DIANE DI PRIMA: THE MUFFLED VOICE
OF THE BEAT GENERATION

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Heather Goggans, B.A.
Denton, Texas
August, 1997
DIANE DI PRIMA: THE MUFFLED VOICE
OF THE BEAT GENERATION

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Heather Goggans, B.A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1997
The Beat rejection of conventional values meant a rejection of marriage, family, and a nine-to-five job, and few women were prepared to make that kind of radical shift in a society that condemned women for behaving the way the Beats behaved. Though she has faced difficulty in getting published, Beat writer Diane Di Prima has been publishing steadily for the past forty years. Di Prima has also lived the life of a Beat, wandering the country, avoiding nine-to-five work and supporting herself with grants, teaching and poetry readings. In spite of her success and adherence to the Beat lifestyle, Di Prima has given birth to five children, all of whom she took with her in her travels. Diane Di Prima has always faced the particular challenge of gaining the acceptance of her male peers amid indifference and hatred toward her sex while not allowing these men to go unanswered.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. BACKGROUND OF A BEATNIK</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. BEAT IMPRESSIONS OF WOMEN</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. DI PRIMA RESPONDS TO HER BROTHERS</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. DI PRIMA AMONG HER SISTERS</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For those in need of a simple definition, *The Concise Oxford Companion to American Literature* identifies the Beat Movement as “a bohemian rebellion against established society which came to prominence about 1956 and had its centers in San Francisco and New York” (Hart 38). For those attempting to locate boundaries and determine the shades of gray that dictate whether a writer or work is “Beat,” there are no easy answers—but plenty of theories. Few Beat scholars dispute the rightful place of Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, who is credited with naming the movement and largely regarded as its central figure. Many critics attempt to determine who belongs in the movement based upon direct relationship to one of these three “inner circle” Beats, but there is little agreement upon just how far the “outer circle” should extend.

Many critics argue that the Beat Movement involved New York writers only; Edward Halsey Foster comments that these New York writers “shared a set of experiences at a crucial moment in their lives . . . and developed political and social vision that often overlapped” (4). But despite the distinction sometimes made between the New York and San Francisco writers, Gary Snyder is commonly classified as a Beat writer by virtue of his starring role in Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, which chronicles
their actual adventures in Berkeley and the Sierra Mountains. Clearly, his Buddhist ideology influenced Kerouac, and *The Dharma Bums* has become one of the most widely read pieces of Beat literature. Snyder resists being labeled a Beat, explaining, “I never did know exactly what was meant by the term” (Knight & Knight 2).

Snyder is not alone in his confusion. Even Jack Kerouac, who claimed that he was the only person would could truly understand what “Beat” means, often changed his mind—sometimes contradicting himself repeatedly within a single interview. In her seminal biography of Kerouac, Ann Charters collates some of the numerous definitions that Kerouac offers. Charters herself opines that Kerouac’s best definition is encompassed by the sentiments expressed in his drunken screeching at a Hunter College debate on whether or not a Beat Generation exists:

> Live your lives out, they say; nay, love your lives out, so when they come around and stone you, you won’t be living in any glass house—only glassy flesh. What is called the “beat generation” is really a revolution in manners . . . being a swinging group of new American boys intent on life (300).

This definition is a fitting one. Beats favor raw honesty, evidenced in the graphic and occasionally unflattering pictures they paint of themselves—much of the work by Beats is obvious or thinly veiled autobiography. Kerouac’s books were meant to make up the entire story of his life (“The Dulouz Legend”), and his efforts to be true to the actual
events he chronicled are legendary among his friends and family. William Burroughs wrote *Junky* about his own experiences with drug addiction, graphically detailing withdrawal symptoms and candidly admitting to stealing from drunks and the dead to support his habit. Allen Ginsberg’s poetry is infamous for shocking censors and college freshman with his realistic descriptions of sexual activity of all types.

Kerouac’s drunken definition is also fitting in that many of the Beats avoided living in any kind of house at all. The Beat Movement was literally built upon movement, so it would make sense that the definition changes because the meanings are in constant flux, elusive. The first book written on the Beats was John Clellon Holmes’s *Go*, so named for the constant use of that word by Neal Cassady, one of the “heroes” of and inspiration for *On the Road*. Cassady was notorious for darting around from room to room, city to city, woman to woman. Most of Kerouac’s books involve extensive travel: hitch-hiking, freight-hopping, bus-riding. Ginsberg visited a variety of places inside and outside of the United States, including Africa, Bolivia, Chile, and the Soviet Union, and he took up temporary residence in a number of countries--India and France, among others.

And, finally, Kerouac’s definition is fitting because almost without exception, those placed in the Beat Movement are boys. The Beat rejection of conventional values meant a rejection of marriage, family, and a nine-to-five job, and few women were prepared to make that kind of radical shift in a society that condemned women for behaving the way the Beats behaved. More often than not, the women who attempted to
make this sort of break with convention found themselves pregnant with the child of a free-wheeling boy, and very few of these boys could ever be persuaded to stop roaming and settle down to care for a family. This inevitable struggle between the sexes caused bitterness in the men, many of whom were unabashed misogynists, and fear in the women, many of whom were aspiring writers who gave up on their work to take jobs to support their children and their men, deciding that, in the words of Joyce Johnson, "as the voices of the men, always the men, passionately rise and fall and their beer glasses collect and the smoke of their cigarettes rises toward the ceiling and the dead culture is surely being wakened. Merely begin [t]here . . . is enough" (262).

This is not to say that there were no women Beats—they were there, but often they remained relatively silent. They wrote, but rarely had the luxury of throwing themselves into their work, and many of them waited twenty years or more to publish their writing. For the past ten years, there has been an outpouring of suppressed Beat writing. In the recently published book Women of the Beat Generation (Knight 1996), Beat historian Brenda Knight observes:

Beat is underground, raw, unedited, pure shooting. . . . To pretty it up for the cameras and papers is to snuff the very essence of Beat. Ironically, because the women in the movement have, to a certain degree, been ignored and marginalized, they represent what precious little of that which remains truly Beat. (5)
Among the women in this anthology is a writer named Diane Di Prima, a woman who doesn’t quite fit with the others. Di Prima has faced difficulty in getting published, frequently relying upon small presses and newsletters, often of her own creation, to circulate her works; however, she has been publishing steadily for the past forty years. And, in spite of having five children, Di Prima has lived the uprooted life of a Beat, wandering the country, avoiding nine-to-five work and supporting herself with grants, teaching and poetry readings.

Critic George Butterick claims that “Di Prima is the writer [among women of her generation] who by her life and her work most embodies the definable patterns of the Beat Generation” (Butterick 149). Beat scholar Warren French concurs, commenting that “it is difficult to account for the omission of Diane Di Prima from any [Beat] group” (49). However, these omissions—by editors, other Beat writers and even the poet herself—occur frequently. Despite her successful writing career and distinctively Beat lifestyle, Di Prima is not one of Kerouac’s “new American boys,” a fact which keeps her out of the clubhouse, so to speak. This no-girls-allowed attitude shows up in the great majority of Beat writing, but the attitude is so prevalent that on at least one occasion Di Prima’s own words are twisted. In her autobiography, Memoirs of a Beatnik, Di Prima reflects upon her excitement at reading Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” for the first time, but her words are rather tellingly misquoted by Bruce Cook in The Beat Generation: “It followed that if there was one Allen [Ginsberg], there must be more . . . all these would now step forward and say their piece . . . I was about to meet my brothers” (Cook 66). This quotation
actually concludes with, "I was about to meet my brothers and sisters" (emphasis added) (Di Prima 1988, 127). Di Prima’s sisters, as usual, are missing.

Diane Di Prima is a woman stuck between her brothers and her sisters. She wants to be accepted and respected by her brothers, but she is disgusted with their irresponsibility; in turn, they curse her gender. She wants to be accepted and respected by her sisters, but she is impatient with their conventional attitudes toward men; in turn, they resent her success. Di Prima is not in search of acceptance, however, nor is she in search of herself. She accepts what is before her and gets on with it. Di Prima’s greatest strength is her ability to adopt the best of both worlds, embracing the Beat boys’ whirlwind lifestyle while rejecting their tendencies to bluff their way through life, letting others support them emotionally and financially, ignoring their children. And, unlike her sisters, she is able to resist the urge to let the work and personality of men consume her.
CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND OF A BEATNIK

Diane Di Prima (1934- ) was born and raised in Brooklyn in an area “that just
avoided being a slum” (Di Prima 1988, 35). Her parents, Francis and Emma Mallozzi Di
Prima, were first-generation Americans who put themselves through college and,
according to Di Prima, “were noisy and unpretentious” (1988, 35). Di Prima’s
grandparents were Italian and illiterate; her maternal grandfather, Domenico Mallozi, was
a free-thinking anarchist and one of her greatest and earliest influences (Knight 123). At
the age of seven, Di Prima began writing poetry, and at fourteen, she “made the decision
to live her life as a poet” (Di Prima 1988, 139).

For almost two years, Di Prima studied physics at Swarthmore College, an
experience she summarizes as:

a crashing disappointment: a place of male and female
stereotypes in cashmere sweaters. . . . A place of unhappy
faculty members casting sidelong glances at lascivious
virgins from Little Rock. A place of endless bridge games,
fudge parties, ennui which spread like the plague. . . . A
good place for a murder, certainly, which saw instead an
average of three suicides a semester. (33)
After dropping out of Swarthmore College in 1953, Di Prima moved to New York’s Lower East Side “well before the arrival of any ‘scene,’” as Brenda Knight notes (123). Also in 1953, Di Prima began writing to Ezra Pound, whom she visited two years later at a psychiatric hospital in Washington, staying with his companion Sheri Martinelli for several weeks (Di Prima 1990, 198). According to Di Prima, Pound wanted her to single-handedly “change the nature of the programming on nationwide television” (Di Prima 1988, 125).

The years 1953-1956 are the primary focus of Di Prima’s autobiography Memoirs of a Beatnik, a book written for hire and meant to be sold as erotica. Memoirs begins with an explicit account of how Di Prima lost her virginity, and many of the chapters that follow focus upon sexual encounters with a variety of men and women. Di Prima joyfully details life in “pads,” which were shared by groups of people—generally writers and artists—who explored the city together. Di Prima spent most of her time reading and writing, posing for pornographers and art students to pay the bills, resisting the drudgery of nine-to-five life at all costs.

Her unconventional workload very often left her days free for wandering New York. She fondly recalls Longley’s Cafeteria, where “we would sometimes hide ourselves to read or write the afternoon away, watching the folk enter and leave, and making the acquaintance of some of the loquacious and eccentric old people for whom New York then still had time” (Di Prima 1988, 103). Such hang-outs were treasured by Di Prima and her friends, who spent many of their days looking for warm places to write,
talk and watch people, especially where free coffee refills were offered—a well-sugared, creamy cup of coffee often served as a meal for the “starving artists.”

Another coveted hang-out was the “Donnell Library . . . with its clean, glorious bathrooms, plenteous hot water and warmth, rugs in the sitting area, comfortable couches, and records to take out” (103). The Museum of Modern Art provided “an endless stream” of free movies, as well as personal access to the paintings. Di Prima was able to “scribble and daydream and feast on detail and color, or walk around a sculpture, examining it from all angles, backwards, or lying down under it, and scribble, and pick your teeth, and write a letter, and scribble, and take off your shoes . . .” (104); unfortunately, “nowadays [in 1969, when she wrote Memoirs] there are always Heads, millions of Heads, between me and any work of art” (103).

It was during this time that Di Prima lived in “a lovely pad, one of the best” (96), a place she and her friends kept warm by burning “cartons and barrels of wood . . . copped off construction sites” (97). In the hardest winter months, most of the day was spent rummaging for wood, and each night the pad-dwellers would sleep in shifts by the fire to keep it from going out. The bathroom was in the hall and “unspeakably dirty, and could not be cleaned no matter what, because it was only one flight up and therefore used by every bum in the neighborhood” (96). Neither toilet paper nor a light bulb could be left in the bathroom because they would be stolen, so the pad-dwellers had to take both with them or do without. Here Di Prima’s life was “the simplest, kindest and most devoted. . . , the goals were clear and set” (96). Di Prima makes clear her preference for
this type of straightforward simplicity throughout her life—both in her actions and her words.

Di Prima’s tone is relatively casual and cheerful throughout most of Memoirs, but the book ends rather seriously. In the final chapter, Di Prima discusses the disturbing changes in the “affluent post-Korean-war society” around her:

we had lived through the horror of the Rosenberg executions and the Hungarian revolution: paranoid, glued to the radio, and talking endlessly of where we could possibly go into exile. . . . The first fallout terror had finally struck, and a group of people were buying land in Montana to construct a city under a lead dome. In New York, the beginnings of neo-fascist city planning were stirring, and the entire area north of our pad was slated for destruction, to make way for what was to become Lincoln Center. (125)

With the old pads crumbling around them, Di Prima and her friends guessed that there were probably only about one hundred or so people in the country like them, “who raced about in Levis and work shirts, made art, smoked dope, dug the new jazz, and spoke a bastardization of the black argot” (126). They began to feel more and more isolated from society, and they began to “shut out the rest of the world” (126).

During this period Di Prima read Allen Ginsberg’s newly published “Howl” (126). In reading Ginsberg it occurred to Di Prima that, “if there was one Allen, there
must be more, other people writing. . . . For I sensed that Allen was only, could only be, the vanguard of a much larger thing” (Di Prima 1988, 127). However, Di Prima had mixed feelings upon reading Ginsberg:

I was frightened and a little sad. I already clung

instinctively to the easy, unselfconscious Bohemianism we

had maintained at the pad, our unspoken sense that we were

alone in a strange world, a sense that kept us proud and

bound to each other. But for the moment regret for what

we might be losing was buried under a sweeping sense of

exhilaration, of glee. (1988,127)

Any sense of loss that Di Prima felt was purely temporary. Di Prima eagerly began seeking out other poets, and she was soon corresponding with Ginsberg, Kenneth Patchen, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Di Prima 1990, 198). Rather than feeling excluded from these already successful writers, Di Prima was ready to join them and learn from their success. She observed in an interview with Anne Waldman:

Don’t forget, however great your visioning and your

inspiration, you need the techniques of the craft and there’s

nowhere, really, to get them because these are not passed

on in schools. They are passed on person to person, and

back then the male naturally passed them on to the male. I

think maybe I was one of the first women to break through
that. . . (Knight 124)

This same year, Di Prima also met James Waring and began studying “Zen, random techniques, meditative composition” with him (Di Prima 1990, 198), igniting a lifelong passion for Buddhism.

In 1957, Di Prima met Ginsberg, Kerouac, Peter Orlovsky (Ginsberg’s lover for a number of years) and Gregory Corso. She describes the meeting in Memoirs, calling the resulting sexual encounter with Kerouac, Ginsberg, two others and herself as “warm and friendly and very unsexy—like being in a bathtub with four other people” (Di Prima 1988, 131). She chooses to insert this meeting at almost the very end of the book, indicating that she was a Beat long before she knew Kerouac or Ginsberg or their work. Ginsberg and Kerouac introduced the rest of the world to the Beat lifestyle, Di Prima’s lifestyle. Di Prima doesn’t end the book with this encounter though, denying it the privilege of taking over HER story. Instead, the book ends with her realizing that she is pregnant, a logical end to her bohemian existence fraught with casual sex; however, the final sentences of Memoirs reads:

... I knew I was pregnant. And 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. (Di Prima 1988, 134).

This pregnancy does not signal the end of her adventures—it merely signals a turn of events.
Just a year later LeRoi Jones’ Totem Press published Di Prima’s first book, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*, which her friends “Pete and Leslie solemnly assured me . . . could not be published because no one would understand a word of the street slang” (Di Prima 1988, 125). George Butterick criticizes this street slang, saying “Although no doubt sincere, the results seem coy, ineffectual, transient. . . .” (150). The poems are the work of an immature writer who is determined to make new voices heard, but is trying too hard.

Di Prima’s next published work, *Dinners and Nightmares*, showed marked improvement, a greater confidence in her own vocabulary and less reliance upon hip phraseology to make her points. Butterick refers to this writing as “sentimental for a stretch, but with saving ironies. . . . The author’s outlook is steady, sturdy, the poems marred little by self-pity. . . . There is also verbal exploration, . . . [which] allows feelings to be spoken from the heart. . . .” (151). Poet Robert Creeley provided an introduction for the 1974 printing of *Dinners and Nightmares*, calling Di Prima “an adept and flexible provider of the real. . . . her nature balks at false responses. She is true” (Di Prima 1974, introduction).

*Floating Bear*, one of the longest-running Beat newsletters (1961-1970), was founded by Di Prima and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). The Bear “became one of the principal and most influential vehicles for poetic communication for the period,” having published most of the “major Beat figures” (Butterick 156-157). Di Prima and Jones mimeographed *The Floating Bear* themselves in the back of the Phoenix Bookshop,
favoring the quick turnout over a higher quality press production; LeRoi Jones reflects that “It was meant to be ‘quick, fast and in a hurry.’ Something that could carry the zigs and zags of the literary scene...” (Charters 1992, 336). Various volunteers helped collate and staple the newsletter, which had an average circulation of about three hundred people and was offered for the price of postage to anyone who asked to be on the mailing list.

Joel Oppenheimer, one-time contributor to Floating Bear, reflected about the newsletter:

it was published as a labor of love, suspect, but it turns out to be a significant and valuable addition to the library....
the pleasure now is with the depth and breadth with which that scene is presented.... [the contributors ranged] from peter abelard to louis zukofsky with stops for fielding dawson, allen ginsberg, ruth krauss, frank o’hara, pilgrim state hospital and a million others.... (Oppenheimer 1974, 36)

Less than a year after beginning production, Di Prima and Jones were arrested by the FBI for alleged obscenity after authorities seized Floating Bear 9, which had been sent to a prisoner who was on the subscription list. The issue in question contained a passage about homosexual rape, as well as a section from William Burroughs’ Naked Lunch (Charters 1992, 336). Jones requested a grand jury hearing, and he spent two days reading aloud from other books previously labeled obscene, such as Ulysses and Lady
Chatterley’s Lover. The case was dropped after Jones established that precedent protected the publication of Floating Bear.

Di Prima also came up against obscenity charges in 1963 for her association with the New York Poets Theatre, which was founded in 1961. The New York Poets Theatre produced one-act plays written by poets, including Frank O’Hara, Michael McClure and even the more mainstream Wallace Stevens (Knight & Knight, 143), and boasted “fine-arts sets by New York and West Coast painters” (Di Prima 1990, 198). Di Prima and her partners, Fred Herko, LeRoi Jones, Alan Marlowe and James Waring, were brought up on charges for showing Jean Genet’s film Chant d’Amour, and the court “upheld the right of the landlady to throw us out because we were obscene,” Di Prima reflected (Knight & Knight, 143).

Di Prima and Alan Marlowe, her husband from 1962 until 1969, established Poets Press in 1964. With the help of an National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant, Poets Press published twenty-nine books of prose and poetry (Butterick 157). Among the writers published were Herbert Huncke (who figures into the Beat Movement as a friend and drug supplier to Burroughs), Timothy Leary, Audre Lorde and Di Prima herself. Di Prima reflects: “I bought a Davison 241 and put it in a store-front... I went to ‘printing school’ for a week and learned how to run the machine (I was the only woman in the class), and got on with it” (Butterick 157).

In spite of having young children with her much of the time, Di Prima’s lifestyle remained quite bohemian. After the Poets Theatre closed in 1965, Di Prima moved to an
ashram in New York and less than a year later she moved to Timothy Leary’s experimental community at Millbrook (Di Prima 1990, 199). In 1967, she took a 20,000 mile trip around the United States in a bus, reading poetry at bars, universities and galleries along the way (199). Unlike her male contemporaries, Di Prima did not shirk her parental responsibilities, personally caring for all five of her children; furthermore, unlike her female contemporaries, she did not allow her children to ground her. Di Prima’s daughter Jeanne had this to say about her childhood years: “I really miss those old days. They were hard, but they were beautiful” (1988, iii).

Di Prima and her wandering brood settled in San Francisco by 1968. Di Prima joined the Diggers, and with actor Peter Coyote and poet Lenore Kandel and others, she passed out free food and organized political events (Knight 126). This same year she published Revolutionary Letters, a collection of politically radical poetry featuring poems like Revolutionary Letter #49, which begins “Free Julian Beck / Free Timothy Leary / Free seven million starving in Pakistan / Free all political prisoners” (Di Prima 1971, 61).

Once she had settled in San Francisco, Di Prima began studying at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, where she met Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and taught women’s writing workshops (Di Prima 1990, 199). Within two years after moving to San Francisco, Di Prima and Alan Marlowe divorced, her father died, and she gave birth to her fifth child, Rudi. In 1972, Di Prima married Grant Fisher, whom she divorced three years later. Despite all of these changes, Di Prima never slowed down, traveling to Wyoming, Montana, Arizona, and Minnesota to teach for the NEA’s Poetry in the
Schools program, which involved lecturing in reform schools, reservations, and prisons (Di Prima 1990, 199), and even publishing another work, The Calculus of Variation, which critic George Butterick describes as “a surrealistic stream of consciousness mixed with specific memories ... a narrative of cabalistic ramblings lacking linear drive...” (157).

Over the next twenty years, Di Prima would teach in a number of places. From 1972-1975, she taught “writing, visualization, and dream workshops” at Intersection for the Arts, and in 1974 she taught at the opening session of The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, the poetics program for the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado (Di Prima 1990, 199). In 1976 she founded The Poets Institute, “a community graphics and typesetting center,” in Point Reyes, California, where she had been living for three years (199). This same year, she received “an Arts-in-Social-Institutions fellowship from the California Arts Council to teach writing and collage at Napa State Hospital” (199). For the next several years she taught writing workshops in Point Reyes and San Francisco. During this period, she met Sheppard Powell, who remains “her life partner” to this day (Knight 127).

In 1975, Di Prima published Selected Poems: 1956-1975, a collection of poetry that “graphs her journey” and her poetic evolution from a “nutty ‘Wow, man!’ hipsterism of the 50’s through the political activism of her ‘Revolutionary Letters’ in the late 60’s into present Buddhist pathways” (Zavatsky 1976, 33). In a New York Times book review, critic Bill Zavatsky applauds Di Prima’s progress, admitting that “I prefer her
scrutinies of the particulars of her own life, the poems in which she pours out her heart” (1976, 33). Zavatsky concludes, as many of Di Prima’s reviewers do, by praising the potential he sees in her work, admiring its honesty, and expressing a desire to see future works. George Butterick comments similarly, speculating that Di Prima’s unfinished epic, Loba, “an ambitious attempt to embody mythologically the various manifestations of female power through Loba, the wolf-goddess,” could prove to be her major work (160).

With the birth of two grandchildren in the late seventies, Di Prima’s life settled a bit. Along with Robert Duncan, Duncan McNaughton, David Meltzer and Louis Patler, she established a Masters program in poetics at the New College of California, and she taught “hermetic traditions in poetry” there for seven years (Di Prima 1990, 199). In the early eighties, Di Prima began working privately as a healer and psychic, and she founded the San Francisco Institute of Magical and Healing Arts with Sheppard Powell, Janet Carter, and Carl Grundberg (Di Prima 1990). Di Prima still teaches there after fourteen years.

Di Prima has been a writer for over fifty years and has written more than thirty books, which have been translated into over twenty languages. Brenda Knight proclaims, “More than any other woman . . . Di Prima has taken her place alongside the men as the epitome of Beat brilliance” (128). In spite of her involvement in publishing and circulating Beat literature and her growing acquaintance with the other Beats, Di Prima did not consider herself part of the Beat Movement for quite some time (Charters 1992,
335). Di Prima regarded herself as a "fellow traveler" of the Beats, and not part of the creative movement itself (335). Most likely Di Prima developed this feeling of exclusion from both the attitudes of the Beats and the literary representations of women in Beat writing.
CHAPTER III

BEAT IMPRESSIONS OF WOMEN

Edward Foster bluntly asserts, “Women have little place in most Beat writings” (22). Beat writers tend to perpetuate the “American literary tradition which characterizes men as advocates of freedom. . .” (Foster 23). Women, on the other hand, represent attachment and a kind of imprisonment to the free-spirited Beats, to whom motion is critical. “Women and their demands for responsibility were, at worst, irritating and more often just uninteresting compared to the ecstatic possibilities of male adventure,” according to critic Barbara Ehrenreich (Ehrenreich 54). In order to establish a sense of Beat impressions of women, I have chosen to focus upon women in the life and works of the three core writers of the movement: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs.

At the very center of the movement lies Jack Kerouac, who claims in Visions of Cody that “As far as young women are concerned I can’t look at them unless I tear off their clothes one by one” (Kerouac 23). Kerouac’s largely autobiographical novels often portray women merely as experiences—and rather fleeting experiences at that. Eliot D. Allen defines the women in Kerouac’s fiction as

singularly inarticulate . . . they have no ideas, perhaps even no minds. Their lives are completely physical. While the
men are “digging” the human scene around them, sitting far into the night discussing jazz or Zen Buddhism, the women operate on a different plane. They eat, drink, occasionally cook meals, make love, have babies or sit waiting for their wandering men to return. (99)

Kerouac places women on this “completely physical” plane repeatedly in his work and his life; this tendency is perhaps best illustrated by this compliment in a love letter to a Barnard College woman he had been dating: “You have the mind of a man, and the heart and body of a woman” (Charters 1996, 24). So great is his cognitive dissonance that he does not recognize intelligence as a possible feminine trait: to be intelligent is to be a masculinized woman. By viewing the feminine as only physical, Kerouac banishes women to this separate, physical plane, where men and women can only briefly and occasionally meet.

An uglier example of Kerouac’s tendency to reduce women to mere objects of desire appears in a 1955 letter to Allen Ginsberg:

As for a woman, what kind of man sells his soul for a gash? A fucking veritable GASH—a great slit between the legs lookin more like murder than anything else—Really, my dear, every time I look at a woman now I almost get sick thinking of it. (Charters 1996, 449)

The violence and sheer nastiness of this remark is shocking, and the notion that Kerouac must give up his soul to have a relationship with a woman is disheartening, though
In another letter, this time addressed to Neal Cassady, Kerouac describes a girl named Ann: “Who could be better? A nurse, beautiful, pliant, quiet...very shy, looks away, blushes, murmurs her words; a womanly flush on her cheeks, the popping-at-the-seams shape of a real gal....” (Charters 1996, 168). He goes on to stress that he wants a girl “who’ll be all things. Ann may have to learn these things, see?” (168); Kerouac has wisely chosen a “pliant” girl to train, a girl who either keeps her mouth shut or murmurs her words modestly--already popping at the seams, which will save valuable time when he tears off her clothes. Kerouac’s ideal woman is little more than a pretty vessel. She is clearly not meant to be a companion, and certainly not a fellow intellectual. After all, what is the point of having a conversation with someone who knows only what you have told her to know?

Kerouac exhibits a desire for this type of relationship on more than one occasion, sometimes even expressing a yearning to be like a father to a young innocent woman. This arrangement would give him the opportunity to shape his daughter-figure into his own image and foster in her a great sense of dependence. His rather odd relationship with his mother may have contributed to Kerouac’s romantic ideas of incest. He lived with his mother on and off throughout his entire life and frequently allowed her to support him and dictate his actions, much to the exasperation of his wives and girlfriends. In the last years of his life, when Kerouac had completely retreated from the outside world and did almost nothing but drink, many visitors to the Kerouac home observed that Kerouac and
his mother behaved much like an old unhappily married couple.

Caroline Cassady, Neal’s wife off and on for over fifteen years, was one of the few women who remained a constant in Kerouac’s life. In addition to her friendship with Kerouac, she has maintained a correspondence with Allen Ginsberg for many years as well. Caroline has become a great source for Beat scholars, having accumulated much of Neal’s correspondence and other writings, and her name almost invariably appears in the acknowledgments of any book written about the Beats. Though Caroline served as a stable home base for Neal (and Kerouac, to a lesser extent) and has been a fastidious caretaker of writings and pictures that were left behind by him, she was frequently deserted by Neal so that he could be with Kerouac, Ginsberg or William Burroughs. Neal was also notorious for juggling sexual partners, as Kerouac rather gleefully records in On the Road and Caroline writes in her biography Off the Road, which re-tells many of the scenes in On the Road from Caroline's perspective.

One such scene revolves around Kerouac waiting for Neal to finish convincing Caroline that he needs to take a cross-country trip. In Kerouac’s version, Caroline (Camille in On the Road) is keeping Neal (Dean) and him (Sal) apart, and Sal is annoyed by the disapproving “sewing circle” of women who scold Dean (Kerouac 159). Sal is frustrated with Camille’s lack of comprehension that Dean is “BEAT—the root, the soul of Beatific,” made for such road trips, not to sit at home with his wife and children (161). Caroline’s version focuses on the outrage and humiliation she feels at being left, penniless and pregnant, by Neal so that he can get “damned kicks” (Cassady 104). This
contrast is a striking example of the struggle between men and women in the Beat milieu. Caroline’s concerns are primarily with the physical realities of the situation—lack of money, lack of food, and the impending birth of her second child—while Kerouac’s thoughts are on Neal’s rightful spiritual role; Kerouac’s emphasis is on motion, but Caroline’s emphasis is on the preservation of her nest, further evidenced by her choice of title, *Off the Road* (emphasis mine).

Indeed, when his then-girlfriend Joyce Johnson asked Kerouac if he could ever include a woman on his travels, Kerouac responded that all that she, and all women, really want is to “have babies” (Johnson 136). In his book about Kerouac, Robert Hipkiss suggests that Kerouac thought of women as “a biological trap. Her overall purpose is procreation, and in order to fulfill her function she must get a male not only to copulate with her but to provide for her and her offspring...” (23-24). Kerouac himself fathered one child, Jan Kerouac, and his solution to this problem was to deny paternity, though he had been married to the child’s mother at the time of conception and as Jan grew up their physical similarities were undeniable; he also refused to pay child support. As Hipkiss points out, Kerouac could only provide for his offspring “…at the expense of his own freedom and desire for self glory” (24).

Jan Kerouac lived a whirlwind life, hitting the road in her early teens after spending more time dropping acid than attending school (Knight 309). She and Jack met only twice—once when he was forced to take a paternity test and once when she dropped by to visit him, but they spoke on the phone many times. Jan wrote two books in a style
“partially of her design and partially an experiential search for her father” (309). She lived her life the way Kerouac wrote, at a pace he could only keep up with in his fiction, and she remained forever in the shadow of a man who could not bring himself to publicly acknowledge her. Jan lived to be 44, dying suddenly of kidney failure in 1996.

According to Ted Morgan, William Burroughs came to two conclusions about women at a young age: they were either evil or useless (1988). Morgan traces these opinions to Burroughs’ relationship with his mother, supposedly a very cold woman, and Burroughs’ relationship with his nanny, who did something so terrible that Burroughs has repressed the memory for over eighty years. In fact, Burroughs is often regarded a misogynist, though he defends himself by claiming that his problem not with women personally but with romantic love, which he calls “a fraud perpetrated by the female sex” (Foster 23).

In spite of whatever problems Burroughs has with the female sex, he lived with his common-law wife Joan Vollmer for over three years. Joan was seminal in the Beat Movement because her New York apartment “was a nucleus that attracted many of the characters that played a vital role in the formation of the Beat [Movement]” (Knight 49); it was in Joan’s apartment that Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs all first met. Burroughs, though homosexual, was immediately attracted to Joan’s sharp intellect and perception, and he thought she was the smartest member of their group because there were “no limits” to her thinking (Morgan 123); Joan was equally attracted to Burroughs for “his brilliant mind, outrageous proclamations, and vaguely sinister air” (Knight 51).
Unlike Neal Cassady and Kerouac, Burroughs felt an obligation to stay home with his wife and children. On one of Cassady and Kerouac’s cross-country trips, Al Hinkle (a friend of Neal’s) abandoned his wife, who showed up at Burroughs’ ranch looking for her husband. Burroughs somewhat grudgingly took her in, wondering “What kind of character was this Hinkle, to leave his wife without funds and not even let her know where he was?” (Morgan 157); Burroughs was equally disapproving of Cassady’s tendency to leave his wife and children to travel (157).

Though in some ways his sense of duty may have made him a better husband than Cassady or Kerouac, Burroughs was far from ideal. Helen Hinkle observed that Burroughs and Joan were “obviously fond of and amused by one another. . . . But they slept in separate rooms, and there was no physical contact between them. . . .” (156).

When chastised by Ginsberg for not thinking of Joan’s needs, Burroughs responded “I never made any pretensions of permanent heterosexual orientation. . . . How could I promise something that is not in my powers to give?” (Morgan 161). He wrote to Ginsberg that he did not dislike having sex with women: “Better than nothing, of course, like a tortilla is better than no food. But no matter how many tortillas I eat I still want a steak” (Morgan 183). Joan wryly penciled in the observation, “Around the 20th of the month, things get a bit tight and he lives on tortillas” (183). By all accounts, Burroughs was very honest about his frequent affairs with other men, though it seems unlikely that this honesty did much to soothe Joan.

Their “curious marriage of minds” (Knight 51) was abruptly cut short when
Burroughs shot Joan in an ill-fated game of William Tell in Mexico. Hearing of Joan’s death, many of Burroughs’ friends were openly shocked, noting that Burroughs is a very skilled gunman and his wife was standing fairly close to him at the time of the shooting. Burroughs managed to escape prosecution by hiring a good lawyer and quickly fleeing Mexico, maintaining that the tragedy was an accident; however, he has also been quoted as saying there is no such thing as an accident.

As Joan was one of the very few women that the core Beats regarded an intellect to be reckoned with, the fact that her death was caused by a bullet through the brain is rather eerie. Ginsberg agreed with Burroughs that Joan was smarter than any of them, and she was “the only women he really respected and admired” (Morgan 196). In a letter to Ginsberg after Joan’s death, Kerouac claimed that “Burroughs was “Greater than he ever was. Misses Joan terribly. Joan made him great, lives on in him like mad, vibrating” (Charters 1992, 353). Strangely, nothing that Burroughs wrote was published until after Joan’s death. John Tytell postulates that

The accident and the consequent loss of his children and his family’s financial support freed Burroughs from his own past. His use of drugs, his consort with criminals, and finally his shooting Joan—all were steps to outcasting himself, becoming unacceptable in a society which he had already rejected. (46)

It was not Joan who made Burroughs great—it was her death that allowed him to become
great. Moreover, Carolyn Cassady (152) and Joyce Johnson (5), among others, have speculated that the Joan might have allowed herself to be killed, perhaps making the ultimate sacrifice for Burroughs--freeing him from any responsibilities and demolishing their nest.

Burroughs himself admits that

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. I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have no choice except to write my way out. (Morgan 199)

Burroughs had been obligated to and trapped by Joan and their children. After her death, he is free, but in fear of being possessed once again. His rather guilt-free wording, "the death of Joan," indicates how impersonally he now regards her. Her death was something that just happened, but he was able to make the best of her death, using it to spur on his sluggish writing career.

Other than Kerouac, no writer was more a part of the Beat movement than Allen Ginsberg. Though women are rarely included in Ginsberg's poetry, his treatment of
women is much more multidimensional than Kerouac’s. Naomi, Ginsberg’s mother, figured heavily in two of his best-known works, “Howl” and “Kaddish.” Naomi is one of “the best minds” Ginsberg refers to in his opening line to “Howl,” immortalizing her as one of many “destroyed by madness” (Ginsberg 1988, 126). In fact, Ginsberg biographer Joel Schumacher claims that Ginsberg’s “strong feelings of guilt over his signing the legal documents granting permission for his mother’s lobotomy” inspired him to write “Howl” just as much as his conversations with Carl Solomon, to whom the work is dedicated (202).

Though Naomi provided inspiration for “Howl,” she is not mentioned outright, allegedly out of respect for family privacy. However, in “Kaddish,” a lament for his mother written after her death, Ginsberg openly discusses Naomi, tracing her personal descent into madness. Ginsberg speculates what Naomi was like as a young newlywed immigrant in Greenwich Village, seeing her as “beautiful and smiling, a halo of flowers in her hair” (Schumacher 300). He recalls her in his childhood as “holy mother” and “glorious muse” and reflects upon the changes in her as her illness increased, remembering also a “small broken woman” (223) and “sweating, bulge-eyed, fat” (215).

Certainly, “Kaddish” is one of the most even-handed representations of a woman in male Beat writing. Moreover, Schumacher posits:

Allen, in giving the details of his mother’s indignities, sufferings, frustrations, and struggles, had described . . . a woman’s mad battle for personal and spiritual realization.
Few poems ever written by a man would ever approach “Kaddish” for its understanding of all things vital to the contemporary woman. . . . In the end, youthful beauty, innocence, aspiration, passion, sensuality, and intelligence were literally and figuratively scarred by the incessant impositions of Man’s world, the domination exacting its price by moment and incident until the damage was irreparable. In this way, Naomi Ginsberg became a heroic symbol, not of a generation but of an entire gender destroyed by madness. (301)

Certainly, Ginsberg is to be credited with this touching work in which he strives to show Naomi as she was—beautiful and ugly, mad and brilliant—rather than turning her into a fantasy woman, as Kerouac might have. There remains, however, an odd resonance to this work, a reminder of Joan Burroughs; Ginsberg was responsible for ordering his mother’s lobotomy, a surgery considered justifiable at the time, but a chilling Beat pattern nonetheless.

“Kaddish” aside, the conspicuous lack of women in the rest Ginsberg’s work cannot be ignored, especially in light of his exclusionary notions. In a 1954 journal, Ginsberg recorded a dream in which he receives a letter from John Clellon Holmes which states, “The social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang” (Ginsberg 20-21). Ginsberg himself adds, “not society’s perfum’d marriage” (21).
Though he has had relationships with women and once even vowed that he would get married and have children, Ginsberg has been outspoken about his homosexuality for the majority of his life (Schumacher 329). Taking into consideration his sexual orientation, his dismissal of conventional marriage is not surprising. However, he is implying that the unmentioned “perfum’d” women are responsible for perpetuating marriage, the antithesis of the boy gang. Ginsberg views women as nothing more than an impediment to the artist.

Years later when Alix Kates Shulman pressed, “Where are the women Beats?” (19), Ginsberg responded with:

I think the point is, the men didn’t push the women
literarily or celebrate them. . . . But then, among the group
of people we knew at the time, who were the 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. . . . (French 44-45)

While is it true that Ginsberg and the Beat males were not responsible for any “lack of outstanding genius” among their female peers, they were responsible for fostering an atmosphere that is hostile or indifferent to women. Ginsberg’s method of dealing with women is to ignore them, deny that they merit his attention. Where Kerouac and
Burroughs distort the female voices around them, Ginsberg shuts them out. To his credit, he does admit later in this same interview that Diane Di Prima is a “strong writer” (45), and he contributed a complimentary blurb to Di Prima’s *Pieces of a Song*:

Diane di Prima, revolutionary activist of the 1960s’ Beat literary renaissance, heroic in life and poetics: a learned humorous bohemian, classically educated and twentieth-century radical, her writing, informed by Buddhist equanimity, is exemplary in imagist, political and mystical modes. (Di Prima 1990, back cover)

These kind words are immediately followed by “A great *woman* poet in second half of American century...” [emphasis mine].

No matter how much she has accomplished, Di Prima is rarely allowed to forget that her accomplishments are outstanding for a *woman*. While this is true, especially keeping in mind the prevailing Beat attitudes toward women, Di Prima cannot resist the urge to respond to those who try to limit her. She does not let herself become obsessed with battling her “brothers,” but she has much to say about being a woman writer who is surrounded by stunning ignorance and misogyny.
CHAPTER IV

DI PRIMA’S RESPONSE TO HER BROTHERS

Faced with the shocking treatment toward her sisters, Di Prima steeled herself and simply “got on with it,” as she has been apt to do. And she published, corresponded with scores of successful male writers and even befriended some of them. Though some may argue that Di Prima achieved such unprecedented success with the men by being masculine, this seems unfair. Certainly, Di Prima has lived much more like the free-roaming men than the nesting women of her time. But Di Prima’s work is peppered with statements about womanhood, proclaiming that “I am woman and my poems / are woman’s” in “The Practice of Magical Evocation.” For the introduction to her second printing of Dinners and Nightmares, Robert Creeley wrote:

Di Prima is . . . not simply, certainly not passively, but clearly, specifically, a woman as one might hope equally to be a man. I am not speaking of roles, nor even of that political situation of persons she has so decisively entered at times. Nor of children and homes, though she has made both a deep and abiding pleasure in her own life and those related. It is some act of essential clarity I value—which in these initial occasions of her writing is already moving to declare itself: food, places, friends, nights, streets, dreams,
the way. She is an adept and flexible provider of the real, which we eat daily or else we starve. (Di Prima 1974)

Di Prima's concerns are not always the concerns of her brothers. What occasionally moves her to write—the strangely delightful moments of everyday life, such as planning to cook a feast on a shoestring—are the very topics that compel her brothers to stay on the go. Di Prima can relate to her brothers, but she does not always agree with them. Moreover, she airs her complaints in the most public forum available to her—her work.

In Memoirs of a Beatnik, Di Prima describes her first meeting with Jack Kerouac, who immediately “seizes” her writing notebook and “uncorrects” her poems (130). Di Prima explains Kerouac’s writing philosophy, “that one should never change or rewrite anything” (Di Prima 1988, 130), and she admits that his “uncorrections” make her work “beautiful” (130). While Di Prima agrees with his philosophy, appreciating the honesty of a first draft herself, she chooses to say that he “seizes” her book, suggesting it was not offered to him, and he “uncorrects” her work, suggesting that the poems should have been left alone, especially in light of Kerouac’s own philosophy. After this literary rape of sorts, she and Kerouac have consensual sex, which is described in the usual graphic detail. She, for the most part, treats him much as she treats the numerous other sexual encounters in her work, but Di Prima awards Kerouac a courtesy he would rarely extend by not merely making him a sexual object, prefacing the sex with a brief discussion of his literary technique.

Although she does not truly object, the fact remains that Kerouac has invaded her
world, much like Ginsberg does with the publication of “Howl,” which stirs a sense of loss in Di Prima. She clearly admires both Ginsberg and Kerouac, but their entrance onto the scene changed her life forever. The work that she had been doing for several years suddenly had a label, Beat, which carries with it all of the stigmas as well as the notoriety. Certainly, the wide-spread popularity of Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* opened the door wider for many Beat writers, including Di Prima. However, in spite of the fact that she was partly responsible for keeping interest in their work alive with her publishing efforts, Di Prima’s male peers were often indifferent to her contributions.

Di Prima claimed in a 1984 interview that her lack of recognition was due to the fact that she “actually had the balls to enjoy” herself (Knight 144). In choosing the word “balls,” she takes a male (anatomically speaking) term and uses it to describe her own strength; she attempts to fit into the “boy gang” while using their language to emphasize (and de-emphasize, to complicate matters further) her “woman-ness.” She is bound to them by language, but she is playing with that language, tongue-in-cheek, underscoring the glaring lack of an equivalent feminine term to describe the tough and scrappy sort of courage she wants to invoke. New York Times reviewer Bill Zavatsky comments that, “By addressing the masculine in herself, [Di Prima] gains great power as a poet” (33), but he provides no evidence in support. Zavatsky is correct only in the sense that Di Prima is capable of seeing beyond conventional gender roles, which gives her work a greater depth and scope than the more polarized work of her peers. However, what Zavatsky seems to suggest is that it is the acknowledgment of the “masculinity” of her thoughts that gives Di
Prima strength, further asserting that “it is men who trigger her best poems” (33), another rather sweeping and unproven claim. Unable to find any instances of Di Prima “addressing the masculine in herself,” I have to assume that Zavatsky intimates that when Di Prima writes powerfully, she is tapping into her masculine reserves, which echoes Kerouac’s notion that to be an intelligent woman is to be a masculinized woman.

Di Prima certainly does not view herself as a masculinized woman; she has written about menstruation (“I Get My Period, September 1964”) and childbearing, most notably in “The Practice of Magical Evocation,” which directly addresses fellow poet Gary Snyder’s “Praise for Sick Women” (see Snyder 1976 for complete text). Snyder’s work propounds the condescending notion that “All women are wounded” (Murphy 49). “Praise” focuses on feminine fertility (menstruation) and the female genitalia, the “canvas” for the man’s creation. “The female is fertile,” (part 1, line 1) ripe for the planting of male seeds, “sudden roots” (part 1, line 13). Critic Michael Davidson claims that “Praise for Sick Women” epitomizes, “The revival of a primitivist ethos . . . in which the male was regarded as the maker and the female as the formless material of his art” (177). Di Prima’s response is a “revision” of Snyder that “directly appropriates Snyder’s naturalist rhetoric and turns it to her own uses” (Davidson 178). The full text of “The Practice of Magical Evocation” is as follows:

The female is fertile, and discipline
(contra naturam) only
confuses her.
--Gary Snyder

i am a woman and my poems
are woman's: easy to say
this. the female is ductile

and

(stroke after stroke)
built for masochistic
calm. The deadened nerve
is part of it:
awakened sex, dead retina
fish eyes; at hair's root
minimal feeling

and pelvic architecture functional
assailed inside & out
(bring forth) the cunt gets wide
and relatively sloppy
bring forth men children only

female
is
ductile
woman, a veil thru which the fingering Will
twice torn
twice torn
twice torn
inside & out
the flow
what rhythm add to stillness
what applause? (Di Prima 1975, 39)

Di Prima turns Snyder’s “the female is fertile” into “the female is ductile,” or “malleable, pliable and without will” (178); she then proceeds to claim that the female has no mind or nerve,” which has the double meaning of both lack of feeling and lack of courage. The woman meekly serves as an “empty vessel” through which the male “begets his progeny” (178). And after giving birth, “what does the woman receive from all of this: ‘what rhythm add to stillness / what applause?’” (178).

Di Prima slyly manipulates Snyder’s words and uses the absurd results to her rhetorical advantage. The woman is not at all helpless, and she is clever enough to use the perception of her helplessness to gain strength/voice. As Davidson points out, her response is purely ironic, and the more she “asserts woman’s passivity, the less we believe her...” (178).

Even as nothing more than a poetic response to Snyder, “The Practice” sets Di Prima apart from the other Beats simply by its emphasis on her woman-ness; however, Di
Prima is responding to more than just a single poem here. Di Prima’s poem begins with, “I am woman and my poems / are woman’s . . .” (Di Prima 1975, 1-2). This straightforward statement does more than exclude Di Prima from a large majority of the Beats; it excludes them from her own poetry. She asserts that her poetry, in essence, belongs to women, and she takes up the challenge of defending the “community of women.” She uses this forum to comment upon the treatment of women by the Beats. Women are “ductile”--malleable, easily maneuvered things; the women are unthinking, unfeeling, merely sexually “functional,” not unlike many Beat representations of women.

Di Prima also sarcastically comments upon the “boy gang mentality” of the Beats when she notes in “The Practice” that the female gives birth to “men children only.” And, finally, one wonders if the unheard applause Di Prima asks for in the final line of the poem is the applause of her fellow writers. Since Di Prima chooses to address this work directly to another Beat writer, and she begins the poem with such a strong, confident assertion of her work as a female poet, this poem can clearly be read as a message to the “boy gang” Beats.

In another work, “The Quarrel,” Di Prima talks to “Mark,” who is drawing as she grudgingly washes dishes, “I have just as fucking much work to do as you do . . . I am sick I said to the woodpile of doing dishes. I am just as lazy as you. Maybe lazier . . . Just because I happen to be a chick I thought . . .” (1974, 76). Obviously aware of the futility of her complaint, Di Prima addresses the woodpile, not Mark himself. Though she resents his apparent unwillingness to acknowledge her work as important, she
wordlessly finishes the dishes, thinking, “... I probably won’t bother again. But I’ll get bugged and not bother to tell you and after a while everything will be awful and I’ll never say anything because it’s so fucking uncool to talk about it” (76). Di Prima is keenly aware of her contemporaries’ opinions of women and is anxious not to fall into the trap of sounding like a shrew, so she passively gives in, knowing that scenes like this will soon end this relationship, “And that I thought will be that and what a shame” (76). The final dig comes when Mark calls to her from the living room, having leisurely switched from drawing to reading, “Hey hon... It says here Picasso produces fourteen hours a day” (76).

Critic Bill Zavatsky remarks that he “can hardly think of a more poignant contrast than the male Beat ‘on the road’ life and the early image di Prima projects of her pent-up ‘pad’ existence” (33). However, even a cursory look at Di Prima’s life clearly shows that she spent just as much time “on the road” as the male Beats, and her description of life in her pads is almost always more affectionate than weary. Zavatsky is correct to point to Di Prima’s emphasis on her pads and the day-to-day specifics of homemaking, but he imposes the male Beat ideology upon Di Prima’s work--she finds joy in much of what the “boys” find tedious.

Though just as prone to wanderlust as the boys, Di Prima was interested in making a home for herself, her companions and children. In Dinners and Nightmares, Di Prima dedicates an entire section to “what i ate where,” in which she gives several detailed descriptions of meals she eats and, more often than not, prepares. At one point,
she even happily describes shopping for the food that she will cook, serve and eat:

the shopping for thanksgiving was very lovely... i took
my shopping cart and arthur who lived next door... there
was at that time a vegetable market on east houston street,
more expensive than the other east side vegetable markets,
but very good, with everything very fresh, ... (30)

Di Prima then lists the food that she gets— all the way down to the spices—and explains how she rearranges her pad to accommodate the guests coming to the feast.

Certainly, Di Prima views food as a form of art, worth taking care to prepare and worth taking the time to appreciate. She is not depressedly making meals for some ungrateful man, but instead is celebrating having the money and leisure to cook well for many people. She celebrates making her pad a home, albeit a temporary one.

Several times in “what i ate where,” Di Prima mentions “the baby,” her first daughter, Jeanne. At Thanksgiving, “the baby sang happy birthday and said it was a party and we told her yes” (33); before the Christmas celebration, she “took the baby and went into brooklyn and bought six dozen clams...” (36); after Christmas, the baby sleeps while Di Prima clears away the leftover food (37). Rather than ignoring the existence of her children, Di Prima accepts the children as her responsibility and often takes great delight in them, even finding inspiration in them, having written a number of poems about them (e.g., “Letter to Jeanne” and “Tara”).

Di Prima’s male peers often had the luxury of ignoring the earthy realities of life,
depending heavily upon women to provide for them. Gabrielle Kerouac (Kerouac’s mother) took care of Kerouac for most of his life, providing a nest for him when his money and patience ran out. When he was away from home, Kerouac often leeched off other women, including Joyce Johnson, Carolyn Cassady, and his two wives, Joan Haverty (whom he left with a child to raise) and Edie Parker (whom he married in order to get released from jail). Neal Cassady was much the same, bouncing from wife to wife, sporadically playing house until he got the urge to travel. Burroughs’ paternal instincts never seemed strong, and he allowed his children to be distributed to various family members after Joan’s death. Unlike her male contemporaries, Di Prima manages to find some beauty in the mudanities of life, and she undoubtedly finds tremendous joy in motherhood, looking upon her children as works of art in and of themselves.

Di Prima has had admirable success in getting along with her literary “brothers,” especially considering that “the Beat ethos related women to the role of sexual surrogate . . . [and] did not raise them to a position of artistic equality” (Davidson 175). However, her interests have never been in merely breaking into the boys’ club. Di Prima has sought to gain the respect and approval of her male peers without alienating her struggling sisters -- “a difficult dance to do” (to borrow from “Praise for Sick Women,” line 6).
CHAPTER V

DI PRIMA AMONG HER SISTERS

Di Prima sets herself apart from her female contemporaries. Few women were bold enough to continue having children out of wedlock, and few were determined enough to make the children part of their artistic lives, often setting aside literary aspirations until the children grew up. Di Prima is also unique in that her success did not come as a result of writing about her relationship with any of her male contemporaries. While she was adventuring her way across the states, many women were stuck at home, writing when they had the energy and usually lacking the nerve or support they needed to show their work to anyone. Blossom Kirschenbaum notes that with her unparalleled success, “Di Prima could have assumed the role of ‘queen bee’” (55). But, typically, Di Prima has been supportive of her sisters, dedicating works to them (e.g., Loba, Parts I-VIII is dedicated to poets Lenore Kandel and Anne Waldman, among others) and publishing their works (e.g., Between Our Selves by Audre Lorde), never patronizing them (55).

However, despite her desire for sisterhood, at times Di Prima seems to suggest that women are naturally at odds with one another. An example of this comes from the “what i ate where” section of Dinners and Nightmares:

Millicent the bitch who married Dick. . . . She won’t eat
clams, or duck, or asparagus, or mushrooms. Nibbles at the pastry. Keeps saying nothankyou in a honeysouthern voice

... And us who invented this feast and eat it and love every bit and are bugged at Millicent which is how it should be when a woman comes to dinner in another woman’s house.

(Di Prima 1974, 14-15)

Traditionally, cooking is “women’s work,” and one of the few creative domestic chores. Though Millicent’s critique of the food annoys the cook, Di Prima recognizes that any time a cook makes a meal for another cook, criticism is inevitable. The same is true of artists revealing their art to one another. And most probably there is greater tension between female artists, given the additional credibility problems facing them.

Certainly, Di Prima is sometimes guilty of making this tension even worse. In the early sixties, Di Prima had an affair with LeRoi Jones, who was married to Hettie, a friend of Di Prima’s. In her memoirs, How I Became Hettie Jones, Hettie claims that she was hurt but unsurprised to learn that her husband, LeRoi, and Di Prima were having an affair:

Diane was everything I wasn’t. To begin she was single, and single women know, as the blues say, when to raise their window high. I liked her because she was smart and quick to laugh, and enjoyed her bisexual life (although she tended to wear lovers like chevrons). Unmarried, she was
raising a daughter. . . . I never knew how she lived,

working only occasional odd jobs. (98)

Though Hettie clearly respects Di Prima, she cannot help but undercut this respect with resentment. In Hettie’s eyes, Di Prima’s lovers (e.g., LeRoi) are merely her badges. Suddenly, the notion of “coming to dinner in another woman’s home” could conceivably be read as one woman’s (Di Prima’s) infringement upon another’s (Hettie’s) sexual territory, an interesting contrast to Hettie’s comments, which make LeRoi the trespasser through Di Prima’s open window.

According to Hettie, Di Prima once complimented her by saying, “Hettie’s a great lady, because she doesn’t bug her man” (99), but Hettie does not agree with Di Prima’s assessment—she feels embarrassed and betrayed. Nonetheless, Di Prima escapes Hettie’s wrath for the most part. Either graciousness or low self-esteem compells Hettie to compliment Di Prima frequently. Hettie remarks, “I admired Diane—why not? She wrote. Her self-directed life included a lot of good work” (190). Though independent by most standards of the day, Hettie was by no means “self-directed,” often deferring to LeRoi, to whom she stayed married for about six years until building pressure from Black Power groups convinced LeRoi to give up his white wife. Though a writer herself, Hettie kept her poems hidden in shoeboxes for years, trusting her judgment when called to choose other people’s writing for Yugen, but not trusting her instincts that her own work was worth reading. Once she was finally ready to let her writing be seen, Hettie chose to write a book about LeRoi Jones, who is mentioned, on average, every other page in her
memoirs. In contrast, Di Prima dedicated one book (*A New Handbook of Heaven*) to LeRoi and moved on.

Di Prima has noted that in her time “a lot of potentially great women writers wound up dead or crazy” (Knight & Knight 144). In *Minor Characters*, one of the few books written about Di Prima’s female peers, Joyce Johnson describes the lives of women whose talents were often overshadowed by the men who surrounded them. In one of the most tragic cases, Johnson remembers her friend Elise Cowen, an intelligent, cynical woman who had gone to high school with Johnson. Elise typed the manuscript for Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” which is generally her only claim to fame. For over ten years, Elise was obsessed with Ginsberg, whom she had briefly dated. She regarded him so highly that she referred to him as her “intercessor,” and Ginsberg thought of Elise as a “bright, sensitive and loving woman” (Schumacher, 376). However, he could not give her all of the attention that she craved, and he admitted that he sometimes found her gloominess repulsive (376). Ginsberg easily moved past the relationship, counting Elise among his scores of friends; Elise suffered quietly for the rest of her life, depressed, addicted to methamphetamine, wandering unhappily from place to place until she finally killed herself at age twenty-seven, leaving behind a number of poems, some of which Ginsberg published for her a few years later. Although Joel Schumacher, a Ginsberg biographer, claims that “Elise’s death [bothered] Allen for a long, long time” (376), Johnson aptly observes that “Elise was a moment in Allen’s life. In Elise’s life, Allen was an eternity” (78).
Di Prima indirectly responded to Elise’s suicide in an interview with Anne Waldman. Di Prima claimed that she had difficulty in the past getting published because she is a particular kind of woman—I’m not apologetic. I’m not sad. . . . Maybe if I was drinking a lot and writing miserable poems about some man and trying to kill myself every three years, maybe that would be okay, because that makes guys feel okay, too. . . . (144)

This is an interesting theory, but the reverse seems more likely: the reason Di Prima has gotten published at all has been that she is a particular kind of woman, one who did not let men become the focal point of her life, setting her in sharp contrast with her contemporaries. This is a rare moment of self-pity from Di Prima, who would be hard-pressed to get any sympathy from any of the wretched women who let men destroy their lives or any of her female peers who tried in vain to get published.

In addition to telling Elise’s story, Johnson chronicles her own story in Minor Characters, as well. Her focus is primarily Jack Kerouac, who floated in and out of her life for two years. They dated before, during and immediately after the publication of On the Road, a major turning point in Kerouac’s life. Instant fame and notoriety overwhelmed him, and he sought refuge in Johnson’s modest New York apartment after the media frenzy hit him. Johnson, who had been paid an advance to write a novel of her own, postponed writing so that she could be free to spend time with Kerouac. However,
Kerouac spent much of his time with her traveling—to see Burroughs in Tangier, to see Neal Cassady in San Francisco, and to see his mother—while Johnson is stuck in New York, trying to make a living as a secretary and doing her best to work on her novel when she had a break from Kerouac. At one point, he stays for quite some time in San Francisco, so Johnson offers to move there to be with him. His answer, “Well, do what you want, Joycey. Always do what you want,” was disconcerting to her (154). She protested, “Men were supposed to ask, to take, not leave you in place. I wanted to be wanted” (154-55).

Johnson’s attitude is precisely the type that Di Prima has little patience for, as can be seen “More or Less Love Poems #21”:

you are not quite
the air I breathe
thank god.
so go. (Di Prima 1974, 120)

In terse and cutting language, Di Prima sarcastically whittles down the ego of a lover who has apparently gotten cocky, but her “thank god” (3) suggests that she’s aware of the possibility (and danger) of infatuation. The specific use of “go” (4) invokes the Beats (e.g., Neal Cassady, John Clellon Holmes’ Go), and her blase final command is typical.

Though Di Prima often tries to encompass the community of women with her writing, ultimately her writing, and her life, is “woman’s,” singular—her own. Di Prima’s life, more than her work, is an indirect response to the women surrounding her. Her life-
message would be in harmony with Kerouac, “Live your lives out, they say; nay, love your lives out, so when they come around and stone you, you won’t be living in any glass house--only glassy flesh” (Charters 1988, 300). Di Prima wanted her life to be more than society dictated it should be. In a world that offered her only one option, to be a housewife and mother, Di Prima improved upon this option, making pads and her “glassy flesh” her home and mothering her children on the road. Like most of her sisters, Di Prima loved her children and sought to provide a nest for them--but her nest had wings.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In spite of all of the difficulties facing her as an artist, Diane Di Prima was always one of the “most productive Beat writers” (Charters 1985, 107). She is still committed to her “aesthetic and social concerns” and “her work has also been a continuing development and fulfillment of her early promise” (107). Di Prima deserves more credit than she receives. She managed to earn the grudging respect of a group of men who, for the most part, had little or no respect for women, especially women artists.

In spite of the barriers put up by the “boy gang,” Di Prima is greatly responsible for spreading much of the literature of the 1960s New York Beats, most of which was written by members of this same “gang.” Ironically, her own work is not widely read, though perhaps that will change with her inclusion in Brenda Knight’s recently released anthology of Beat women (1996). Although it has given women writers a boost, Knight’s book is somewhat disappointing. Many of the women included were not included for their own talents, but for knowing Beat males. Critic Elsa Dorfman points out, “Fourteen of the women in the book . . . would not get into an anthology if it weren’t for their involvement with Ginsberg or Kerouac or one of the other men on the scene” (16). However, the book has been generating wide-spread interest, so it is likely that other projects will follow. According to Colleen O’Connor, as soon as Women of the Beat
Generation was published women Beats have "been asked to read with the Dalai Lama and to headline the 1997 Jack Kerouac Festival in Lowell, Mass. They [have been] giving poetry readings from Seattle to New York. Many of their books are being reissued next year" (1). In April of 1997, the third printing of Di Prima's Dinners and Nightmares was released, over twenty years after the second printing, which took place in 1976. Di Prima's biography, Recollections of My Life as a Woman, is also scheduled to be released in late 1997. If this trend continues, Di Prima will undoubtedly continue to be a beneficiary. She is, according to Brenda Knight, "considered by many to be the archetypal Beat woman" (2), and she will probably become the sort of central figure to the women that Kerouac was to the men.

Di Prima's sisters are being heard at a time when her brothers are growing more and more silent. Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady have been dead for years, and Allen Ginsberg died this year. The Beat Generation is an aging one. The fame that the men found in the prime of their life will be a late gift for the women, many of whom are now senior citizens. As usual, Di Prima stands alone, having enjoyed a prolific writing career along with her brothers, and about to reap the benefits of her sisters' revival.
REFERENCES


