The Women Who Stayed Home From the Orgy

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*We* all remember Gatsby’s kiss, of course, that sublime, incarnational moment when he “forever wed his unutterable visions” to Daisy Buchanan’s “perishable breath.” What we’re less likely to remember is that this kiss is a capitulation of Gatsby’s ideals. “He knew that when he kissed this girl….his mind would never romp again like the mind of God.” A mind that romps like God’s is a mind that romps alone. Nick Carraway, who imagines this kiss for us, speculates that Gatsby, moments before the kiss, had a vision of a “secret place above the trees,” and that “he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incompara-

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ble milk of wonder” (Fitzgerald 112, my italics). That vision of solitary communion is unimaginably better than the kiss.

Gatsby’s companionless climb to the penetrantium of life exemplifies the impulse behind what Harold Bloom calls the American Religion. For Bloom, the genuine American soul is essentially Gnostic: it “stands apart, and something deeper than the soul, the Real Me or self or spark, thus is made free to be utterly alone with God who is also quite separate and solitary” (Bloom 15). “Freedom,” Bloom adds, “means being alone with God or with Jesus, the American God or the American Christ.” The Beats—sloppier, happier, less tragic than Gatsby—were the postnuclear avatars of this sublime American search for Divine Freedom. The exemplary figure is, of course, *On The Road*’s Dean Moriarty, seeking the unutterable vision of “IT” across the wide expanses of the country and betraying the perishable breaths of countless women along the way. His romping mind, entertaining and invigorating as his friends most assuredly found it, was also, however, profoundly careless. Dean could be counted on to read the wonders of sensuality as a form of his own spiritual freedom while the women with whom he shared this sensuality read it, more prosaically but less narcissistically, as a form of connection, even love. And there’s the rub. For Dean, “freedom” was liberation from his own confusions and frustrations. At the heart of most of the male Beats (Ginsberg and Snyder, perhaps, excluded) was exactly the kind of swaggering cowboy self-sufficiency one might expect from postwar American men released from sexual conventions and more than eager to fall in love with their own epiphanies. Through intoxicating talk, feverish writing, alcohol, drugs, and sex, they kept climbing to that secret place above the trees, and rarely understood why they felt so lonely and so desperate up there.

The women of the beat generation didn’t have this problem. Though, as a group, they displayed astonishing patience toward and forbearance of their male counterparts, and were notably free of the inhibitions of most 1950s American women, by and large they didn’t share the male faith in the efficacy of spiritual/sensual delirium. Or, perhaps better, they yearned to leaven it with a more grounded sense of romantic attachment and domesticity. On a recent broadcast of a radio documentary about Beat women, one woman reminisced about an orgy that she had wanted to attend in her early days of beathood. But who, she wondered to a friend, will take care of the children during the orgy? “If you have to ask that question,” her friend responded, “what are you doing going to an orgy?” Exactly. Of course, the women were forced to ask the question because the men wouldn’t. The men, who after all fathered those children, were too busy glorifying Bacchus. This was the 1950s, even for the beats, and women’s work didn’t stop at the orgy den’s door.
This is by now an old story threatening to go stale—behind every shooting star of a male writer lies a sacrificing, enabling woman—and among the virtues of Brenda Knight's and Richard Peabody's new collections of writings by the women of the Beat generation is that this story gets reinvigorated and recomplicated, if not wholly deconstructed. Neither Knight nor Peabody claim that any of the women represented in their volumes are as important, as literary figures, as Kerouac, Ginsberg, or Burroughs; they do, however, make a strong case that the second tier of Beats (e.g., Michael McClure, Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Lawrence Ferlinghetti) must give space (or perhaps more space) to talents such as Diane De Prima, Anne Waldman, Sandra Hochman, and Joyce Johnson. In addition, Knight and Peabody (particularly Knight) go further to remap the sociological landscape of Beat writing so that the work of such women is given a broader and enriched context. Finally, they remind us, if at this late date we need reminding, that the Beat movement—which we like to think of the great democratic exception to elitist modernism in America—was never so undemocratic as when it considered the status of women.

Knight and Peabody both include in their titles the phrase “women of the Beat generation” rather than “women Beat writers” because some of the best writing in their collections isn’t Beat at all. It influenced the Beats, or was influenced by the Beats, or most often was about the Beats without itself being Beat. Knight begins her anthology with a section entitled “The Precursors” and includes a discussion of and a selection of work by the Scottish balladeer anm “matriarch of the San Francisco Renaissance” Helen Adam, as well as by Jane Bowles, Madeline Gleason, and “the great professor of English, Josephine Miles.” Here, Knight lays the groundwork for a dense historical context which she will build throughout her book. Adam chanted her poetry in impressive public performances which later inspired the “happenings” of later Beat readings; Gleason founded the San Francisco Poetry Guild in 1935 and the San Francisco Poetry Festival in 1947; Miles provided the beat writers with a rigorously literary but tolerant mentor and, by introducing establishment poet Richard Eberhart to “Howl,” helped pave the way for elite acceptance of Beat poetry.

Both Knight and Peabody include substantial selections of women’s autobiographical writing, and in many ways these writings, while Beat in neither style nor attitude, are some of the best work in either collection. Selections from Joyce Johnson’s memoir Minor Characters, which chronicles a smart literary Upper West Side young woman’s introduction to the Village and her two-year affair with Jack Kerouac, are included in both anthologies. Johnson’s writing is balanced, elegant, exacting, measured, careful to be honest not only to herself but to everyone around her. It is writing that one
could easily find in *The New Yorker* in the post-William Shawn era. Hettie Jones's autobiography, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, also represented in both anthologies, is less urbane but is controlled by an intelligence that we associate much more with the charged ideological toughness of *The Partisan Review* (for which Jones served as managing editor in the late fifties and early sixties) than with the free-for-all enthusiasms of the Beats. Diane De Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, from which Peabody and Knight also draw different selections, while conventional in form is impressively frank in its description of female sexuality. It is notable, as well, for its illuminating evocation of the "code of coolness in effect at the time" which shrouded the beat movement's manifold sexual confusions in silence. Carolyn Cassady's memoir *Off The Road* is touchingly starry-eyed and wistful in its evocation of Neal Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg, but the writing is again conventional, and in fact gives the impression that this upper-middle class Bennington girl was way over her head when she found herself in this milieu. Other memoirists included in these anthologies, like Kerouac's daughter Jan Kerouac or Eileen Kaufman, flavor their work with jazz rhythms and Beat attitude, but their work feels clearly derivative. It is the women whose voices declare a modest independence (usually by virtue of a tolerant reasonableness) from male beat rebelliousness who stand out here.

The poetry in these anthologies, which takes up perhaps a third of Peabody's text and a sixth of Knight's, tends to be strongest when it extends the Ginsbergian bardic incantation into new areas. Janine Pommy Vega's "Poem Against Endless Mass Poetry Readings," in fact, parodies the sub-Ginsbergian dross that came in "Howl's wake (and which we seem to be stuck with in poetry slams and coffeehouse open-mike nights) while attempting to hold onto to Ginsberg's spirit:

O the tyranny of assembled poets
beleaguering ears & the shoulder muscles
the blade cracks in my jaw & the
head pangs.

..............................
full hours it takes me unwinding
/stark hands on the tablecloth twitching,
& drinking even as I would not otherwise
/unnerving & pallid

O pay yr dues before ye lord it over
me,

Poets!
In silence/ the angels are breathing.
Others, like Diane di Prima and Anne Waldman, extend Beat styles and concerns without unduly suffering from Ginsberg's hefty shadow. These two women—the twin towers of women's achievement in beat-influenced poetry who have gone on to institutionalize Beat writing at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics and the Master's Program of Poetics at the New College in San Francisco—are featured in both anthologies with selections like di Prima's technically masterful "The Quarrel" and her justly famous "Rant," or excerpts from Waldman's "Fast Speaking Woman" and *The Lvis Books*. Waldman, a second-generation Beat writer (she was born in 1945 and didn't publish until the late 1960s), probably has the best chance of literary longevity. While deeply studied in the Beat syllabus (Blake, Whitman, the Symbolists, Zen writers), she has allowed other influences to suffuse her poetry (Philip Sydney, for instance), and the result is a growing body of work which may make the Beats less a time-bound movement and more of a valid tradition.

The anthologies aren't equally useful, however, either as layman's introductions to the subject or for classroom use. Though each represents a wide array of women of the beat generation (26 by Knight, 27 by Peabody, fifteen of which they share in common), Peabody's emphasis is clearly on the poetry and prose itself. There are no introductions to each writer, and only one-paragraph biographies are provided in the back of the book. Peabody's clear intent is to make these women's voices stand on their own, and to some extent they do. His sense of literary merit seems to me superior to Knight's, and his inclusion of eight of Sandra Hochman's poems was a revelation to me. Knight's collection is much more ambitious—and problematic. Knight's enthusiasm for the Beats is so unbounded that she tends to gush and mist over at any mention of the word "creativity." While her passion for her subject leads her to delve deeply into the biographies of her subjects and to discover in them a courage to defy convention and a willingness to experiment with their lives which hearkens back to the socialist women of the twenties and looks forward to the feminists of the early seventies, Knight is also disappointingly slapdash. Among at least a dozen confusions and errors I found, the excerpt called "I Am The Guard" by Anne Waldman is never identified as being from the *Lvis Books*, and several epigraphs for Knight's introductions to the writers have precious little to do with the introductions themselves. Finally, and most seriously, Knight makes no more than a desultory case for the literary merit of these writers, so concerned is she with establishing their biographical interest.

Neither anthology, in short, is really satisfying. Peabody slights the biographical and historical context that might demonstrate how the women of the Beat generation broadened, extended, or contradicted the ideas of their male
counterparts, while Knight lacks a critical perspective that might make these women's literary contributions to the Beat movement clear. Though some of the work here shines without need of help from any editor, a more definitive Women of the Beat Generation anthology is still waiting to be done.

Works Cited
