual language, and the stage effects, all humming with significations, take on an order, reveal patterns.” (119)

A slightly different approach is found in *m & m* (1965),⁵²⁰ at least, as far as the fairy-tale element goes. Horst Spandler has referred to *m & m* as the play “that might most rightfully be considered a product of the Beat era” (*Can't Stop the Beat* xxi), not only because it was written about a meeting which took place during the Beat high momentum, but also because of the “eccentric existence of the protagonists who live on the fringe of society due to their homosexuality [and] their travestism.” (xxi) Indeed, the *m & m* of the title refers to the real persons on which the two characters are based. The story, as weiss tells in the summary of the play, comes from the night the two men met:

1956 [...]. night-walking in san Francisco with my close friend, JIM MARKOW, a writer & actor. we stop at a 24-hour café & there is TAYLOR MEAD, another close friend who has just returned from new york city. TAYLOR is a poet & actor (later to become famous for his roles in WARHOL's films). they resemble each other on many levels. the conversation that followed my introduction sparked this fantasy-piece titled **m & m** --- MEAD & MARKOW. (72)

the great spread / releases / all the ballasts / the heart --- / vulnerable --- / takes each annihilation / back to life / pulsing / pages partial / must be ripped / out completely / with paper --- / quite possible.” (n.p.n.)

⁵²⁰ weiss's *m & m* is included in *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945-1985* (Eds. Kevin Killian and David Brazil, 2010), which also includes plays by Gregory Corso, Helen Adam, Michael McClure, Diane di Prima, Anne Waldman, Kathy Acker or Madeline Gleason. Regarding the label “poets theater,” the editors write that “one way to try to articulate its shape through time is to try and catch it performing its social function. These plays occupy a charged social space between the disputed territories of performativity, theatricality, and the textual.” (xiii) They further state that “to arrive at a conclusion about the genre of poets theater, we might claim that its disorderly hybridity is its genre – that it is, perhaps, a genre in the process of formation, emerging out of the destabilization of sorts of prior forms, social as well as literary.” (xiv)

Despite the correspondence with real life people, Mead and Markow seem to fulfill archetypal positions rather than portraying realistic images of themselves. The similarities between the two, in addition, even blur individual traits; as weiss writes, in the play we have, “MEAD who looks like MARKOW but isn’t / MARKOW who looks like MEAD but isn’t” (72). Like Samuel Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*,⁵²¹ Mead and Markow are archetypal figures of people in transit, on the road, waiting for something to change the course of their lives. Alone on opposite sides of a desert road, the two characters reluctantly engage in halting conversations that are often cut short by interruptions or abrupt changes of topics:

MEAD: are you a star too?

MARKOW: i’m celibating.

MEAD: could you repeat that?

MARKOW: i wouldn’t know how to begin.

MEAD: the way to get rid of a cold is to eat half a bottle.

MARKOW: please be serious.

MEAD: the way to get rid of a cold is to suck half a bottle.

MARKOW: are you talking to me?

MEAD: the way to get rid of a cold is to fuck half a bottle.

MARKOW: are you trying to get my attention? (74)

Throughout the play, they loosely cover various topics such as faith and religion – “first they learn about GOD, then they get lunatic & want to meet him ---they ask where’s heaven ---they want to see it RIGHT THEN! & so they commit suicide...” (80) – jazz through the figures of Charlie Parker, Lady Day and Thelonious Monk, or orgies, to name a few. Their exchanges often lead to jokes or surrealist situations; when Mead complains that he “hasn’t seen a beautiful person in blocks” (82), Markow answers, “you & your cubism!” (82) Similarly, in the following conversation, the surrealist and

⁵²¹Spandler writes in the introduction to *Can’t Stop the Beat* that weiss did not become aware of the similarities of *m & m* with Beckett’s play until years after writing it. Seeing weiss’s play, then, as “an unconsciously counterpart” (xxii) to *Waiting for Godot*, Spandler writes that “similarities arise from the basic constellation: that two queer birds in a deserted place are waiting for something existentially meaningful to arrive that does not come and, in the case of *m & m*, for a car to pick them up and to save them from waiting in an inhospitable desert area. A further parallel lies in the conversation, which is often repetitive and revolves around certain topics, while it appears to be pretty incoherent at times.” (xxii)

disconnected sentences challenge the position of the audience by forcing them to find meaning outside conventional uses of language:

MEAD: *sighing* if only one car would come, we could have an orgy

MARKOW: if there was someone in it

MEAD: i thought you gave all that up

MARKOW: i'm not so sure you're of this world either. but i wish one night i could go out & have no one disappear. (86-88)

A recurrent line in the play involves Mead asking Markow for a dance; the dance, as Markow answers, is in the play “a way.” (90, 98) After two failed attempts at dancing,⁵²² it is not until an actual car is coming Mead’s way that they start dancing, letting the car go by – “*they dance a slow waltz (no music) --- headlights come close --- whirr of motor --- light & sound passes --- MEAD & MARKOW continue waltzing in wider & wider circles.*” (100) Turning now towards the audience, they talk simultaneously to emphasize their voluntary, willing, stranded position: “we can’t give you anything but love --- BABY!”⁵²³ (102)

Like Macumbre in *The Thirteenth Witch*, Mead and Markow use dance not only as means of self-expression, but also as an instigator of action – or lack of action in this case. In *One Knight and One Lady*, Kerard also initiates a dance that is explicitly constructed in terms of the liberation of the spirit through physical movement; accompanied by Anna’s clapping and encouraging words – “dance! dance! / get it all out / dancing dancing that’s what it’s all about”⁵²⁴ (60) – Kerard experiences the only moment of freedom and peace in the play.

The centrality of dance in weiss’s work is not limited to her plays – to the more visual medium of theater – but is also felt in her poetry. A very powerful example of dancing takes place in “Single Out,” (1958) a poem weiss often refers to as her “refugee

⁵²² The first time Markow states that “a car will be passing soon one way or the other” (90) apparently concerned that their dancing will prevent them from seeing the car. The second time, after Markow points out that “the dance is a way” (98), Mead – the one who proposed dancing in the first place – responds: “i don’t dance!” (98)

⁵²³ This line is a quotation from the popular 1928 “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love, Baby”, a song and jazz standard by Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields.

⁵²⁴ weiss’s paternal grandmother is quoted in “Single Out” saying almost the same words as Anna: “dancing she said / only dancing / that’s all it’s about / never stop dancing & she would roll the strudel / into the oven for her family / my father my mother me / just arrived in 1933 from berlin”. (n.p.n.)

story.” Divided into four sections, the poem begins with the poet immersing in a kind of drug-induced state in which she, stream-of-consciousness style, looks back at her past and her escape from the Nazi-terrorized Germany.⁵²⁵ While sections I, II and III are autobiographical, describing her early years in New York, her escaping to Vienna with her parents when the political situation in Berlin started to get dangerous, then fleeing Vienna on the last train permitted to cross the border to Holland, as well as her years in Chicago before going to San Francisco, the last section – entitled “Dance” – is the only one not related to the poet’s personal experience. In fact, “Dance” is a fictionalization of a real event which took place when a ballerina who was in line for the gas chamber, was asked to undress and – apparently – dance to amuse the SS Sergeants present.⁵²⁶ In that moment, she took the gun off of an officer and killed him, also wounding another. In weiss’s poem, the girl “naked / lined up for the gas chamber” (n.p.n.), feeling the “shame & blame & guiltless guilt” weiss also suffered from during much of her life,⁵²⁷ takes the opportunity to turn the joke the officer wanted to turn her death into – “YOU THERE / you’re a dancer / DANCE!” – into a heroic revenge action which grants her a momentary triumph. The word “dance,” in this context, “struck lightning,” sparking the action:

and she danced as it struck
 CLEAN LIKE LIGHT
 and took the gun from his dumb hand
 and struck him down
 like thunder
 and thunder again

from where the shocked guard stood

⁵²⁵ She had been drinking terpin hydrate to cure a persistent cough.

⁵²⁶ Although this is difficult to prove – as the story has mostly survived orally and details vary from one account to the other – the dancer is most often said to be Franceska Mann, a Polish Jewish dancer who was killed in Auschwitz in 1943.

⁵²⁷ In “Full Circle” (1993), for instance, she writes: “i live through my concentration camp guilt. that / i got away. will i ever dare to put roots down. i see my relatives with shaved heads. and all the others. in the gas-chambers.” (64) Similarly, in her poem “her number was not called” (*No Dancing Aloud*) weiss comes back to the same survivor guilt: “her number was not called / her number was not called / she was not there / to be given a number / she was 10 [...] she is 20 / lives in a room she paints black / vomits daily for 20 years / shaves her head / does not know why she’s alive / does not know the source of her pain” (6).

she went down

CLEAN LIKE LIGHT

Independently of the real details of the event, in the context of weiss's own refugee story, the fact that she concludes the poem with the celebration of the power of dance is telling of her commitment to different art forms in poetry. weiss – who still dances at 87 – states that “dance is one of the big things for [her]”.⁵²⁸ Using that story at the end of her poem was a way of “finalizing the dance”; of using its power to symbolize freedom.⁵²⁹ In much the same way, her plays incorporate dance as a manifestation of the power of art and creativity independently of the medium used. In “The Relation of Dance to the Visual Arts”⁵³⁰ (1947) the dancer and author Barbara Mettler – who thought of dance as a fundamental human activity – saw dance as a unifying force among other forms of visual arts:

Dance is the integrating factor among all the arts. It is equally concerned with time and space, thus overlapping on the one hand the arts of sound (music and poetry) and on the other the arts of sight (painting, sculpture, architecture). A study of dance can be a powerful impetus to visual art expression. By releasing creative movement impulses, it frees the personality for all types of expression. By awakening the sense of space and cultivating it in a visual-motor direction, it establishes a functional basis for the creation of visual art forms. Just as every sensory experience involves a movement impulse, every art contains an element of dance. The more consciously this element is cultivated, the more complete will be our art expression. (203)

weiss herself does not make this connection explicit, but the way in which different art forms are interrelated in her work, and the centrality of dance in her plays and her poetry, reveal her extensive use of the visual arts and the “expanded,” multimedia character of her writing.

⁵²⁸ Personal interview, July 10th 2015.

⁵²⁹ In a personal interview with her, weiss told the following story she said not to have told before: “I was also going to make an improvised ballet-type of thing [...] after I wrote that, I thought that I should make a dance out of it...of just that section. And a friend that was going to help me write things out came over. The two of us were alone. And I started to make the movement, and the dancing...and all of a sudden there were these strange noises and the apartment started to shake a little...I mean that...[...] and then it stopped. And I turned to my friend and I told her ‘I don’t think we should be doing this.’ And she said ‘I agree with you.’ I wasn’t spiritually strong enough to handle that. So I was stopped from doing it.”

⁵³⁰ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1947).

IV.4.2. Film and Video

“i love movies. have made them, been in them – sometimes fiction, sometimes fact.” (*Can't Stop the Beat* 180)

In November 2008 the Museum Ludwig – Cologne, Germany – launched an exhibition entitled “Looking for Mushrooms, Beat Poets, Hippies, Funk, Minimal Art: San Francisco 1955-1968.” Marking the 40th anniversary of 1968, the year of love, the exhibition, curated by Barbara Engelbach, looked at the socio-political conditions surrounding the different activist and artistic movements that originated in the West Coast during that period of time, stressing the connections between artists as well as the breaking down of barriers between artistic forms. Among the work of exhibited artists such as Stan Brakhage, Wallace Berman, Jay DeFeo, Lawrence Jordan, Yvonne Rainer, Allen Ginsberg or Bruce Conner – whose film *Looking for Mushrooms* gave title to the program – the program also included a screening of ruth weiss’s only film, *The Brink* (1961). This exhibition followed the steps of other similar events, such as “Beat Culture and the New America, 1950-1965,” (1996) an exhibit curated by Lisa Philips at the Whitney Museum in New York which, besides screening *The Brink*, also exhibited DeFeo’s *The Rose*. In that same year, *The Brink* was also screened at the Venice Biennale Film Festival, and even though these events have drawn attention to weiss’s involvement with film – which resulted in more screenings⁵³¹ – the role of film in her work has not yet been studied, if at all, in depth. Neither in experimental film studies nor in Beat-specific cinematic discourses, has weiss’s contribution been seriously analyzed, being too frequently pushed – in the best of cases – to an anecdotal position. In “A Movement towards the Real: *Pull my Daisy* and the American Independent Film, 1950-65,” John G. Hanhardt analyzes “the historical and critical context, reflection on filmmakers and their efforts to create an alternative film culture during the late 1950s and early 1960s” (*Beat Culture and the New America* 215). Even if *The Brink* was screened at the exhibit this book originated from, Hanhardt omits weiss’s

⁵³¹ In the last decade *The Brink* – and other film projects by weiss – has been screened rather frequently, especially if we compare it to the film’s lack of visibility during the 1960s. Recent screenings include a special screening of four of weiss’s film projects organized by the Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center (New Orleans), or “The Eyes: San Francisco Beat Film 1958-67” (2013) at the Phyllis Wattis Theater, where *The Brink* was shown in conjunction with more established “beat” films such as Christopher Maclaine’s *Beat* (1958) or Wallace Berman’s *Aleph* (1958).

contribution,⁵³² focusing, instead, on filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Ron Rice and Robert Breer, among others.⁵³³

While in the previous section I analyzed the impact of visual art forms like painting, sculpture, theater and dance in weiss's oeuvre, in this section, I look into the poet's involvement with film as an expansion of her poetry. Despite the lack of academic awareness of weiss's association with film, cinema has had a central role in her life and artistic career. Since the release in 1961 of *The Brink*, the poet has continued to work with film, both by performing in them, and by using the audio-visual possibilities offered by cinema and video as means to supplement her poems. Before delving into the analysis of the translation of weiss's poetry into the film celluloid, I briefly look at another important facet of her relationship with the experimental film culture: her participation in Steven Arnold's films.

Steven Arnold (1943–1994), a Californian painter, filmmaker and visual artist, directed his first film while studying at the San Francisco Art Institute. Like the rest of his artistic production, his films rely on very subjective imagery, creating situations in which conventional meaning and settings are often deployed in favor of dream-like scenarios where the characters are free to explore sexuality and bend gender lines. As a close friend of Arnold, weiss acted in the majority of his films, and has described her relationship with him as “two artists on the same beam.” *The Liberation of Mannique Mechanique* (1967), Steven Arnold's first film, revolves around different female characters alternating positions as mannequins, models and ordinary girls, in a series of half-dream, half-nightmare scenarios full of masks, clothes, fabrics, accessories, and so forth. weiss's interaction with the protagonist, who dreams she is trapped inside a mannequin, functions mostly as a comforting presence adding, incidentally, to the general sexual innuendo of the film.

⁵³² weiss's film is similarly only mentioned in passing in the section “The Beat Movement in Film: A Comprehensive Screening List” (by Ray Carney). Carney, in his article “Escape Velocity: Notes on Beat Film,” briefly mentions *The Brink* in relation to John Korty's *The Crazy Quilt*, seeing both films as freeing “both their characters and their viewers from the repressiveness of overly logical, overly determined, overly casual understanding of experience.” (*Beat Culture and the New America* 207)

⁵³³ He also mentions Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, seeing *Pull my Daisy* as “the key Beat film of its generation” (223).



Figure 55. weiss in *The Liberation of Mannique Mechanique*

Messages, Messages (1968) is a surrealist film influenced by the work of “Dali, Buñuel and the German expressionists” as Michael Wiese – filmmaker and the producer of the film – has stated. Arnold, who would later work with Dali and was called by the Spanish artist his prince in the court of Miracles, uses surreal imagery in this film to access the unconscious of the protagonist.⁵³⁴ Through the opening metaphor of the peeping hole, the film portrays a man’s trip through his own mind, where lights and shadows delineate ambiguous figures, and close-ups of people become alienated and estranged through the superimposition of faces. In a long sequence, weiss is featured in a scene in which the protagonist and herself, sitting naked across each other, look intensely into the other’s eyes with subtle changes of expression that range from curiosity, to acceptance to peace.



Figure 56. weiss in *Messages, Messages*

The superimposed and out of focus images of *The various Incantations of a Tibetan Seamstress* (1969) similarly evoke dream-like states. While the seamstress sews

⁵³⁴ When Salvador Dali saw Arnold’s last film, *Luminous Procureess*, he was so impressed with his work that he invited him to help set up The Dali Museum in Spain. To know more about Arnold’s connection with Dali, as well as his artistic career in general, see the film *Steven Arnold’s Heavenly Bodies* (dir, Stephanie Farago, 2014.)

a piece of fabric, different scenes suggest the result of her incantations. One of them features a naked Ruth Weiss sitting down in the Buddhist lotus position. Keeping a serious face, Weiss gesticulates wildly with her hands – an action that she performs in the majority of films she appears in.



Figure 57. Stills from *The various Incantations of a Tibetan Seamstress*

Luminous Procuress (1971) – Arnold's last film and his only feature-length – is the story of two men that are led through various fantasy worlds where surrealist, sexual, spiritual, and otherwise just playful characters are given free rein. With a hypnotic musical score and dialogue dubbed in several languages, this film, like all of Arnold's, purveys a multisensory experience rather than a linear narrative. Weiss, together with members of the psychedelic theater group The Cockettes – in one of their first film appearances – is featured in several of the vignettes or peepshows the two men run into.





Figure 58. weiss in carnival procession, with Arnold's muse, Pandora, and as a light creature

Through the extended use of vignettes, this film shows Arnold's interest in the *tableau vivant*, an art form he worked with in depth after the 1970s, and that can be interpreted as an expansion of painting while keeping a close connection with theater and performance. Arnold, who worked with painting, drawing, assemblage sculpture and photography, staged photography, *tableaux vivants*⁵³⁵ and film – among others – to give expression to his artistic vision, shares with weiss, as well as with many post-war, revolutionary artists, a constant preoccupation with finding new means of expression. While the collaboration with Arnold shows weiss's interest in film⁵³⁶ and participation in Underground Film culture, it does not represent the poet's use of film and video as media from which to explore or expand her own artistic vision. In what follows, I look into the one film she made, *The Brink*, and into other projects she has participated in to investigate the connection between her poetry and the cinema.

The Brink: The Poetic Film

In 1961, weiss produced the only film she has directed – the only one, as she often puts it, that she has been in full control of. The origin of the film can be traced back to Paul

⁵³⁵ To see examples of Arnold's tableaux, see Peter Weiermair's *Steven Arnold: Exotic Tableaux* (1996).

⁵³⁶ In several interviews weiss has also alluded to an apparently lost film called *The Rise and Fall of the World as Seen from a Sexual Position* (dir., Arthur Meyer, 1972). In this film weiss acted in together with Carol Doda, a legendary topless stripper in San Francisco who was active in the 1960s through the 1980s, known for her topless – and later bottomless – dancing and breast implants – the latter were known as “the new Twin Peaks of San Francisco.” In an interview conducted by Walker Brents in August 2002, weiss stated that the film “was a complete spoof on pornography. Very funny film. Some Busby Berkeley type things in there that were very funny. I had about seven short roles in it, in one of them I played Queen Victoria, and I played a lesbian running for president. It had a grand opening on Chestnut Street back in 1972. I don't know what happened to it. I think some of the Cockettes were in it.” (ruth weiss Archive at Bancroft. A shorter version of this interview, not including this last question, was published in *The San Francisco Reader*, September 2002.)

Beattie, a painter and personal friend of weiss, who had just bought a 16mm camera and asked her to write a script for him. (*Cool* 63) Like the rest of art forms she has explored, this film is a good example of the way in which she, in her own words, “expand[s] [her] poetry into whatever medium” (*Cool* 60) she uses. Although the film originated from – and bears the title of – her narrative poem “The Brink” (1960) – published in *Single Out* – in the narration of the film weiss not only expands this poem, but also fuses it with different poems written around 1960: besides “Blue in Green” (1960) and “Chopsticks” (1960), as Preston Whaley notes in *Blows like a Horn*,⁵³⁷ the narration also includes excerpts from “Light” – in *Light and Other Poems* – a couple of poems included in *Gallery of Women* (1959) – such as “Earth Painting” and “Words no words for a dance Fumi” – and even excerpts from her first play, *Figs*. Taking “the essence of ‘The Brink’”⁵³⁸ and completing the narration with excerpts from the above-mentioned poems, weiss constructs an archetypal love story whose protagonists He and She – played by the painters Sutter Marin and Lori Lawyer, respectively – follow a poetical structure rather than a conventional, linear script.⁵³⁹ From a sort of first date at a cafeteria to a physical and emotional distancing and potential final reconciliation, *The Brink* offers a poetic tour through the joy and pain of love guided by images and words that evoke, rather than describe or impose, emotions and situations.

Together with the loose script formed by the different poems, the improvisational nature of the film lies, in fact, at the core of its structural success. In a personal interview with the poet, she related that in this film she “was in complete control of where, why and how. And nobody read the script.” She further described the filming process as being highly improvised: the same day of the shooting, she would call Paul Beattie – who had a van – and ask him to pick up the crew, telling him in that moment where to go. Once in the setting she had chosen – different locations in San Francisco and its outskirts – weiss would simply tell the actors and personnel, “this is what’s supposed to happen,” letting them improvise their actions. In *Blows like a Horn*, Preston Whaley writes that:

⁵³⁷ He erroneously refers to “Blue in Green” as “Blue and Green.”

⁵³⁸ Personal interview, July 2015.

⁵³⁹ In none of the poems, except for “Words no words for a dance Fumi” – which is read in its entirety without interruption – does weiss follow a linear reading, opting, instead, to rearrange the different poems by cutting and pasting them together – sometimes whole stanzas, other times individual verses.

The Brink is improvisational and verité in style: 16mm, black and white, natural lighting, no-prop location sets. weiss carefully choreographed the film's eighteen scenes with her narration and Bill Spencer's soundtrack, however. Like Frank's *Pull my Daisy* and Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (1960), *The Brink* utilizes improvisation but within a framework and according to specific protocols – loose ones. (72)

This spontaneity not only concerns the actors and their actions, but also the filming itself; as weiss has commented, she “used a lot of [her] impressions from [her] wanderings around San Francisco. A lot of spontaneous magic happened with the film.” (*Cool* 63) This magic materializes in the film through the incorporation of “found objects” that in the moment of filming were deemed as contributing to the meaning and imagery of the story. An example of these found objects is the old couple at the opening scene at the cafeteria who – while they just happened to be there – served weiss as a counterpoint to He and She or/and as an old version of them.⁵⁴⁰ Other found objects incorporated into the narrative can be found in a scene in which She walks through San Francisco's Chinatown – holding an empty cage decorated with flowers, a fake bird outside the cage and a wind chime – until the camera follows a set of Chinese characters drawn on the sidewalk, stopping when it stumbles upon an upside down bus stop sign. These elements, as weiss commented in a personal interview, were not planned when she envisioned the scene, but were simply found and incorporated because they “just fitted with the work [she] was doing”; “I had a structure, but it was very open to changes,” she further noted. The narration in this scene is mostly taken from “Chopsticks” (1960), a poem in which weiss evokes Chinatown through short visual and musical verses,⁵⁴¹ and that works in the film as a poetic soundtrack to She's and He's wandering through the neighborhood. The scene with the characters on the sidewalk is edited to the lines that draw attention to past stories ingrained in a place, be

⁵⁴⁰ weiss related this story in *Breaking the Rule of Cool*: “For example, we are in the cafeteria, and there is a scene of the couple who are the main characters, and then you'll see a shot of this old couple. They just happened to be sitting there, just fit into the scene.” (63)

⁵⁴¹ Sound, which plays an important role in most of weiss's work, is very present in “Chopsticks.” See – or hear – for instance the following verses: “and i want to ingo tree-throw / go trip the quick / eeee ooooo oh / a whook / awahookah whokk / clik clik klink / and you go off on your own bright / tangent / inflections in a golden high / and rr bbb/ bog a boggin / whiss the whistle / rrrr here the trill spill” (*Single Out* n.p.n.)

it land or cement, and that are now used to tell She's and He's story: "from ancient Chinatown spreads, the beans sprout silk, for tomorrow's tale."

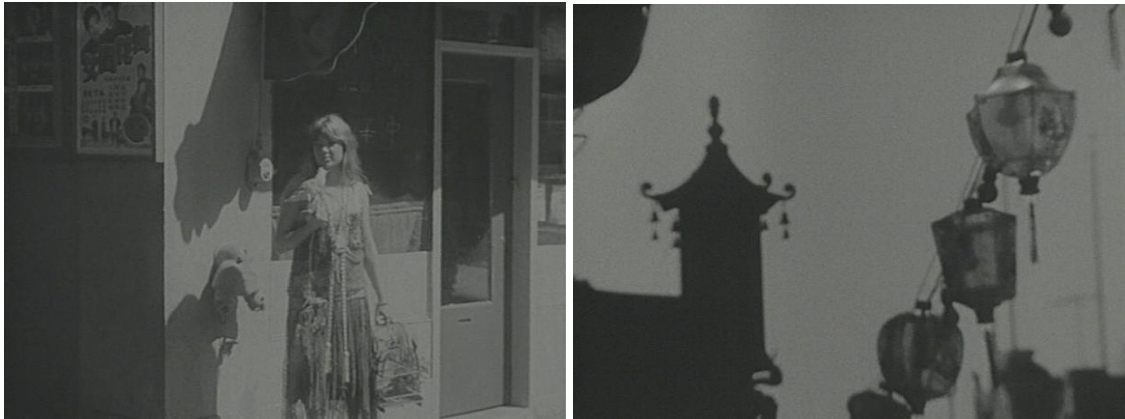


Figure 59. Scenes in SF's Chinatown



Figure 60. Found objects

The end of the row of characters on the ground takes the viewer to the bus stop – or “pots sub” – that is used in the film as an introduction to the following scene, this time taken from the poem “The Brink”, in which He takes a bus. This scene – with a cameo by weiss as one of the passengers annoyed by He’s looks and attitude – can be seen as an example of the ways in which text and image influence one another in this film. While in the poem it was “the shopping ladies [who] sat grim / and then they too laughed” with He’s memories of “his grandmother / and picnics / on the bus & weaving,” in the film version – quite probably because it “just happened to be there” – the line changes to “the passengers sat grim, only the shy child smiled,” as He talks to the little girl sitting behind him. A similar example takes place later in the film when the verses “they had stopped their parking / and went driving in the country / looking for apples with no fences” is substituted with “they crossed the bridge looking for apples

with no fences” to fit the image of She and He walking across – not driving – a bridge in the outskirts of San Francisco.



Figure 61. Bus and bridge scenes

In these cases, the poem is altered to fit the images filmed, while other times, it is the images that replace the poem, reproducing the verses through visual means.⁵⁴² For instance, when the couple leave the cafeteria in the very first scene, the verses “my baby’s carriage / blocks the passage / beyond”, are turned into filmic images that stand for the poem itself. In much the same way, all the references in the poem to zimzum – weiss’s dog – are similarly replaced by the real zimzum “acting out” his lines,⁵⁴³ so that lines such as “and zz barked & barked” or “zz sat on the rock out of the sun”, are transformed into moving images.



Figure 62. Images as verses

⁵⁴² Other times the images and text coincide, that is, the images filmed act as visual representations of the verses that are used as narration.

⁵⁴³ He even appears in the credits.

Stan Brakhage was one of the first to acknowledge the delicate relation between weiss's poetry and the filmic image in *The Brink*. In December 1962, he wrote a letter to Jonas Mekas – editor of *Film Culture* – drawing attention to weiss's film and its lack of visibility in the film culture. In the conclusion of his letter, which was published in *Film Culture* n° 29, Summer 1963, Brakhage wrote:

I am once more aware of the complete lack of attention to film endeavor in this community (that *The Brink*, “(one of the most ambitious ‘first’ films I’ve ever seen, attempting to pitch the actors into situations preordained by ruth weiss’s poetry yet leave them free of the context, unaware of the poetic narrative intended, to develop synthesis of poetry and image highly structured but containing residue of very real immediate, almost haiku, feeling) – that this film remains, almost two years after its completion, almost completely unknown); and my determination to correct such local ignorance by way of a little national advertisement, if possible. (80)

Brakhage, who began his artistic career as a poet – and indeed thought of himself as a “failed poet” – was, as Daniel Kane writes, greatly “invested in the conversation between film and poetry” (*We Saw the Light* 51). Kane also writes that for Brakhage, “[t]he poetic line itself, conceived of as a sung utterance rather than a page-bound text, was an analogue to the projected light of film.” (51) In this context, it comes as no surprise that the filmmaker appreciated the particularly musical and visual quality of weiss's poetic line which, as foundation for the narration, becomes an essential element of her film.

In fact, in addition to the relationship or correlation between narration and image, another central aspect of *The Brink* is the sound, an element that takes different dimensions in the film and that, as the poems themselves, accompanies the images rather than gives them traditional – “Hollywoodesque” – sense. Bill Spencer,⁵⁴⁴ who worked in the sound together with Warner Jepson and Mel Weitsman,⁵⁴⁵ created a sound track composed of different musical instruments – like saxophone, guitars, bass, or flute among others – and also sound effects created with chains, glass or metal, used to simulate, for instance, the ambient noise of the cafeteria and the sea. Like the

⁵⁴⁴ Spencer also collaborated in film projects with the visual artist Elias Romero.

⁵⁴⁵ Weiss's first husband, a painter who later became a Zen priest.

narration itself, the music and different sounds compliment and/or interact with the images in different ways. The music, for one, helps to differentiate between scenes, adding to the “highly structured” feel Brakhage alluded to in his letter to Mekas, and setting up the mood of the images and the narration. For instance, a soft, low drum gives way to a bass guitar that introduces a Jazz score as She and He dance and goof around by the sea shore. The couple’s improvised rough and tumble game by the water – fighting against each other and playing with sand and rocks – fits perfectly with the playful jazz on the background, just as weiss’s words – “i am the begin said the water, I was before you said sand / and the shells rubbed screaming against each other” – allude to a musical synchronicity between the couple’s love and the nature that serves them as a scenario. The relationship between images, music and narration, however, does not always lead to a peaceful dialogue; for instance, in a different scene, similarly gleeful images of She and He crossing a shallow river while smiling and hugging, are counterpointed with a dark melody reproduced by low piano keys as well as weiss’s lower tone while she reads: “This mad still pond to magnetize, the ferning phantoms, tread blue, my only dream grew dark, a forest, and a pool, to feel somehow a sun.”

Ambient sound compliments audibly the visual representation of the poem – as is the case with the sounds of the sea in several scenes or the clanging of plates and food utensils in the cafeteria, but also in a scene in which He and She goof around with a group of friends in an apartment by the sea. Just as the images of the sea were accompanied in the soundtrack by the reproduction of its sound, in this scene the flute and string instruments used to compose the music are directly shown in the film as they are being played by guests at the party.



Figure 63. Instruments and music

While in these scenes sound and image match, the juxtaposition of these two elements create more complex associations on other occasions, even pointing towards a social critique not made readily available by images, sound or narration alone, but suggested through the combination of all three. An example can be found in a sequence where images of rows of houses and fences are accompanied by the sound of expanding or contracting metallic structures. In this case, as the houses do not make that noise, a new correlation can be made between images and sound that draws attention to the artificiality and lack of freedom of suburban areas. In addition, the barrenness and sterility of the landscape – the rows of identical houses and uncultivated ground – acquire a darker meaning in light of weiss’s narration for this scene: “all around the town / blow men & women down / make ‘em into sticks / stop all their tricks / put ‘em into rows & rows of boxes / where the trees once were / they’ll be of some use then.” These lines, taken from the last section of “The Brink,” work hand in hand with the metallic sounds and the images of the row houses to suggest the dehumanization of contemporary life. Cutting the trees and putting standardized dwellings in their place – or turning the men and women who hide inside into inanimate sticks – He and She are forced to find a way of self-expression within this deserted landscape. The last scene in the film – set in an abandoned area full of debris and wreckage – shows the couple making a home out of the broken pieces of civilization, rearranging rocks on the floor, playing on a rug with fallen branches and twigs, reading burnt paper, and even receiving letters from friends.





Figure 64. Rows of houses and home in the debris

This scene, which ends with the words, “horn song / let us have come / let us from city up and city down” – the first part being also the opening lines of the film – is reminiscent of weiss’s poem “One more Step West Is the Sea.” This narrative poem, published in 1958 in weiss’s first book, *Steps*, although not explicitly quoted in the film, resonates in the representation of the city and, more noticeably, in the last two scenes of the film. In “One more Step West Is the Sea” weiss describes a San Francisco of “spread around hills where the action shifts while its geographical center is still an outpost.” (n.p.n.) A city that, like the one She and He inhabit, is under the threat of a larger, oppressive force: “silly city! the webbed monster is clawing you. he will devour you when he has ceased playing!” Like the metal noise that resonates as the camera follows the rows of houses in *The Brink*, the threat in “One more Step” is given the intangible form of modern civilization, and the city is to blame for accepting its transformation into a progressively alienated space – “you have invited the webbed monster to connect you he has a cement and steel-greedy eye.” Similarly, like She and He, who at the end of the film achieve a peaceful reconciliation with the city – even if it means living at the margins of society, among the debris and ruins – the speaker in the poem concludes by establishing a give and take relationship with the town, instead of completely abandoning it: “city, i have / come to you / from the far-land... / my hands / are cupped.”⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁶ In its description of an industrialized threat, repressed sexuality and its connection with violence and economic profit – “it is the coin-again-coin / gold is out / silver is out / diamonds are a ... --- / only paper is king / kong gone / down the river / of again / because in sex-fear / orgasm-fear / we must build better and bigger bombs” – weiss’s “clawing monster” can be analyzed as an incarnation of Ginsberg’s Moloch. Unlike Ginsberg’s “Howl,” nevertheless, weiss also sees the many positive aspects of the city, mostly its

Most notably, sound in the film compliments weiss's voice, which most of the times acts as another instrument by playing different notes through variations in tone, intonation, and pitch. The musicality of the poet's voice is very present in a scene in which He and She play with fallen leaves and pieces of cork around the base of a big tree, while weiss reads the poem "Words no words for a dance Fumi" (included in *Gallery of Women*). This poem, which, as mentioned before, reproduces the dance movements of Fumi Spencer through mostly made-up words and syllables, serves a very similar function in *The Brink*. Accompanied by metal, drum-like, sounds, a xylophone and a flute, the rise and fall of weiss's voice highlight the musical nature of the couple's movements. Rather than giving their actions a sequential sense – for instance, a description of what they are doing – the narration in this scene fuses with the musical score to delineate the emotional tone of a specific phase in their romantic relationship.⁵⁴⁷ Similarly, the intonation and tone with which weiss narrates help accentuate different emotional states in different scenes, even when the verses read are the same. As a case in point, the verses "to clean water use earth to clean earth use fire to clean fire use air to clean air enter / Rock and rock and tide, rushing rushing stream, table and table and mirror, bird against wind, a leaf, a current / LAUA VABO AVE"⁵⁴⁸ appear both at the beginning and at the end of the film, conveying slightly different meanings in each case depending on both the background music and weiss's tone. The sporadic and arrhythmic flute notes and metallic sounds that can be heard the first time that these verses are read – in a scene in which He plays with Zimzum while She contemplates the sea – are contrasted with the more melodic and fluent tune composed with a piano and a whistle of the second time around. In addition to the harmony created by the music, weiss's more upbeat intonation accentuates the feelings of hope and optimism that were not present in the first reading of the same verses.

people and the love they feel – even a fireman's puppy who "hears red engines / and is not afraid / because it has love"; or the city's multiculturalism: "i've lived here five years / and only met two who were born here." As an anecdote, weiss lived in 1010 Montgomery in San Francisco in 1952 – the same apartment where Ginsberg was to write "Howl" years later.

⁵⁴⁷ Discussing Beat film-makers, Christopher Gair, in *The American Counterculture*, mentions *The Brink* together with Rice's *The flower Thief*, Smith's and Jabobs' *Blonde Cobra* and *Flaming Creatures*, Frank and Leslie's *Pull my Daisy* and Cassavetes's *Shadows*: "In San Francisco, the poet ruth weiss produced the experimental film *The Brink* (1961), a movie that echoes the free jazz of the tome in its focus on sound above 'meaning' or 'structure' in a process whereby, as Whaley suggests, 'the priority of the aesthetics of tone color subordinates the mechanisms of signifying chains'." (113)

⁵⁴⁸ This last verse was She's invented language at the end of the play *Figs*.

weiss's film not only attests to the poet's involvement with different art forms and media, but also contests the commercialized image of the beatniks in mainstream – even experimental – film, an issue which becomes even more relevant in light of the marginalization of female experience. Although weiss's film does not tackle feminist issues directly – like much of the work of Beat women, the film predates feminist discourses – weiss does create a space in which independence becomes essential for both sexes. To name one example, the sentences “go the round house he can't corner you there” and “go to sea she can't corner you there” stress both the feminine and masculine need of retaining individuality and freedom while in a relationship. Nevertheless, weiss's position as woman and a poet permeates the fabric of the film, allowing for an open and global interpretation of masculine and feminine experience. Critics such as Johnson and Grace, see *The Brink* as an expansion of “Beat Culture, representing a heterogeneous egalitarianism that counters the misogyny of the 1959 Robert Frank/Alfred Leslie film *Pull my Daisy*.” (*Breaking the Rule of Cool* 58) That egalitarianism translates in the film, as well as in weiss's whole oeuvre, in a focus on experience lived above and beyond exclusionist or reductionist divisions between the sexes.

Show Must Go on: Recent Projects

In 1972 weiss wrote the script for a film that was going to be directed by Steven Arnold. Though the project never materialized, the manuscript – titled *Beyond the Palace Walls* – was published in *A Fool's Journey* in 2012.⁵⁴⁹ Divided into four very structured sections – corresponding to the four seasons – weiss's film very much resembles plays like *The Thirteenth Witch* in its use of fairy-tale elements and highly symbolic imagery.⁵⁵⁰ A princess in an “ornate palace” (56), wizards, a monkey-God who accompanies the princess on a journey of self-discovery, harlequins, dragons, riddles and different transformations, are some of the main elements in the story. The year-long

⁵⁴⁹ In the prelude to the script weiss writes: “in 1972 film-maker and artist Steven Arnold asked me to write the script for his next film. i had appeared in all his movies which he began in 1967. but this was my first-time to do the story-line for him. the Chinese Monkey-God was to be the central figure to be played by our mutual friend Kaisik Wong. i was to play the demon. known for garments he did stitch by stitch that evoked Atlantis reaching into the Aquarian Age, Kai was also to do the costumes. the backing never materialized. all involved went on their separate paths. the film did not happen. but the story which is the script asks you to enter and be entertained.” (54)

⁵⁵⁰ Steven Arnold, as weiss told me in a personal interview, merely told her that he wanted to make a film about the Monkey-God taking the princess out of the palace. From that information, weiss wrote the script.

odyssey the princess embarks upon to save her father's kingdom concludes when she is forced to face her independence; alone for the first time in the story – finding herself “on the path where there is no path” (76) – she receives the last advice from the demon or old woman: “child child follow your heart / which like a flame / will guide you to heaven & home” (76). Although all of these projects – her participation in Arnold's films, *The Brink* and the failed *Beyond the Palace Walls* – took place between the 1960s and early 1970s, weiss's involvement with film and video is not limited to this era. In fact, in the last two decades she has participated in several projects in which she has continued to expand her poetry through performance and moving images.

ruth weiss Meets her Prometheus (2007), a short film directed by the Austrian-British filmmaker Frederick Baker,⁵⁵¹ documents the poet's relationship with a sculpture of the Greek titan. As the creator and benefactor of human kind, Prometheus suffered greatly from one of Zeus's monumental tantrums when he deceived him twice in favor of humanity. First, by making Zeus choose fat and bones over meat and entrails as his share of the sacrifice humans offered to the gods,⁵⁵² and later by stealing back from Zeus the fire humans had been deprived of. As a punishment, Prometheus was chained to a rock in the Caucasus, where an eagle would eat his liver, which would grow back overnight, for the rest of his days. When the five year old weiss came across this statue for the first time – in the hallway of her paternal grandmother's apartment in Vienna⁵⁵³ – she did not know the origins of the chained man, and at the time simply feared and pitied him in his torture. It was not until weiss returned to Vienna in the late 1990s that she learned about the origin of the statue. Despite the fact that weiss was unaware of Prometheus's story for much of her life, she has often commented how his presence haunted her, an affirmation which is relevant on two levels. First, Prometheus

⁵⁵¹ Baker divides his time between filming, teaching and writing articles. He is also the author of *The Art of Projectionism* (2007) where he argues that any surface can be used as a potential projection surface (objects, skin, water, smoke, etc.) and that projection becomes a physical act. In his praised *Shadowing the Third Man* (2004) – about the production of *The Third Man* (1949) directed by Carol Reed and written by Graham Greene – he uses this technique, projecting Reed's film in various surfaces.

⁵⁵² As Fritz Graf writes in *Greek Mythology*, “[o]n that occasion, Prometheus divided up a slaughtered ox, placing to one side the meat and entrails, which he wrapped in skin and paunch, to the other the bones, which he concealed in savory fat. Zeus protested that the division was uneven, and Prometheus invited him to choose between the two portions, whereupon Zeus at once claimed the outwardly more appetizing one. From that time on, mortals have been immolating the bones and the fat as offerings to the gods, and eating the meat and entrails themselves.” (82)

⁵⁵³ She had, in fact, a pension – “Pension Julie” – where ruth and her parents lived while in Vienna, sharing the house with mostly international students.

has come to represent for her both the repressed memory of the holocaust and an opportunity to begin a new life by liberating these memories. Secondly, Prometheus acts in weiss's life – a committed poet since age five – as another example of the power of synchronicity of apparently unrelated events. It is at least a fortunate coincidence that the statue which stayed in her memory during all these years turned out to be one of the titan who gave humankind the creative fire, and that it was her poetry that brought her back to him.⁵⁵⁴ In this light, it comes as no surprise that it is through her poetry that weiss reinitiated the dialogue with Prometheus.

In *Prometheus* (2006), Carol Dougherty notes that the frequency with which poets have returned to the mythological character might be related to his rebellious nature. Since the gift of fire he made to humankind was not his, but stolen from Zeus, the myth “begins with an act of transgression [...] by stealing the fire from Zeus, Prometheus rebels against the powers that be.” (19) In the context of weiss's personal history as a Nazi refugee, Dougherty's views of the Greek titan as “a rebel [...] who] helps represent those without power in an ongoing battle against tyranny and authoritarian regimes of all kinds” (19), acquires a deeper meaning. The main action of Frederick Baker's film revolves around weiss's reading of two of her poetical approaches to the influence of Prometheus in her life. The film begins with weiss reciting “The Legacy of Prometheus”⁵⁵⁵ – a poem in which she gives voice to the titan – while holding and caressing the stone arm of the sculpture.



Figure 65. weiss reciting “The Legacy of Prometheus”

⁵⁵⁴ In 1998, after attending the *Beat Generation Festival* in Prague, she was invited to the *Schule für Dichtung* in Vienna.

⁵⁵⁵ Included in *No Dancing Aloud*, 2006.

In this poem, weiss highlights Prometheus's outcast status – “i am the wanderer” (10) – as well as his connection with creativity and art – “i am the spark / the fire stolen for art / for sacred creation” (10). While Prometheus is old, his words are connected to the present – “my words are old / my words are bold / my eyes see the new / my words speak true”⁵⁵⁶ (10) – and it is in this light that he functions in weiss's life, and in the film, as a trigger to uncover a painful past. As Prometheus says through weiss, he is “the return” (12). The first two-minute sequence uses a still camera in which Prometheus is only depicted through a reflection in a mirror, which refers to the story of weiss's reunion with him that is later addressed through her poem-dialogue with the sculpture. A short scene right after the title shows the shadow of the poet playing diablo, which similarly acts as a preview of the forthcoming dialogue with Prometheus as well as a connection to a memory of weiss's early childhood in Vienna. In her poem “DIABOLO (DEEAHBOLO)”,⁵⁵⁷ (1993) she specifically connects the memory of the game with her “escape from berlin to vienna / 1933 --- year of the rooster”:



Figure 66. Shadow of weiss playing on Prometheus

These more poetic scenes are cross-cut with hand-held camera shots of weiss and the film crew walking the streets of Vienna at night in search for the building where her grandmother lived. weiss comments – both in English and German – on the way the streets have changed,⁵⁵⁸ and seeing how new buildings have also replaced those that

⁵⁵⁶ Prometheus is also connected with music and dance, as I have shown, two very important elements in weiss's poetry and notion of art: “i am THE DANCE / i am note upon note to fill the air / with the music the story / that must be heard / though ears turn deaf / it will be heard” (10).

⁵⁵⁷ Unpublished, available at ruth weiss's archive, at Bancroft Library U.C. Berkeley.

⁵⁵⁸ One steep street that used to have steps has been turned into a slope, which she sees as a connection to Lombard Street in San Francisco, connecting two cities which represent home for her.

must have been bombed during war, she hopes her “building is still there.”⁵⁵⁹ Once they get to the building, and they see Prometheus – weiss touches him and introduces him to the crew: “here’s Prometheus”. The narrowness of the lobby seems to force the reflection of the statue on the mirror, at the same time that it reproduces weiss’s reencounter with him.⁵⁶⁰



Figure 67. Shots and close-ups of Prometheus

The dialogue – “Torch-Song for Prometheus” (1999)⁵⁶¹ – interpreted with weiss doing her own part and Prometheus’s – using a low voice – centers around weiss’s difficulty to come to terms with her refugee past. As weiss puts it: “the shards of our story cut in into pieces. but there was no blood and the tears would not come. --- and my hands would sweat with fear. there was only thirst and hunger” (12). The pain

⁵⁵⁹ Translation from German – “Ich hoffe meine Gebäude ist noch dort.”

⁵⁶⁰ In “Torch-song for Prometheus: a dialogue”, weiss relates this encounter: “P: how did you find me again? / r: through the mirror / P: you lie! there was no light on. how could you see me in the mirror? / r: that’s true. there was no light on. the gate was locked. it was PAUL my long-time lover. the only one i ever told our story. his eyes are always open. even when he sleeps. he made me unlock the gate. with my voice. there was no light on. but he found you reflecting in the mirror.” (10)

⁵⁶¹ Published in *Full Circle* (2002).

Prometheus suffered all these years separated from weiss symbolize in the dialogue the pain of those who could not escape the holocaust:

r: what you saw while i was away.

P: that's true. i saw. i suffered.

r: but you were suffering when i first saw you. and long before...those chains and you tongue lolling out. i didn't understand.

P: you never asked.

r: i was too young---i was only five when i first saw you.

P: but when you left you were more than ten.

r: i still didn't know how to ask. (12)

Prometheus forces weiss to face her past and abandon the silence and politeness in which she has repressed her memories; "times have changed" (14) and as Prometheus tells her, now she "can scream, [she] can shout. and go back to eating pistachio ice-cream in [her] neighborhood Italian ice-cream parlor" (14). In the dialogue weiss's fulfills different roles in connection to Prometheus's myth; her survivor guilt transpires in her positioning as the eagle that tortured Prometheus – "i did what i had to do but i knew that one day this would stop" (12) – at the same time that she represents both humanity and the poets for whom the titan stole the fire.⁵⁶² In addition, at the end of the poem, weiss becomes Heracles as she frees Prometheus from his bondage. In doing so, she simultaneously hopes to unlock her repressed memories, reaching a state in which she would allow "no more denial" (16):

P: you don't need a key. take one link and the another

r: you are right the chain is light.

P: now i know, the links make a chain of light.

r: never again shall i fear the fire.

⁵⁶² "P: but what about the fire i stole for the likes of you? / r: i've guarded that flame /P: it's the only reason i trust you" (12) In the dialogue Prometheus also celebrates weiss's poetical and romantic view of the world: "p: do you believe in miracles? / r: what else is there to believe in? / p: in what is real / r: but that is the same thing / p: now we're talking." (12-14)

P: don't promise⁵⁶³

r: oh Prometheus (16)

A short clip after the dialogue returns to the documentary-style, hand held camera to show weiss discussing Prometheus's significance in her life. As "a symbol for many things...for new life after your chains" – as weiss puts it in the film – Prometheus represents weiss's embrace of her past, an issue which in the context of the "keeping it cool" atmosphere of the Beats, often translated in a conscious abandonment of past traditions and stories, in favor of a living-in-the-now credo.⁵⁶⁴ Not coincidentally, in *Full Circle* (2002), where the dialogue was published, Prometheus's story stands side by side with a reprint of weiss's refugee story in "Single Out" (1958) and an expansion of her life-story in the poem "Full Circle".⁵⁶⁵ (1993)

*Las Cuevas de Albion*⁵⁶⁶ (2001) is a twelve-minute film-poem in which weiss performs the "Twenty Seventh Day" of *Desert Journal* accompanied by the flamenco guitar of Tao Ruspoli. Together with the performance, which was recorded at weiss's studio in Albion (California), the film also incorporates – as a way of visually interpreting the poem – collage-like images of weiss wandering the woods and fusing

⁵⁶³ References to a "promise" are found both at the end and the beginning of the dialogue, acting as a reminder of the poet's commitment to not forget her past. In a performance weiss did at Gualala Art Center in 2007, she reads three poems by the statue of Prometheus. Accompanied by Hal Davis on percussions – on the log – weiss recites "A Promise Kept," where she asks the titan to help her "return to Wien / again and again". Far from the memories of war, Vienna is now a pure city – "Oh Vienna of water pure and air to breathe / let me return again and again" – to which the poet wishes to return in order to show the younger generation a brighter future: "i am a child of the holocaust / to give to the children what has not been lost". An Edition Exil production, in co-operation with Kulturzentrum Spittelberg – Amerlinghaus Wien, Austria – Video production Andreas Holleschek, project administration, Christa Stippinger, 2013. The DVD also includes a performance of weiss "her number was not called" sang by students from a 2012 workshop taught by the poet.

⁵⁶⁴ In Volume 1 of the interview weiss did for the *Holocaust Oral History Project* (1993), the poet discusses this phenomenon which, together with her personal rejection of her past as a survival strategy, caused her to be oblivious – on a conscious level – of how the holocaust affected her life. Similarly, she admits that even if the guilt she felt might have transpire some of her early poetry, "it did not register", as she was not conscious about it.

⁵⁶⁵ Even earlier that weiss was aware of who the statue was, his image seems to have been present in her poetry. The "Thirty-seventh Day" in *Desert Journal* seems to allude to Prometheus: "it must be he / who else but that firethief / who the gods are after / in this life / and the many before" (n.p.n.)

⁵⁶⁶ This film was produced by LAFCO – The Los Angeles Filmmakers' Co-Op – which also produced *Surprise Voyage* a film by the artist Paul Blake in which he uses the event of getting a tattoo as an excuse to explore his life and art.

with the natural landscapes of Albion's forests and the Mendocino Coast.⁵⁶⁷ As if inhabiting Anna – the wise old witch of *One Knight and One Lady* – weiss appears as a mysterious, lonely, figure communicating with nature; or even becoming nature.⁵⁶⁸ Like a fairy-like or mythological entity, weiss appears and disappears in the woods of Albion, interacting with nature through her poem but also through the slow, incantatory, dance she performs looking at the sunset. In the “Twenty-seventh Day” – as many of the poems in *Desert Journal* – weiss explores synaesthetic metaphors that make the poem a very visual and sensorial one,⁵⁶⁹ making it especially appropriate for film. In one of the sequences that shows weiss's connection with nature in the film – mostly shot in black & white or with very soft colors – when she pronounces the words “red is a color / red is a sound / red cannot range / having coming itself”, red color is added to the white and black image to accentuate the poet's actual red hair.



Figure 68. Landscape, ruth in nature and performing

⁵⁶⁷ weiss edited the film together with Alfonso Gordillo, for which we can assume she had control over the finished product.

⁵⁶⁸ In one scene the silhouette of weiss's face is edited next to a rock by the sea that resembles her contour, so that the resemblance between the two is highlighted.

⁵⁶⁹ “words beyond meaning / sounds beyond sounds / silence beyond sound / the gesture charged / a mime on a desert stage / electric the wings /swooping against the foot of the horizon”. (n.p.n.)

In addition to these visual elements, weiss's voice in this performance can be seen as a good example of the way in which she understands the fusion of poetry with music – which, as this film shows, it is not limited to Jazz.⁵⁷⁰ As weiss has often commented when asked about the relationship between voice and music, when she does poetry with Jazz she avoids merely reading the poem to jazz in the background, treating instead her own voice as another instrument. In 1958, Kenneth Rexroth wrote about these two approaches in his essay “Jazz Poetry” (*The Nation* 186, 29 March 1958)⁵⁷¹ where he defined the true Jazz poetry as taking place when “[t]he voice is integrally wedded to the music and, although it does not sing notes, is treated as another instrument, with its own solos and ensemble passages, and with solo and ensemble work by the band alone.” (354) In *Las Cuevas de Albion* weiss's already powerful voice is pushed further into a shattered vibrato extending, for instance, the verse “KALPA!”⁵⁷² to work together with the notes played by the guitarist.

A poem from weiss's *Desert Journal* is also performed in *Iberia* (2006) directed by the visual artist and filmmaker Eddie Falconer, a feature film which loosely relates the story of Shabbetai Zevi – Jesus Christ “rival prophet.”⁵⁷³ A recording of weiss's “Nineteenth Day”⁵⁷⁴ is accompanied with images reminiscent of the ones found in *Las Cuevas de Albion*, as weiss is also portrayed in deep connection with nature – superimposed images of landscapes and the poet are found in both films. In addition, she also dances in or with the wilderness that surrounds her studio in Albion, setting the words in her poem into movement with the motion of her body and her hands – as it happened in many of Arnold's silent films in which she participated, where she communicated mostly through gestures. While the images do not correspond to the words in her poem – which would be very difficult, if not impossible, in such a symbolic piece – they rather emphasize the viewers' need to look for symbols and

⁵⁷⁰ In 2015 she also recorded some poems with electric guitars in a project with the musician Rent Romus.

⁵⁷¹ Published in *The Beat Generation: A Gale Critical Companion. Vol. 1: Topics* (2003).

⁵⁷² One of the six auxiliary disciplines of Vedanga, traditionally associated with the study of Hindu scriptures. *Kalpa* concerns ritual.

⁵⁷³ A title card at the beginning of the film reads: “What follows is the diary in pictures of the ‘rival prophet’, who wandered the earth in search of love until he came to what he thought was the Iberian peninsula (he must have been standing on his head). There he found an odd assortment of characters like himself, some vying for truth, and others for power. These fragments of the rival prophet's journal are all that is left to us of his voyage.”

⁵⁷⁴ Original recording from *Poetry and All that Jazz* (Media Arts West at Sonoma Salutes the Arts, 2001. weiss: vocals; Doug O'Connor: acoustic bass.)

create associations: “i in the desert / pure to receive / all association / new association / without association / the purpose of the desert” (unnumbered). The images, similarly, are not a record of a performance; in fact, the only time weiss actually pronounces the words out in the film is right at the end of the poem – with the verse “LOVE MUST NOW OHM” (unnumbered) – and even in that case image and sound are not synchronized.



Figure 69. weiss dancing and performing to her poem

As these projects attest to, weiss has continued to expand her poetry into film and documentary, mediums which, besides allowing her the possibility of visually accompanying her poetry with images, offer the poet a space in which the musicality and performance-quality of her poetry is emphasized. The more than forty years that separate the early *The Brink* from *Iberia* have witnessed weiss’s ongoing commitment to the performance side of poetry. From that first time in 1949 when she improvised her poetry with Jazz musicians in The Art Circle (Chicago), to poetry with Jazz at The Cellar in the early 1950s and the 1971 weekly Wednesday poetry readings at Minnie’s Can Do in San Francisco, together with “Surprise Voyage,” the poetry Theater she opened with Paul Blake – where they did “poetry with slides, with dancers, with

musicians, even drag-shows”⁵⁷⁵ on Thursdays – to her latest performance with bass and percussion which took place in July 2015 in Berkeley (California), weiss continues to believe in the power of poetry’s orality. These films, then, can ultimately be seen as celebrations of her poetry and the language from which it originates. As Michael Allen Zell notes, for weiss, “[l]anguage is her lifeblood, but she does not treat words as common. ruth speaks as if each word is precious, deserves certain regard, and she wishes to nourish herself in turn when pronouncing them, further causing the source.”⁵⁷⁶ Through these films, in which her words become alive, weiss honors her poetry and its centrality in her life.

IV.5. Conclusion

In *Points of Resistance* (1991) Lauren Rabinovitz draws attention to the fact that women experimental filmmakers, who first were attracted to the medium’s marginal status – a space women were, unfortunately, very comfortable with – were soon further marginalized when this type of cinema started to be consumed and supported by the establishment. As Rabinovitz states, “[a]s institutional support for independent film increased, a rigid hierarchy concerning economic practices and political goals developed within the institutions that excluded women artists from the positions of authority and privileged their male counterparts.” (10) This situation can also be extrapolated to the Beat Generation which – either as a literary or visual arts movement – seemed to offer a freer space for both male and female artists and poets. Nevertheless, as it was the case with experimental film, once the Beat movement started to be appropriated by the establishment – by being incorporated into university courses, academic analysis or mainstream media discourses, to name a few examples – women and their work were pushed aside; once more, marginalized within the margin.

The position of Beat women within cinematic and visual art discourses – both mainstream and experimental – is a vivid example that documents this exclusionist pattern against female artists; an exclusion which works in tandem with different forms of oppression. On the one hand, it reduces women to misogynist and stereotypical images, as it was the case with the representation of Beat women in mainstream film and, to a lesser extent, also in underground film. On the other hand, critical and

⁵⁷⁵ *Can’t Stop the Beat* 77.

⁵⁷⁶ “Poet/Filmmaker ruth weiss: the Black Widow Salon, Crescent City Books”, review by Michael Allen Zell, *Entrepôt* Vol.1, *French Quarter*, New Orleans, October, 2012, Nos. 8-10, 31.

academic discourses, by systematically undermining the position of women, have obscured the actual involvement of women of the Beat Generation with film and other visual arts. In opposition to these double exclusion, as I have shown in this chapter, film and other forms of visual art have played – or continue to play – a significant role in the work of female Beat poets.

In the first part of this section, through an analysis of the involvement with film and video of poets Joanne Kyger, Joanna McClure and Anne Waldman, I investigated the way in which these poets took advantage of the visual and technical properties of film to enhance or expand their poetry. Joanne Kyger, for instance, made use of the visual effects – and the sheer visibility – offered by video to emphasize the centrality of her own female body in the critique of Descartes' *A Discourse on Method*. Specifically relocating the philosophical discourse on an estranged, domestic, space, Kyger subverts Descartes' text in her video at the same time that she draws attention to her own position as a poet. The collaboration of Joanna McClure with the filmmaker Lawrence Jordan in *The H.D. Trilogy Film* not only served as illustrative examples of the collaboration between poets and filmmakers in the multidisciplinary bohemian artistic circles, but also helped disassociate McClure from her secondary position in Beat discourses as Michael McClure's (ex)wife. Finally, Anne Waldman's extensive collaboration with film and video also established the poet's expansion of her poetry through the properties of this medium. While moving images were used in different ways in her oeuvre, they always complemented Waldman's poetry and/or served as means to explore poetical concerns: this applies both to the ironic undertones of Waldman's videoclip *Uh Oh Plutonium* – where both the visibility and visual effects of video were used to spread the reach of her poetry and activism – or to the collaboration with Ed Bowes in the creation of visual texts that explored their shared preoccupation with the connection between words and image.

In the last part of this chapter, through the extended metaphor of poetry as the base – or seed –⁵⁷⁷ from which the rest of artistic approaches emerge, I expanded the concept of visuality in Beat poets by analyzing not only ruth weiss's involvement with

⁵⁷⁷ In an interview included in 2000 Program of Bravo Book TV (Toronto, Canada), conducted in 1999 at the legendary Vesuvio in North Beach (San Francisco), weiss stressed again the idea of her poetry being the source of all the other work she does. It is, in her own words, "as if that [poetry] was the seed, and all the rest were plants coming out of it."

film and video, but also the influence of other visual arts in her body of work. While films like *The Brink* – composed from an amalgam of poems by weiss – or *ruth weiss Meets her Prometheus* – where her poems and poetical dialogue with the titan delineated the plot and rhythm of the documentary – clearly established the centrality of poetry in weiss's approach to film, other visual art projects equivalently vindicated the prevalence of poetry in her oeuvre. In the cases in which she responded to various forms of visual arts – painting, sculpture or lightshows – her poems became the medium from which to not only document her interest in different artistic forms, but also transform those responses into hybrid poems that retain the aesthetics and visuality of these art forms while using the written medium. The collections *Light* – where weiss's highly sensorial and visual poetry successfully translated Elias Romero's lightshows into poetry – or *Gallery of Women* – where her own poems and the drawings by Sutter Marin adopted the same evocative, abstract approach – established a close connection between weiss's poetry and visual art forms. In much the same way, the poet's involvement with painting, theater and film, has always been based on her poetry, what was obvious in her water-color haiku collections, but also manifested more subtly in her plays through the exaltation of symbolic speech and metanarrative discourses which emphasized the centrality of language.

All of these examples attest to the fertile cross-pollination between art forms in the American artistic counterculture. While the visual work of women has often been left out of academic and scholar discourses, as I have shown in this chapter through the examples of Joanne Kyger, Joanna McClure, Anne Waldman and ruth weiss, it comprises a highly fertile body of work which – besides countering the stereotyped visual representation of women within the Beat Generation – draws attention to these poets' ongoing dedication to the expansion of creativity and art. The idea of an expanded poetry through the use of other mediums, the collaborative approach to art, and the notion of creating art from other works of art, link the work of these women with (post)modern dialogues and artistic concepts. In *Expanded Cinema* (1970) Eugene Youngblood called for multi-media, synaesthetic approach to art, that more than just using different media, meant a new consciousness:

When we say expanded cinema we actually mean expanded consciousness. Expanded cinema does not mean computer films, video phosphors, atomic light, or spherical projections. Expanded cinema isn't a movie at all: like life it's a

process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes. One no longer can specialize in a single discipline and hope truthfully to express a clear picture of its relationships in the environment. This is especially true in the case of the intermedia network of cinema and television, which now functions as nothing less than the nervous system of mankind (41)

In a similar fashion, expanded poetry becomes not only the use of other mediums to give expression to a poetic idea, but an overall aesthetic and artistic vision that sees art in a complex and interdisciplinary framework. In the specific context of the poets studied in this chapter, this notion draws attention to the importance of reading their poetry in an expanded, multi-media environment that incorporates other art forms such as film, theater, performance, dance or painting, among others.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Life-writing, poetic revisions of mythology, reinterpretations of the epic and memoir genres, film, video, performance and a poetry heavily connected with the visual arts, are just some of the genres, themes, and artistic approaches that frame the work of Beat women. Despite this vast and varied body of work, these writers and poets have continued to be overshadowed by their male counterparts. An illustrative example of this tendency can be found in Ann Charters's – best known as Jack Kerouac's biographer – compiling and editing work on various anthologies dedicated to the Beat Generation. In *The Portable Beat Reader* (1992), although she includes some poems by Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman, the rest of female names – a minority to begin with – are found in the section entitled “‘Tales of Beatnik Glory’: Memoirs and Posthumous Tributes”, where work by Carolyn Cassady, Brenda Frazer, Joyce Johnson and Hettie Jones is located.⁵⁷⁸ Outweighing the poetry and fiction, memoirs dominate in this anthology as the female Beat genre par excellence. The introduction to the tome, to complicate matters, is equally reductive in its vision of their literary production. In one of the only two paragraphs dedicated to women, Charters writes:

Reflecting the sexism of the times, the women mostly stayed on the sidelines as girlfriends and wives, as the novelist Joyce Johnson described in her memoir *Minor Characters*. The writing of the exceptional Diane DiPrima flourished, but most women living with or married to the Beats, for example Carolyn Cassady, Bonnie Bremser (Brenda Frazer), and Hettie Jones, took care of the children, worked to support the family, and did little writing, mostly memoirs years later. (xxxiii)

This situation shows only a modest improvement in Charters's later anthology, *Beat down to your Soul* (2001). This time, Charters includes poems by Joanne Kyger – a noticeable absence in the previous anthology – as well as Joanna McClure, Anne Waldman and Diane di Prima, and increases the visibility of memoirs by adding Eileen Kaufman and Joan Haverty to Johnson, Jones and Cassady – who repeat in the

⁵⁷⁸ With a relaxed approach to memoir, Charters also includes in this category di Prima's *Dinner and Nightmares*.

anthology with the same work. In addition, Charters includes an excerpt from a transcript of a panel she moderated on Beat women, which took place at the San Francisco Book Festival in 1996.⁵⁷⁹ Although in the panel the women resisted their representation as victims, arguing that they were well aware of their situation and always had a choice, Charters introduces the panel through a short contextualization that further obscures the literary career of Beat women by reducing them to their relationship with men. Judging their works only in relation to successful or unsuccessful personal stories of rebellion, Charters states that, “[a]lthough none of the women writers associated with the Beats achieved a major literary career, many of them wrote books that continue to be relevant to contemporary readers because they anticipated the changes to come for women in our society” (*Beat Down to Your Soul* 612). The aim of this dissertation was precisely to counteract this reductionist, victimized, approach to the literature produced by women associated with the Beat Generation. This has been done not by addressing their subordination, but by drawing attention – through examples of their own literary and artistic production – to the way in which they explored poetry beyond the confines of the Beat Generation.

And beyond they went: they wrote memoirs that exceeded their relationship with the men, memoirs that blurred the boundary of fact and fiction, that were used as platforms from which to emphasize not only their own position as artists, as writers and poets, but also to bring to light the lost poems of fellow women artists. Accessing the market and the public eye through a medium which in principle sustained their subordination, in many cases they were able to transform that same genre and use it according to their own needs and vision.

They wrote and rewrote myths and other traditional stories in which women were trapped in stereotypes of the good wife – like the faithful, devoted, eternally patient, Penelope – or complicated the essentializing conception of a mother goddess completely isolated from the patriarchal world in which women and women artists actually have to dwell. They were not only grateful pupils of the male masters, but also learnt their tricks, stole their secrets and used their weapons to fight for their particular vision of a de-gendered poetics as a space where it is art, and not gender, what remains in the end.

⁵⁷⁹ The panelists included Carolyn Cassady, Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones, Eileen Kaufman, Joanna McClure and Lenore Kandel.

They were influenced by the visual arts and expanded poetry and the written word to explore other media – drama, fiction, video and film, painting and performance, among others. They collaborated with visual artists and filmmakers and put into practice a complex, open-ended, unrestricted approach to creativity. Especially in this notion of an expanded poetry, but also in the genres used and themes explored, these women wrote *past* the Beat Generation’s confined space for female creativity. The title of a poem published in *On Time* (2015), the latest poetry collection of the always bold Joanne Kyger, calls for a an urgent reassessment of women’s poetry: “I’m very busy now so I can’t answer all those questions about Beat women poets”. In much the same way, Diane di Prima’s latest collection – *The Poetry Deal* (2014) – dissolves the domineering relationship with the Beat movement by stressing a continuous flow of artistic and poetic creativity across ages and generations:

it’s not a “Generation”
 dig –
 it’s a state of mind
 a way of living
 gone on
 for centuries
 a way of writing too

 “Beat” poetry’s older
 than the *grove of academe*
 older than
 Apollo
 or Pythagoras (“Keep the Beat” 81)

Seeing her poetry as part of an ancient tradition, not tied by any specific literary group, at eighty di Prima renews the vow to poetry she took when she was fourteen: “You can burn my favorite snapshot of myself / Lead me on paths or non-paths anywhere / You can not make sense for years & I’ll still believe / you / drop husbands, tribes & jobs as you wish” (“The Poetry Deal” 20).

In short, this dissertation has stressed the necessity of placing the centrality of poetry in these women's lives in the foreground of academic and scholar discourses. The themes and poets analyzed in this study are just a small segment of what the umbrella term "Beat Women" encompasses. The work of Janine Pommy Vega, Elise Cowen, Joanna McClure, Lenore Kandel, or Jan Kerouac, together with post-Beat artists such as Kathy Acker or the filmmaker Barbara Hammer, as well as the Japanese poet and performer Kazuko Shiraishi, are some of the female names whose contributions draw attention to the blurred edges of the Beat canon or, as Robert Lee appropriately calls it, the Beat shadow canon.⁵⁸⁰ Because these women wrote within and outside the Beat Generation, demanding through their very different literary and artistic approaches to be accessed through analyses that consider their expanded, multi-media, multi-form and heterogeneous art and poetry, and because they carried the torch of creativity – the one Prometheus stole for humankind – this dissertation celebrates their lasting and ongoing commitment to art. As ruth weiss writes: "tell you a secret. i've barely begun. the movie goes on."

⁵⁸⁰ In *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics* (2010) Lee writes: "Beat canon. Beat shadow canon. This greatly diverse archive of voice and writing serves to remind that Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Burroughs and Ferlinghetti, with Neal Cassady as 'gone' poster boy and Gary Snyder as Buddhist and ecological spirit, together with their fellow literary makers, were never less than a genuinely wide, more inclusive gallery." (13)

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