“I Am A Fast Speaking Woman”: The Creation of Female Subjectivity and Agency in Beat Poetry

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Abstract
This paper is an examination and analysis of the exclusion of female writers from the popular canon of Beat literature. The Beat movement, which reached its peak in 1950's America, idolized male writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, yet failed to recognize the enormously talented group of women who were producing material at the same. This project looks at the works of two poets, Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman, and discusses how both of these women sought to create an active female subjectivity and a sense of personal agency within their work.

There has been a tendency within popular culture to romanticize the Beat generation and its collection of now-famous writers, such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, who created a homosocial community for themselves in 1950's America. Rejection of mainstream society, spontaneous movement, sexual freedom and independence have become stereotypical images associated with the Beats. Written works such as Kerouac's On the Road or Ginsberg's "Howl" have reached iconic status for the Beat generation. However, recent feminist criticism led by researcher Ann Charters has raised an important question: where were the women? Why were so few women writers included in Beat anthologies, studies or publishing houses?

For this essay, I decided to research the answers to these questions by gaining a historical understanding of the Beat movement, specifically studying the poetry of Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman, two recently reclaimed female Beat poets. While reading and analysing the poems, I am particularly interested in discussing how women Beat writers were creating a female subjectivity and sense of agency within the male-dominated Beat culture. This project gives an overview of the Beat movement, focusing on the status of women as marginalized others within it. It then proceeds to examine each poet while analysing the different methods and techniques used by both Waldman and di Prima in order to disrupt patriarchal value systems while building a female subjectivity.

The Beat Generation
This counterculture movement arose out of the mid-fifties Post-war Era,
when conformity to social norms of sexuality and gender roles was highly valued. “Beat” can be used to describe a specific literary movement as well as the lifestyle that was popularized by the poets, writers, and artists of the movement. Bohemian Beat communities formed primarily in Greenwich Village, New York City, and in San Francisco, and were based on the idea of rejecting mainstream culture. People who identified as Beat refused to accept popular consumer culture, sexual repression, Cold War paranoia, conformity to corporations and the extreme homophobia present in the US during that time. In terms of the poetry being produced, it was “stylistically and technically too diverse to constitute a homogenous aesthetic or literary philosophy.” For instance, Beat poetry incorporated improvisations based upon jazz music, spontaneous composition, direct expression of mind, surrealism and first-thought-best-thought. Beat poetry does not adhere to one particular form, but there are subject matters and philosophies that inform most Beat poetry, such as experimental drug use, sexual freedom, spirituality, mysticism, revolution and travel. The Beat canon is largely based on the works of “iconic male figures,” particularly Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. Recent feminist literary criticism has called out the Beat movement as exclusionary toward its female counterparts. While researching, I found it very difficult to find information on or critical responses to women beat poets. As Ann Charters writes, “It is now widely acknowledged that many of the Beat males were no more sensitive to the needs of the intellectual women in their midst than many other males of their generation were to the needs of women they worked and lived with.”

“The Rule of Cool”: Women’s subordinated positions within Fifties and Beat Ideology

1950s America was an era that held strict codes of behaviour in terms of people’s sexuality and gender roles. Homosexuality was considered extremely taboo, resulting in the vilification and exclusion of queer peoples from dominant social groups. This expulsion was a large factor in the formation of the Beat movement as several of the central figures such as Ginsberg, Kerouac and Neal Cassady identified as homosexual or bisexual in their works and personal relationships. The ideology of the “nuclear family” placed men as the financial supporters and authoritarians of a household, the women’s only roles being those of wife and mother. The role of white middle class women in society was clearly defined; those who dared to step outside the boundaries were rejected by mainstream culture. Women who decided to enter the Beat movement were amongst those who faced such rejection. Due to the

2 Johnson and Grace, 3.
3 Johnson and Grace, 2.
4 Johnson and Grace, 1.
5 Johnson and Grace, 10.
fact that throughout their lifetimes women in the 1950s were expected to remain under the authority of a familial male, beginning with the father then moving to the husband, it was more difficult for them to gain independence. Gregory Corso, speaking on a conference panel about Beat Poetry, addressed an audience member who questioned the lack of women and their general under representation within the literature: “There were women, they were there, I knew them, their families put them in institutions. In the ‘50s if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female your families had you locked up.” Despite the Beat ideals of standing against the status quo and rejecting traditional roles chosen by society, the position of women within the movement (who were in fact mostly white from middle class backgrounds) replicated the subordination women faced in dominant culture. This is demonstrated by the rigidly upheld “Rule of Cool” which dictated the bohemian Beat code for living. A central tenet of the “rule” was the idea of female silence. Jack Kerouac describes this in his “The Origins of the Beat Generation” when he writes, “the ‘cool’ (hipster) today is your bearded laconic sage, or schlem, whose speech is low and unfriendly, whose girls say nothing and wear black.” This image of the “girls who wear black” was the stereotype for Beat women and places them as mere decorative objects whose “coolness” rests on their lack of voice. Thus, Beat women were made into outsiders within an already marginalized group. As opposed to male members of the movement for whom the code was a style that in no way decreased their personal or political agency, women found themselves in a situation that merely reflected the “powerlessness, objectification and gendered silence” that the conservative ideals of the Fifties forced upon women as a social caste.

However, women did enter the Beat movement because its anti-establishment beliefs and sexual freedom afforded them an escape from the traditional domestic roles that otherwise awaited them. These women modified and used the multidimensional style of Beat writing in order to create a female literary subjectivity: works that spoke from a woman’s voice rather than being mediated through their relationship with men. Johnson claims that it is this “gendered emphasis,” on critiques of patriarchal society that is the most radical separation between female and male Beat writers. The creation of a female subjectivity within the Beat movement was complex in that women had to subscribe to Beat aesthetics, which required recognizing their part in their own hegemonic colonization. Johnson explains that poets such as Joyce Johnson, Diane di Prima and Joanne Kyger appropriated “male-authored traditions”

8 Johnson and Grace, 1.
9 Johnson and Grace, 8.
10 Johnson, 10.
about writings on women's lives to subvert and replace them with a female subjectivity and agency. This technique exposed how women writers felt about the styles and discourses that subordinated them.\footnote{Johnson, 20-21.}

**Diane di Prima**

Diane di Prima was born in Brooklyn in 1934. In her early twenties, she dropped out of college and decided to move to the Lower East Side of New York City where her apartment became a centre for Beat poets to come together for various activities including discussions and sex. She self-published her first volume of poetry\footnote{Knight, 123-125.} Di Prima's works during the fifties and early sixties have been labelled "protofeminist" by critics due to the fact that they precede Second Wave Feminism. Her examination of topics such as female sexuality, the body as a site of violent resistance, and childbirth marks a distinctly feminized thematic.


This poem is dedicated to Inez Garcia, a woman who was convicted of the 1974 murder of the man who raped her. She became a *cause célèbre* for many feminist organizations. A quotation from the Free Inez Garcia Committee provides further context as it argues that "a man's body is in itself a weapon in a way that a woman's body is not." This concept of bodies being weapons or tools of violence became more widespread with the advent of radical feminism within the Second Wave movement. The slogan "The Personal is Political," summarized the radical feminist belief that women's bodies were at the center of political issues, specifically those around reproductive rights and violence against women.\footnote{Christine Saulnier, *Feminist Theories and Social Work: Approaches and Application* (New York: Haworth Press, 1996), 32.} Second Wave feminism actively exposed how abuse, pornography and rape are systems of male domination that utilize violence as a method of control.\footnote{Saulnier, 38.} Thus, it is not entirely surprising that violent actions against men were advocated in radical feminist writing, the most extreme example being Valerie Solanas' *S.C.U.M Manifesto*. This document begins with a list of goals, one of which is to "destroy the male sex." It goes on to outline why men are completely useless in every aspect of society, and becomes increasingly violent in language and advocated behaviours.

The connection can thus be made between discourses of violence and the body in Second Wave feminism, which helps to locate di Prima's work. What di Prima is doing in "Revolutionary Letter #66: TO THE PATRIARCHS" is locating the female body as a site of revolution, and transforming it metaphorically into a weapon of physical and sexual
power in order to create a women-centred agency. In terms of form, the first word in every line except the last three is "my." This works to create a single speaker's voice, which is inferred to be a woman from the quotation at the beginning and the listing of female body parts. The use of "my" as a repeated introduction emphasizes the authority the speaker is taking over her own body. Di Prima goes through a list of body parts like teeth, arms and legs, but most importantly parts that are sexualized: thighs, hips, breasts and vagina. This is where di Prima begins to locate the sexual body of women as powerful. In the poem, these sexualized parts are connected to metaphors of violence. She advocates violence as a form of resistance in many of her poems from Revolutionary Letters. Here in "#66," the female sexual body creates resistance, thus placing the woman in a position of agency. Di Prima is combining the concept of the women's bodies entering the public sphere with ideas of violent revolution proposed by radical Second Wave feminists.

Several important lines from the poem, "My strong thighs/ choking the black lie/ My hips/ haven and fort/ place where I stand/ & from which I fight" demonstrate this argument. The speaker's hips are described as both a safe place and stronghold but also as the location of a claimed space where her active self comes from. This self incorporates both non-passivity and violence as the idea of the sexualized body creating a place from which to fight is clearly demonstrated. The most explicit sexual metaphor comes in the line, "My cunt a bomb exploding/ yr christian conscience." In these lines, her vagina is figured as a weapon used to destroy a Christian value system, thus linking sexual practise to political critique. Di Prima used metaphors of the female sexual body, which was ideologically a taboo or private subject, to create comparisons to highly public weapons of warfare. She takes the socially masculinized domain of war and appropriates it for exclusively female actions such as childbirth. The second line of the poem, interestingly the only line written completely in capital letters, reads: "MY CHILDREN WEAPONS ETERNALLY." Reproductive rights were a major issue for the Second Wave and here the speaker empowers the act of childbearing by including her offspring as instruments for revolution. They are products of her body through a process which men cannot undergo, therefore a bodily condition only known by women is once again figured as a site of violent resistance. These examples continue to prove the intent of the poem in creating a female agency through the sexual body. The final three lines, where the act of orgasm is implied, exemplify this point: "The shock waves of my pleasure/ annihilate/ all future shock/ all future shock forever." Orgasm is the culminating point of sexual encounters and here it is the speaker's climax of sexual energy that makes for the powerful and final elimination.

16 di Prima, 85.
17 di Prima, 85.
18 di Prima, 85.
19 di Prima, 85.
Anne Waldman

Waldman is considered along with Janine Pommy-Vega as a poet in the Third generation of Beat writers. Born during the Second World War, they were adolescents in the Fifties, but came of age during the hippie movement of the Sixties. Their work is therefore more influenced by the politics of the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution and the blatant drug culture as well as the beginnings of Second Wave feminism in the form of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Waldman gained recognition for her emphasis upon oral performance, and has been known to change or expand poems depending on a particular situation or feeling. As with di Prima, her first book was self published.

Close Reading: “Fast Speaking Woman”

Waldman wrote this poem as a chant which speaks to, for, and about the psyche of the “Everywoman.” It is based upon chants Waldman had heard by a woman named Maria Sabina, a Mazatec shaman, whose work she describes as “radical empowerment.” “Fast Speaking Woman” is in the form of a long poem, which has often been associated with male modernist poets who focussed their long poems on European high culture or male dominated tales of history and myth. Waldman appropriates this traditional male discourse, infusing it with her own style of language, which she describes as “impulsive, free associative, naive.” Puchek relates Waldman’s style to postmodern theorist Julia Kristeva’s writings on what she refers to as “the semiotic.” Based upon Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic framework, the semiotic is a pre-oedipal stage which Kristeva contrasts against the “Symbolic” or post-oedipal stage in which infants come into language that permits them to make rational, linear and objective arguments. The Symbolic stage is also associated with the child entering the social realm under the rule of the father figure; Kristeva situates the semiotic as pre-oedipal, meaning it is experienced while the child is still fused to the maternal. She describes the semiotic as consisting of bodily drives or pleasures, pulses, rhythms and emotions occurring pre-linguistically. All of these elements are repressed upon entering the Symbolic, however Kristeva claims that they can resurface in later stages of development. Waldman’s self-described style and practise

20 Johnson and Gracc, 14.
21 Knight, 287-288.
22 Anne Waldman, Fast Speaking Woman: Chants and Essays (San Francisco: City Light-Books, 1975), 34.
23 Waldman, 34.
25 Waldman, Fast Speaking Woman, 34.
28 Tong, 205.
of body poetics can both be seen as representations of the semiotic.

The term "body poetics" is defined by Puchek as poetry created not from language or observation but from kinetics: the poetry of dance which emphasizes the sounds and rhythms of language and sexuality.\(^{29}\) Waldman became well known for performances of her poetry and as mentioned earlier "Fast Speaking Woman" was written as a chant. She recounts that she often changed or improvised poems during readings depending on the particular situations.\(^{30}\) Waldman also indicates that the lines borrowed from Sabina that are interspersed throughout the poem allow for the reader "to pause and shift rhythm and acknowledge the cleansing impulse of the writing."\(^{31}\) Thus, where di Prima is interested in the female body occupying an active subject position and in locating the sexual woman's body as a site of power, Waldman takes these ideas and puts them into practise through the concept of body poetics. Her acts of public performance involve both her physical body and voice as elements of the poetry thereby figuring them, along with the literature, as part of the political message. Once again, the theme of "The Personal is Political" is called to mind as Waldman uses her body as much as her words in order to create her resistance. Waldman's idea of the 'Everywoman' creates a new subjectivity that encompasses all women. The title positions the subject as a "woman" singular, yet there is the sense of collectivity in the expression of shared experiences. This poem claims both individual and collective identities for women through the listing of qualities, objects, activities, races, religions, social positions and occupations that women can take to define themselves. Shifts between the plural and singular subject can be seen in Waldman's technique of changing "I'm a" for "I'm the" before the descriptors. When she uses "I'm a", she implies that there is a multiplicity present within that line. The "a" opens up the position to many subjects, inferring that the speaker of the line is one within a larger group. In contrast to this, "I'm the" reflects a singularity; it is the claim made by the speaker through an individualistic perspective.

**What's Discovered in the End**

Beat literature is difficult to define as there was such a diverse range of styles, forms, subjects and aesthetics within the works. Therefore, it is impossible to say that Beat women used one certain technique in creating a female voice. The methods by which they subverted patriarchal discourse are as broad and varying as the movement they participated in. Both Waldman and di Prima use a variety of techniques to create the women-centred subjectivity featured in their works, including locating the female sexualized body as a site of agency and/or a tool of violent resistance, empowerment of sexuality, and the act of performance through the idea of body poetics. These two women have become influential writers, not

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30 Waldman, 38.
31 Puchek, "From Revolution to Creation," 238.
only in the academic canon, but in the feminist movement as well. Due
to their revolutionary poetry, which examined the experiences, identities
and sexualities of women, Waldman and di Prima are two writers who
are essential to feminist discourse.
Works Cited


