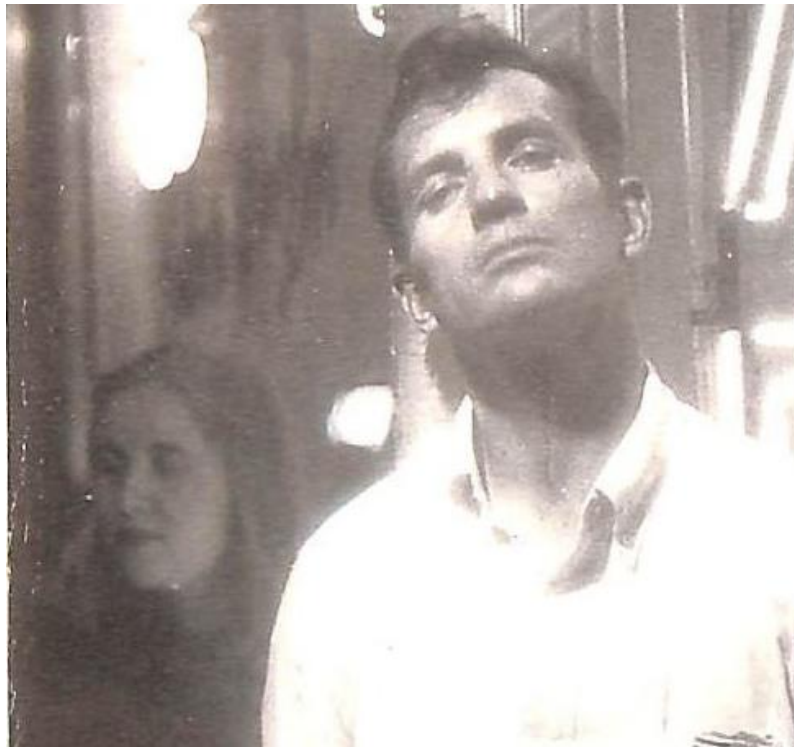


## **Voices From off the Beaten Track: Female Representation in the Beat Generation**

An analysis of Joyce Johnson, Diane di Prima and Joanne Kyger



Joyce Johnson and Jack Kerouac. (*Minor Characters* cover photo. Picador, 1983)

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the exclusion of female authors and their literary works from the Beat Generation discourse. The authors associated with the Beat Generation are all male. Authors such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs are often names coming up in debates around the Beat Generation. However, during the rise of the movement, several interesting works were written by female authors. The aim of this thesis is to expose these female authors and to find a possible explanation for their ignored presence within the Beat Generation discourse. In using the work of Bourdieu and his notion of “habitus” and his field theory, this thesis will examine how “generations” come into existence. This, in order to illustrate the workings of matters of exclusion, agency and canon formation. A great part of this thesis consists of analyses of literary works by Joyce Johnson, Diane di Prima and Joanne Kyger. First, their respective works *Come and join the dance*, *Loba* and *The Japan and India Journals, 1960-1964* will be analyzed. Subsequently, two memoirs will be analyzed; *Minor Characters* by Johnson and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* by di Prima. The memoir as a narrative tool will give us more insight into these female authors’ attempts of making themselves visible within the Beat Generation discourse.

## Introduction

You don't know what narrow lives girls have, how few real adventures there are for them; misadventures, yes, like abortions and little men following them in subways, but seldom anything like seeing ships at night (Johnson 41).

The passage above is an excerpt from a letter from Joyce Johnson to Jack Kerouac written between 1957 and 1958. From it speaks Johnson's feeling towards the position of girls, or women, in her time. Her views regarding this matter would later become an important part of her writing. Johnson is the author of three novels, *Come and join the dance* (1962), *Bad connections* (1978), and *In the night cafe* (1987). These novels often deal with women's place in society, and are highly critical of the limitations women experience because of their gender. Consequently, a prominent theme in her work is boredom, which especially encapsulates her first novel, *Come and join the dance*. This novel is often regarded as the first Beat Generation novel that was written by a woman. However, the authors who are mostly associated with the Beat Generation are all male. Also these male authors' best-selling novels, such as *On the Road* by Kerouac, contribute to the image of the Beat Generation as an "all boys club".

Where does that leave an author like Johnson? While scrutinizing her work, one would immediately recognize the themes the Beat Generation is known for. Why is it then that her novels are being read less than her male contemporaries? It is not just the absence of female authors in the Beat Generation discourse that is interesting to examine, the invisibility of female characters is also worth shining light on. These female characters are missing, "unless as mothers, lovers, wives, sometimes victims, hamstrung by ignorance, societal prejudice, a patriarchal dominance yet to fully crumble" (Waldman xvi). The aim of this thesis is to expose these hidden authors and characters and to look for a possible explanation for their ignored presence within the Beat Generation discourse. Why is it that, in retrospect, Johnson

and her female contemporaries such as Diane Di Prima and Joane Kyger are receiving attention because of their involvement in the Beat Generation, but were having trouble getting acclaim during their literary careers? Their autobiographical works are more popular than ever—but often because of their past relationships with the men of the Beat Generation. This thesis will examine this ambivalence. Therefore, the point of departure of this thesis is the following research question: how can we explain the invisibility of the female authors and characters of the Beat Generation in light of their contemporary context?

The first chapter will provide for framework regarding the Beat Generation and its female authors. In using Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" this chapter will examine the coming into existence of a "generation" in order to analyze the exclusion of the female Beat authors within the Beat Generation discourse. Subsequently, Bourdieu's idea of the different fields that are at play when producing different forms of capital will be used in order to explain the realization and sustaining of the concept of the Beat Generation. This chapter also addresses the Beat Generation's timeframe and its relation to feminism. Chapter 2 consists of an analysis of three female Beat Generation authors, namely, Johnson, Di Prima and Kyger and their respective works *Come and join the dance* (1962), *Loba* (1998), and *The Japan and India Journals 1960-1964* (2016). Finally, chapter 3 will examine the workings of the memoir. By looking at the memoir *Minor Characters* (1983) by Johnson and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* by di Prima this chapter shines light on the way these works may have affected the inclusion or exclusion of female Beat authors in the Beat Generation discourse.

## Chapter 1: The Beat *Generation* and Bourdieu's notion of "habitus"

### 1.1. Generations and "habitus"

This thesis consists of different analyses of female Beat authors. However, before doing this, it is vital to look at what it means to be a "female Beat author". Therefore, an analysis of the Beat Generation as a social group is needed. Subsequently, it is interesting to examine how these female authors relate to the Beat Generation as a social group. In order to execute this analysis, Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" might shine light on this matter.

Karl Mannheim described a generation as "a group of people of similar age bonded by a shared experience that can eventually result in a distinct self-consciousness, a world-view and, ultimately, political action" (Mannheim qtd. by Purhonen 2). Although this description might seem apt to characterize the Beat Generation, a more in-depth approach to the analysis of the Beat Generation is important in order to avoid generationalism: "a simplified and exaggerated view of generations" (Purhonen 3). Besides the possible danger of generationalism while analyzing the Beat Generation, it is further complicated by the fact that several of the members associated with it initially distanced themselves from the term. The term was first brought up by Kerouac while in a conversation with John Clellon Holmes discussing the nature of generations. According to Ginsberg it went as follows:

Kerouac discouraged the notion of a coherent "generation" and said, "Ah this is nothing but a beat generation!" They discussed whether it was a "found" generation, which Kerouac sometimes referred to, or "angelic" generation, or various other epithets. But Kerouac waved away the question and said "beat generation!" not meaning to name the generation *but to un-name it* (Ginsberg 1, my emphasis).

However, when Holmes used the term in the popular article “This is the Beat Generation” in 1952, the term stuck in people’s minds. Purhonen argues that the realization of a generation through a collective identity based on shared experience “is possible only if someone articulates or formulates the very existence of the generational experience and its meaning to the people first; only then can others begin to identify themselves with that generation” (Purhonen 13). Still, the question remains who belongs to a generation; what mechanism are at play in the realization of generations? This is difficult to determine, because “it is not clear to what degree the ‘representatives’ of a generation reasonably and legitimately represent an entire generation as they claim’ (ibid.). In the case of the Beat Generation: where does that leave the female authors?

Bourdieu reflected on the workings of social groups in a society and argued that these social groups, and social classes, produce and are driven by “habitus”. He defines habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, [...], as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules” (Bourdieu 72). These innate dispositions are the drive of human behaviour and produce “objective practices”; habits people inherit and reproduce through individual, but also, shared history or culture. Bourdieu gives three main factors in obtaining habitus, namely, education, family and culture. Through this personified system of habitus, an individual identifies with the social world around him and, subsequently, responds to it. Although the use of habitus in academic discourse dates back to Aristotle, and more recently, Mauss and Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu’s sociological approach to it stands out because of its dealing with agency. Bourdieu emphasizes how, through habitus, some practices by social groups are accepted as common and other practices are not. He, therefore, speaks of “agents” of habitus, because the system of habitus represents in what way one’s individual

history and culture, as well as one's collective and, thus, shared history and culture affect the mind and body. Bourdieu argues that within habitus, through innate dispositions by objective conditions, individuals "engender aspirations and practices objectively compatible with those objective requirements" (Bourdieu 77). Individuals, as a result, perceive the world around them in a specific way and, consequently, react to it. This illustrates how individuals tend to accept certain practices that are compatible with their personal dispositions and to refuse the ones that do not. Therefore, they "refuse what is anyway refused and to love the inevitable" (ibid.). By looking at habitus in this way, Bourdieu achieved to illustrate how habitus is important in analyzing agency, because when individuals act out agency, a social structure comes into existence. This is interesting to take into account while examining the Beat Generation, because in the case of the Beat Generation this inclusion and exclusion works on two levels. On the one hand it is interesting to explore who are and who are not accepted as part of the Beat Generation by the members associated with it because of ruling norms and practices and, on the other hand, who are or are not accepted as part of it by external individuals, such as readers, publishers etcetera. It is also interesting to look at the way the female Beat authors reacted to their exclusion themselves. Could we say that with, for example, their memoirs, these female authors fabricated their own Beat persona?

It should be emphasised, however, that this normalisation of inclusion and exclusion within a social group on the basis of habitus happens through structures and mechanisms which are "objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules (Bourdieu 72). Still, "[p]ractices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted" (Bourdieu 78). Therefore, in social groups, individuals with the same shared experiences tend to cluster together and will not easily accept individuals with whom they cannot identify immediately. As a result, a "homogeneity



of habitus is what – within the limits of the group of agents possessing the schemes [...] implied in the production – causes practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted” (Bourdieu 80). In this regard, it is interesting to examine how the female Beat authors and their work relates to the Beat Generation as a social structure. Why is it then, in retrospect, that the interest in female Beat authors and the image of them being part of the Beat Generation is growing? Bourdieu emphasizes how habitus is never fixed and is dependent of its past, but also of its future social structures and practices. Because of its fluidity, habitus, when “understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Bourdieu 82-3). So, the structures within habitus are always in relation to its ever changing environment. How this relates to the Beat Generation might become more clear when taking Bourdieu’s field theory in consideration.

### *1.2. Bourdieu’s field theory*

Within sociology, Bourdieu defines different fields. We could see such a field as “a competitive system of social relations which functions according to its own specific logic or rules” (Moi 1020-21). This competitive character is visible in the always present aim to rule a particular field. Within the social field, various other fields are at play, such as, for example, the academic field. Each field aims for its own dominant position and has its “own specific mechanisms of selection and consecration” (Moi 1021). Such a dominant place is acquired through a certain kind of symbolic capital belonging to the specific field. As in the case of habitus, the organization and the acquiring of symbolic capital within a field are based upon “*unspoken and unspeakable rules*” (Moi 2022). It is also in this manner that within the literary field canonization takes place. It is through these different modes of selection and

consecration and the subsequent acquiring of symbolic capital that certain novels end up in the literary canon. However, the nature of these different fields is always hierarchical and they are, therefore, always in relation to each other and affect each other. Ultimately, besides producing symbolic capital, these fields also produce social, economic and cultural capital. It is important to keep in mind these different forms of capital when analyzing the Beat Generation. Social capital, for example, is accumulated through a shared sense of identity, norms and values and consists, therefore, of “more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986 n.p.). In the case of the Beat Generation, we see that its social capital is based on and accumulated through its recognition as a social group. The authors of the Beat Generation also acquire social capital through their connection with each other, which, in turn, also produces symbolic capital because their work is consecrated because of their mutual relationships. Simultaneously, economic capital comes into play; through their shared social and symbolic capital the literary work of the Beat authors produced a lot of economic capital. Upon the branding of the term “Beat Generation”, Joyce Johnson says: ““Beat Generation” sold books, sold black turtleneck sweaters and bongos, berets and dark glasses—thus to be either condemned or imitated” (Johnson 173), implying the great economic success of the literature associated with the Beat Generation. Therefore, the literature of the Beat Generation also produced cultural capital; reading the novels of the movement or being associated with the movement gave people higher social status. Cultural capital is achieved through three forms. The *embodied state* illustrates how cultural capital is acquired over time in the form of “long lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu 1986 n.p.), the *objectified state* in the form of cultural goods, such as books and the *institutionalized state*, a form of objectification that is specifically aimed at institutions and its qualifications for producing capital. The different fields and the various forms of capital they produce are always in relation to each other. The workings of cultural

capital, and the other forms of capital, are also influenced by habitus; various practices and norms within a social group affect the structures within the habitus.

When we for example look at di Prima's reissued poetry collection *Loba* (1998), which consists of di Prima's poetry written between 1973 and 1998, it is striking that on its back cover it is announced as the "great female counterpart of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*". When examining di Prima's bibliography, one will notice that most of her poetry and other work are reissued prints with added forewords by famous authors commenting on her work's relation to the Beat Generation. The earlier prints of her work are difficult to access. Still, di Prima's poetry and other work are gaining more attention than in the nineteen-fifties, nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies when most of it was first published. The same goes for her memoirs, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, which was reprinted in 1988 and is now often used in academic writing about women and the Beat Generation. If we keep in mind the "specific mechanisms of selection and consecration" (Moi 1021) belonging to Bourdieu's different fields we could see a shift in the process of consecration of Beat literature. It is this shift that this thesis aims to explore. Is the female Beat authors' work, as it appears to be, acquiring more recognition through their connection with the Beat Generation and the symbolic capital it acquired or is the Beat Generation as a literary movement subjected to change because of altering views towards women's rights and the position of women in literature?

### *1.3. The Beat Generation's timeframe*

The coming into existence of the concept of the Beat Generation was not a new phenomenon. Following World War I, authors like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were later said to belong to the "Lost Generation". Looking back, these authors were associated with the group of people associated with the "disillusionment" that followed the war (Dolan 42). However, as Dolan points out, there was an ambiguity to the term "Lost

Generation”, because “[t]he realization of a shared narrow identity (“generation”) was more important than the implied absence (“lost”) of an established, culture-wide identity” (ibid.). This shows the human’s tendency to name certain matters, which is linked to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus in the sense that individuals’ dispositions and aspirations produce structures that makes them react to and perceive their environment accordingly. Striking it is, though, that, like Kerouac rejected the term Beat Generation, Hemingway rejected the term Lost Generation. The coming into existence of both the Lost Generation and the Beat Generation are similar; as the Lost Generation is associated with “disillusionment” following World War I, and the Beat Generation is associated with the “nakedness of the mind” (Holmes n.p.) that was said to be caused by World War II and the aftermath of the Great Depression. In this we can see Mannheim’s generationalist idea of a “group of people of similar age bonded by a shared experience”, but also the shared individual and collective history within a social group that Bourdieu reflected upon while illustrating the workings of habitus. About realization of generations, though, Mannheim also said that,

The cohesion of the community group *ceases to exist* if the mental and spiritual dispositions on which its existence has been based cease to operate in us or in our partners; and our previous class position loses its relevance for us as soon as we acquire a new position as a result of a change in our economic and power status (Mannheim 166).

In this passage Mannheim touches upon an important aspect of the forming of social groups, namely that they are subjected to change because of their always changing environments. With the occurrence of certain historical or political events the structures within the social organizations within a society might change drastically. We could use this as an explanation

of the themes that are recognizable in Beat Generation literature. The socio-political situation after World War II and the aftermath of the Great Depression resulted in a shared loss of faith in the power of the state. People acted upon this by, for example, experimenting with drugs and choosing a lifestyle that was going against the idea of marriage as the ultimate goal in life. Authors such as Hemingway commented on the socio-political situation in post-World War I-America. Similarly, the authors of the Beat Generation reflected upon their socio-political environment in their work. The authors of the Beat Generation have an “instinctive individuality” (Holmes n.p.). Holmes explains: “brought up during the collective bad circumstances of a dreary depression, weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war, [members of the Beat Generation] distrust collectivity” (ibid.). It is striking, however, that, through this collective feeling they found each other and that this collective feeling resulted in a movement that produced a large number of successful literary works. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, di Prima reflected on the moment she realized that there were more people struggling like her. Upon remembering reading Ginsberg’s “Howl” she says:

[I]f there was one Allen, there must be more, other people writing what they heard, living, however obscurely and shamefully, what they knew, hiding out there – and now, suddenly, about to speak out. For I sensed that Allen was only, [...], the vanguard of a much larger thing. All the people who, like me, had hidden and skulked, writing down what they knew for a handful of friends, waiting with only a slight bitterness for the thing to end, for man’s era to draw to a close in a blaze of radiation – all these would hear them, but they would, finally, hear each other. *I was about to meet my brothers and sisters* (di Prima 164, my emphasis).

At this moment di Prima fully realizes for the first time that there are more contemporaries, like her, writing down their experiences. She exclaims that she is going to meet her brothers *and* sisters. However, unfortunately, it were mostly her male contemporaries that would be published and be praised for their work.

At the moment of di Prima's realization of the existence of her fellow authors, some prominent figures of the movement already met. The origins of the Beat Generation lay in New York; a couple of the movement's authors met each other while studying at Columbia University in the late nineteen-forties. Some of the movement's best known figures, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Lucien Carr decided that it was time for a "New Vision", a term they borrowed from W. B. Yeats' *A Vision*. Carr, who eventually did not produce literary work himself, was responsible for this new vision towards literature, and, art in general. He came up with a new way of thinking that was based on:

- 1: Naked self-expression as the seed of creativity.
- 2: The artist's consciousness is expanded by derangement of the sense.
- 3: Art eludes conventional morality.

(Snyder 12).

Carr, in turn, based these ideas on Kerouac's notion of "supreme reality". Kerouac realized his longing for this supreme reality when he was in the navy during World War II, because he decided that the world was crazy and that he did not want to have anything to do with it (Ginsberg 80). That is when he realized he wanted to be a novelist and Ginsberg and his other contemporaries shared this same urge to write in order to express themselves. We see that although driven by their socio-political environment, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Carr also purposely created with this "New Vision" the possibility of a counter-culture through their

position as young intellectuals with certain dreams to achieve. Through their mutual friendships with each other and other (older) intellectuals such as William S. Burroughs, they acquired social and cultural capital that was the basis of the possibilities and the success of the Beat Generation's literature, which in turn facilitated their "adventurous" and "bohemian" lifestyles.

A strong aversion of domestic life and the desire to travel and, subsequently, "discovering" the world lay close to the surface of the fundamental ideas of the Beat Generation. They, therefore, rebelled against the idea of marriage as a person's highest purpose. Having lost all their faith in the American government because of their experiences with the Great Depression and World War II, the members of the Beat Generation searched for their happiness elsewhere. Especially Kerouac's work consists of adventurous road trips across America and Mexico that give the impression of travel logs. In the later years of the Beat Generation, its members developed an interest in moving eastwards. There were spiritual travels to Japan and India and, therefore, Buddhism also became an important theme in Beat Generation literature. Many works of the Beat Generation share this transnational element. This,

suggests that their calling as writers was somehow predicated upon their leaving the United States behind. This distance from home is what opens up a space for all sorts of unexpected connections and crossings to arise in their work. [...] Every travelogue is, at some level, a comment on home, and the worlded and worldly view gained by Beat Writers abroad often involved a new perspective on the United States as well (Fazzino 2).

Through their trips abroad they gained knowledge and insights into other countries and their cultures, and by describing their trips they could criticize their contemporary American government and society as a whole. However, their travels can also be seen as mere flights from home; flights from having to deal with the real world. This ambiguity is also visible in the experimental drug use that is typical of the movement. At the one hand the members of the Beat Generation experimented with drugs to expand their mind in order to enhance their literary capacities, but, on the other hand, the drug use also made them forget their troubles. It is striking that, in retrospect, the movement is seen as a *group* of writers while back then these authors saw themselves as individuals looking for their own freedom. During the rise of the Beat Generation, in 1952, Holmes reflected on the movement by saying:

The variety and extremity of their solutions are only a final indication that for today's young people there is not yet a single external pivot around which they can, as a generation, group their observations and their aspirations. There is no single philosophy, no single party, no single attitude. The failure of most orthodox moral and social concepts to reflect fully the life they have known is probably the reason for this, but because of it each person becomes a walking, self-contained unit, compelled to meet, or at least endure, the problem of being young in a seemingly helpless world in his own way (Holmes n.p.).

According to Holmes, this is the reason for their strong instinctive individuality, even though they shared the same feelings, thoughts and pasts. Because they lost faith in collectivity they were, at the time, reluctant to discuss themselves as a group and to be themselves (ibid.). This is what, eventually, contributed most to their "beat" state of mind. Still, it is through habitus



that the group of authors were perceived as a social group because they acted upon what happened around them. Bourdieu argues:

The habitus is precisely this immanent law, *lex insita*, laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of structures but also for practices of co-ordination since the corrections and adjustments the agents themselves consciously carry out presuppose their mastery of a common code and since undertakings of collective mobilization cannot succeed without a minimum of concordance between the habitus of the mobilizing agents [...] and the dispositions of whose aspirations and world-view they express (Bourdieu 81).

So we could say that through their shared distrust of collectivity, the members of the Beat Generation ultimately became a collective because of the habits and interests they shared and acted upon. Still, this leaves the question of the position of female authors within the structures of this habitus unanswered.

#### *1.4 The Beat Generation in a feminist perspective*

Eddie Parker, who was once married to Kerouac, and her relation to Beat Generation literature illustrates the way women are portrayed in these works. Parker appears as a character in several of Kerouac's novels. She made an appearance as Judie Smith in *The Town and the City* (1950), as Edna Palmer in *Vanity of Dulooz* (1968) and as Elly in *Visions of Cody* (1972). The characters based on Parker always portrayed the housewife begging the male protagonist to stay home, but always ending up waiting for him to come home after a long adventurous road trip. In these novels the Parker-like characters function as obstacles to overcome for the

male protagonists in order to have the possibility to travel and to develop themselves. This already gives a glimpse of the nature of the female characters in Beat Generation literature.

In the nineteen-fifties there was a ruling image of the woman as the caring housewife. This is an image of women we often see in Beat Generation literature written by men, as we saw with Edie Parker. During the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the early nineteen-sixties, however, feminists began to first question their position in society. We see that this slow realization of their oppressed situation coincided with the rise of the Beat Generation. As the men started the quest of breaking with the image of marriage as one's highest purpose and writing about it in novels, were the women on their way of starting a counter-culture of their own by rebelling against fixed ideas about women and by exploring their sexuality. In the nineteen-fifties women shied away from their sexuality in order to become more rational, like men. This was a result of the emphasis on education within feminism that resulted into an altered view towards sexuality, a "shift to virtuous women meant that white women came to discount any connection they might have to the 'natural' sphere at all. Sexuality, indeed the body itself, was denied" (Arneil 158). We can still see traces of the "virtuous woman" in Johnson's work. In her memoirs, Johnson remarks:

I'd learned myself by the age of sixteen that just as girls guarded their virginity, boys guarded something less tangible which they called Themselves. They seemed to believe they had a mission in life, from which they could easily be deflected by being exposed to too much emotion (Johnson 57).

Keeping in mind that Johnson was sixteen years old in 1951, this passage shows the dichotomy between men and women that was still present during the time between the first wave and the second wave of feminism; a woman should keep her virginity, waiting for the

right man, while men were able to explore themselves by going on adventures and travelling around the country.

Johnson, Di Prima and Kyger approach their position as a woman in a male dominated (literary) world in a various ways. As mentioned, Johnson's early work already deals with her exploration of sexuality and her later autobiographical work, *Minor Characters*, as the name already implies, deals with the ignored position of female Beat authors. Still, Johnson's work, as will become apparent, leans heavily on her connection and relationships to male Beat authors. Di Prima, on the other hand, focuses on the role of the woman in a more explicit way. Her *Loba*-poems are about the quest for the reintegration of the woman and the female sexuality. Di Prima does not necessarily follow the footsteps of her male contemporaries but incorporates her zeitgeist into her work while addressing the marginalized position of women, "she has stepped so far outside the conventional world that she was free of it. She possessed the necessary strength of character to go her own way and invent her own domestic space so that she could function as an artist" (Grace and Johnson xii). By writing explicit sexual poems and prose while at the same time writing about pregnancy and childbirth (Raskin 43), di Prima at the one hand followed the Beat Generation's theme of sexual freedom, but on the other hand broke with the fixed ideas about women and sexuality in her contemporary society. Kyger differs greatly from Johnson and di Prima in the sense that her work does not implicitly deals with the role of women in society but is, nevertheless, about her own development as a woman and, thus, gives the reader insight into her marginalized position. Waldman calls Kyger's *The Japan and India Journal's. 1960-1964* a "feminist tract", because it is about a woman struggling for identity and independence in the early 1960's (Waldman vii). According to Rogoveanu, "[h]er originality consists in her desire to assert her own singularity while at the same time preserving the sense of belonging to a cultural community" (Rogoveanu 357). The latter is visible because of her elaborate descriptions of Buddhism in

her work, a theme that is prevalent in Beat Generation literature. Her connection to the movement becomes also apparent because of her marriage to Beat author Gary Snyder and his presence throughout her autobiographical journals. However, these women's different approaches to the representation of women in their work have contributed to the emergence of a, possible, female Beat canon. Rogoveanu argues, [t]he literary productions of women writers challenged social conventions about gender roles and sexual taboos and constituted the seeds of a proto-feminist movement" (ibid.). It is often said that the Beat Generation paved the way for the hippie movement of the nineteen-seventies. Therefore, one could say that the female Beat authors, with their literary work, created their own counter-culture that paved the way for the feminist movement and the position of women and literature in the years that followed.

Besides examining the representation of women in the Beat Generation in general, the upcoming analyses of Johnson, di Prima and Kyger first distillate themes in their work that are corresponding to the works of their male counterparts by, for example, shining light on the way sexuality is portrayed in their work. This, because sexual freedom is an element that is applauded in the works of their male contemporaries. Subsequently, the analyses explore what the relation is between women and sexuality in the male Beat novels in comparison to the novels of their female counterparts. Finally, the analyses shines light on the way these female authors reflected upon their marginalized situation in their work and outside of it.

## Chapter 2: The unheard voices of the Beat Generation

### 2.1. Joyce Johnson

Johnson's debut novel, *Come and join the dance*, was published in 1962, and was reissued in 2011 and 2014 when the interest in the work of female Beat Generation authors increased.

Johnson, born in 1935, already published two novels at a young age but experienced her literary breakthrough with her memoirs *Minor Characters*, in which she reflects on her life as a struggling female writer and her relationship with Jack Kerouac.

Female Beat authors often find themselves “positioned as women, but not read as writers” (Mklakar 2), and therefore it is interesting to examine the representation of women in *Come and join the dance*, because it gives an account of the situation of women (writers) in her time. *Come and join the dance* is an autobiographical novel that describes a young woman's experiences in college in the late nineteen-forties. In real life, right after the experiences that take place in her first novel, Johnson would meet Kerouac and get acquainted with several other members of the Beat Generation. It is striking that her novel was already published in 1962, but never sold as well as her male contemporaries. In 2014, fifty-two years after its first publication, her novel was reprinted by Open Road, announcing it as “the daring debut of the Beat Generation's first woman novelist”. On its back cover it is mentioned that the novel is written “a year before [Johnson's] encounter with Jack Kerouac”. Although the novel does, indeed, give more insights into the Beat Generation era, especially from a female perspective, it is also important to acknowledge the novel's value apart from its connection to Kerouac because of its dealing with a young woman struggling to be a writer and her quest for sexual liberation.

The novel's protagonist, Susan Levitt, studies at Barnard College and, towards her graduation, she suddenly realizes that she lives her life without a purpose at all. This touches

upon a theme that is important in the novel. It is from this feeling that Susan starts rebelling against her parents, her school, and other people who are close to her. One of the first times this realization touches upon Susan is when her school advisor, Mr. Davidson, mentions how students never change; “the faces were the same semester after semester after semester, the same things were said, thought, done” (*Dance* 7). Upon this, Susan exclaimed: “[p]eople have no right to exist if they’re replaceable” (*Dance* 8). This longing for a life with meaning, and her fear for a life without it shines through the pages of *Come and join the dance*. There are a lot of moments in which Susan reflects upon this matter. For example, she is afraid of committing herself to a serious relationship with her boyfriend Jerry because the terrifying thing about him was that “he was someone she could marry—she could marry him and never have to go alone to Paris—he was only waiting for a signal” (*Dance* 8). Throughout the novel, Susan holds on to her idea of leaving America for Paris after her graduation, however, she is also scared of going there by herself. Still, she is more scared of ending up married and unhappy with Jerry. At one point she thinks, “perhaps she had chosen to feel frightened rather than feel nothing at all” (*Dance* 13). This aversion of feeling nothing, of ending up with a life without meaning is characteristic of the literature of the Beat Generation. This theme in her writing is given an extra dimension because of her being a woman; in her time it was not accepted for a woman to divert from societies expectations such as marrying and taking care of a household. The boyfriend, Jerry, loves Susan and that is exactly what frightens, and simultaneously, bores her. While they are out for dinner in a restaurant, Susan suddenly feels suffocated by this boredom: “[t]he listlessness of the afternoon settled heavily upon her again, and she knew she could neither be gay, nor kind, nor cruel—only blank, a spectator of herself immensely bored” (*Dance* 27). Soon afterwards she breaks up with Jerry in the streets of New York. Susan is in awe, and sometimes jealous of her best friend, Kay. She is a headstrong girl doing whatever she wants. Susan often compares herself to her and admires the way Kay

behaves towards men. It is also through Kay that Susan meets Peter and Anthony, two rebellious young men who seem to make Susan's life less boring. The two young men evoke a rebelliousness in Susan and she realizes that she likes that feeling. Susan's longing for freedom and adventure is apparent while reading *Come and join the dance*, but there is also a certain ambivalence to it. Indeed, Susan is on a quest for freedom and her own personal development, but it soon becomes clear that she needs the two young men to achieve this. Initially, Kay and Susan were searching for this freedom together, but as soon as Susan started to go against the rules, even the rebellious Kay did not approve of it. She would look concerned and wondered whether or not Susan was "flipping" (*Dance* 78). This shows how in that time it was frowned upon when a woman would break loose from societal expectations. Ironically, it is Kay who ends up mad and depressive near the end of the novel. The character of Kay is based on a real life friend of Johnson, Elise Cowen. In *Minor characters* we read how Cowen in 1962, at the age of twenty-nine, commits suicide by jumping through the window-pane of her parents' seven-story apartment after having psychological problems for most of her life.

An important element in *Come and join the dance* is Susan's virginity. Throughout the novel Susan reflects upon her desire to have her first sexual encounter. This is, however, hindered by her insecurity about her sexuality. There is, though, an ambivalence to Susan's attitude towards her virginity. On the one hand she wants to wait for someone she really loves, but on the other hand she just wants to get over with it in order to belong to the grownups, because graduating a virgin was "against all her principles" (Johnson 47). At times her virginity seems, in Susan's eyes, to coincide with her feelings of boredom. Losing her virginity means adventure and belonging to "real life". Ultimately, one day she decides that it is time to lose her virginity with Anthony. What is striking about the scene of her losing her virginity is her attitude towards the situation; she just wants to get it over with and does not

enjoy it at all. She seems to see the whole experience from a bird's eye view and is perplexed by the fact that after the deed Anthony comes across as a "starved, spent child" (Johnson 87), and even asks him afterwards if he is all right. In comparison to passages describing sexual intercourse in the novels of the male authors of the Beat Generation, it is striking to see that in Susan's case, Anthony serves as the "minor character". However, there is an ambivalence to this, too; she "uses" Anthony to finally lose her virginity, but she also needs him to have the feeling that she is part of the "real world", and to make her feel good about herself.

The dependency on men that we encounter in *Come and join the dance* is something we see happening in Johnson's memoir as well. The excerpt from a letter from Johnson to Kerouac at the beginning of this thesis in which she remarks how a girl would never experience something as seeing "ships at night" is actually a moment she reflects upon in *Minor characters*. In this passage she is thankful to Kerouac for taking her on midnight strolls:

There were no women in this nighttime world. [...] I'd never seen anything like it before. It was strange to think that because of my sex I'd probably never see any of this again, and would probably never have seen it at all if it hadn't been for Jack (*Minor characters* 129).

There are several instances in *Come and join the dance* in which Susan and Kay's emotional state of minds are affected by the opportunities men give them, or not. Susan describes her life as a "magnificent party to which [women] had not been invited" (*Dance* 32), and it seems as if, in the novel, the men grant her permission to that party. However, this might have been a result of the limited access women had to the public sphere in that time. Unfortunately, they needed men to grant them this access. Still, Johnson's novel illustrates the difficulties of being



a woman in the late nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties, and by doing this the novel “crucially fills in narratives of the Beat emergence by instantiating women in the scene and by representing women’s integration of Beat ethics and aesthetics into their existential and personal beliefs and conduct” (Grace and Johnson 113). So, although the novel shows this male-dependency, it does provide for a place for female Beats in the Beat Generation discourse by incorporating these Beat ethics and aesthetics, such as writing about the quest for personal and sexual freedom.

In conclusion we could say that Johnson, with her debut novel, goes against societal norms in regards to women by portraying a female protagonist who is in search for adventure and sexual liberation. However, the novel also illustrates how within that timeframe, the protagonist is very dependent on men in order to fulfil her desires. The theme of boredom and the longing for adventure are typical for Beat Generation literature, as is the theme of sexuality. However, both elements are shown from a female perspective and in that sense differ from the way these themes are visible in the novels of the male authors. Kerouac, for example, uses a lot of passages describing sexual intercourse with nameless girls throughout *On the Road*. They are portrayed merely as girls who contribute to his “free” lifestyle. In Johnson’s novel her sexual intercourse with Anthony also serves her feeling of freedom and belonging to the real world, but also adds to the ambivalent nature of this desire to lose her virginity. Johnson’s novel can, in many ways, be seen as a typical “Beat novel” because of its themes, the fact that it was written from a female perspective might have been too provoking and not in line with its contemporary worldviews, to be picked up as bestseller. A 1962 edition of *Come and join the dance* is almost impossible to get access to because it only had one print run. However, the novel was reissued in 2011 and again in 2014, which shows the increased interest in Johnson’s work. As Bourdieu argued, the habitus of individuals is never fixed so we could say that, in retrospect, the novel is getting more acclaim because of altering

worldviews and a shift in ideas in regards to feminism, female authors and literature incorporating female perspectives within contemporary social structures.

## 2.2. *Diane di Prima*

This paragraph is an analysis of parts of di Prima's collection of poems, *Loba*. The most recent edition, published in 1998, is a collection of di Prima's poetry written between 1973 and 1998. Di Prima, who was born in 1934, is best known for her poetry, but also for her *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, which will be analysed in chapter 3. *Loba* is often seen as the female equivalent of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl". "Howl" is, like *Loba*, a very long poem and addresses "the best minds of [his] generation" (Ginsberg 9). Like "Howl", is *Loba* also addressed to the women of her "generation". This analysis will show how *Loba* aims to change people's views towards women and their sexuality. Stylistically is *Loba* also similar to "Howl", in the sense that it consists of quite long lines forming the stanzas. Also, like "Howl", is *Loba* filled with exclamations and prayers towards its reader. Also, "Howl" explicitly addresses homosexuality which caused several obscenity trials aiming to forbid the poem. Similarly. *Loba* deals with female sexuality which was, in di Prima's time, also still a provocative matter.

*Loba* can also be seen as a book-length poem. According to di Prima, it is not yet finished, but always in progress and she reserves "the right to juggle, re-arrange, cut, osterize, re-cycle parts of the poem in future editions" (Di Prima xiii). She adds: "as the *Loba* wishes, as the Goddess dictates" (ibid.). With this, di Prima already illustrates the nature of her poetry; it is free and organic. Her poetry is inspired by the *Loba*, or, the she-wolf in Spanish. An important element in her poetry is the awareness of one's body and simultaneously accepting that (female) body. The poems she writes, therefore, have "bodily energy as a driving force" (Thomsen 2). In her poems, di Prima addresses and describes the *Loba* in many different ways. This, in order to bring an ode to femininity and the female body. In her poems,

the Loba is displayed as “an incarnation of the feminine manifested as a beast, a wolf-like creature” (ibid.). By illustrating the Loba as the natural, the organic (Thomsen 3), di Prima also aims to show this free and natural side of women that is often not seen or acknowledged. Through her poems, di Prima goes against the prevailing tendency in Western philosophy “to displace the animal side of the human persona” (ibid.). Taking into consideration that di Prima wrote her Loba-poems during the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, we could argue that the aim of her poems was to free women from their chaste image and their oppressed, marginalized position in society. Thomsen argues that, with her poetry, di Prima “proposes new forms of signification by reconsidering the body, female sexuality, and normative gender roles” (Thomsen 1-2). Although this sexual theme in her poems is not always explicitly visible, *Loba's* greatest purpose seems to be to address the possibility for women to feel confident with their bodies.

Di Prima does not give a definite answer to what or who the Loba is; it could be a woman or a beast. By leaving the answer in the open, di Prima illustrates that a woman can be both caring and nurturing, but also sexual and savage. This contrast is visible throughout her poems. The caring and nurturing nature is, for example, visible in the poem “The Loba sings to her cub”:

O my mole, sudden & perfect

golden gopher tunnelling

to light, o separate(d)

Strands out of breath!

Bright silver

threads of spirit

O quicksilver



Sorrow presses on my black heart, it  
 becomes a diamond, *slithering*  
*thru murk*. Is this  
 loneliness? Can you count? Static  
 bursts in my eardrum, I turn, a *whoring*  
*centipede* in your drain, slick  
 black sleek head brown hands or your  
 white arms, again, as you *rub me down*  
*w/ warm mare's blood*, shrieking, you are  
 some *naked animal skull* on kitchen  
 chair, the floor  
 curls round me, some tunnel I follow  
 down. [...]

(di Prima 50-1, my emphasis).

We see that this poem is in sharp contrast to “The Loba sings for her cub”. Taking into consideration that the title contains the word “madness”, we could say that the novel may be about saying goodbye to internal inhibitions. The poem evokes a certain sexual, or violent urge within the Loba. “Grit yr teeth” and “slithering thru murk” evoke a sense of violence, or anger and, for example, “whoring centipede”, “rub me down”, “warm mare’s blood” and “naked animal skull” give the poem an erotic layer. We see this alternation between provocative, daring poems and “good” and just poems throughout *Loba*. In her article, Thomsen mentions a poem in which the speaker wonders about the Loba: “is she city?” (di Prima 12). Thomsen argues that this is di Prima’s way of illustrating the femininity/masculinity dichotomy. She says:

These lines refer to the subordinate role the feminine has played throughout history. The feminine has been the passive medium, through which the masculine has entered 'the city' through the feminine, where the city is metaphorically a place of power and embodies the cultural sphere. Thus the masculine is categorically placed in the positive dichotomous position, whereas the feminine appears as the negative, and the dichotomy between these key signifiers has secured the primacy of the former (Thomsen 3-4).

This speaks to women's position in Beat Generation literature, in which the male authors "embody the cultural sphere". The aim of di Prima's poems is to break open this dichotomy in which men occupy the dominant position. When taking into account Bourdieu's notion of habitus when looking at di Prima's poems we could say that her aim to break open the male-female dichotomy with her poetry is, therefore, breaking free from habitus. Thomsen argues that di Prima's poems "challenge the reader's perception of feminine sexuality" (Thomsen 4). Before, we read that habitus is created by structures that affect the way people perceive and act upon their environment.

Concluding we can say that di Prima's poetry changes people's perception of femininity and sexuality, and breaks open the habitus concerning these matters. *Loba* advocates female sexuality and, in doing so, goes against her contemporary society's ruling notion of the male as dominant and the female as inferior. With her poems, di Prima aims to break open this dichotomy and to make the reader think about women's position in society. At the same time, di Prima meets the Beat Generation's themes and produces poems reminiscent of Ginsberg's. Through her social capital acquired by her affiliation with Ginsberg and other Beat poets and authors, di Prima's poetry created a large audience, and therefore, a great

reach. In comparison to Johnson's earlier work, for example, was di Prima's poetry published more regularly between 1973 and 1998 when it was finally published as collected poems in *Loba*.

### 2.3 Joanne Kyger

Kyger, born in 1934, was an American poet. In her book *The Japan and India Journals, 1960-1964*, Kyger merges travel logs, diary entries, dreams, prose and poetry in order to reflect on her life in India and Japan between 1960 and 1964. Kyger elaborates on her thoughts about her marriage with Beat poet Gary Snyder and the accompanying matters of pregnancy, sexuality and her experiences of being a woman in the nineteen-sixties. The book was originally published as *The Japan and India Journals* in 1981, then, after the increasing interest in female Beat authors, reissued as *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journals* in 2000 and, more recently, as *The Japan and India Journals, 1960-1964* in 2016.

In the *Journals*, Kyger uses different narrative tools to depict her experiences while living in Japan and India. Kyger is also known for her numerous travel chapbooks: short, poetic travel logs. Carden argues that these travel chapbooks often solely portray "away-ness for its own sake" (Carden 24), an element reminiscent of Beat literature in which travelling and movement is "inextricably linked conceptually, often in an antithetical relationship to stasis, boredom, oppression, and authoritarianism" (Hibbard qtd. by Carden 24). However, in her *Journals*, Kyger combines these short travel logs with longer bits of prose and diary entries which also show her "attempts to establish stability, to build at-homeness" (ibid.), while being recently married and experiencing the cultures of her new countries. Carden argues that narratives like Kyger's "embrace the uncertainties and ambiguities of perceiving self and world through new lenses of new locales" (Carden 25). In the light of this thesis we could, then, argue, that Kyger's *Journals* touches upon the notion of habitus. In her *Journals*,

“ongoing movement shapes modes of self-representation” (Carden 24), which gives Kyger the opportunity to reflect on matters such as femininity and the accompanying matters of marriage and pregnancy. By giving accounts of her experiences within different social structures, Kyger is able to break open fixed ideas concerning femininity.

A large part of Kyger’s *Journals* depict her struggles of being married and her environment’s expectations of her being a housewife. It is striking that in the beginning of the book her diary entry of 5 February 1960 says “I decide to stay only a short time in Japan and not marry” (Kyger 3). However, a few pages later, in her diary entry of 23 February 1960 it says, “[m]arried at American Consulate’s office in Kobe. [...] My name is changed” (Kyger 7). This already implies her unwillingness to marry, and in the book she continuously elaborates on that emotion:

Gary has me over a barrel. It is difficult being here such a short time to be left alone for 13 hours at a stretch for 3 days out of the week not yet understanding the system of transportation and being such an ass I haven’t realized and prepared for such a position. Yet I can scarcely say don’t go sit in the evenings since that is the purpose of his being in Japan. I *refuse* to be forced into sitting until I freely choose to do so. [...] He seems to have plans for me, although he claims no – and I *will not* fit into them.

Also I wish I weren’t married at all I feel trapped (Kyger 10).

This passage shows Kyger’s stance towards marriage and her struggle of adapting to married life in Japan while her husband is working. It illustrates Kyger’s resistance towards her dependency on her husband and the idea that she should adapt to the plans he has for her and, therefore, feeling “trapped”. Although implicitly, Kyger reflects on her fear of getting



pregnant. Kyger has several dreams in which she is, for example, “pregnant and confused” (Kyger 5). There are also instances in which she makes small comments about having a baby, such as: “Gary says it is an old saying that if you have your ears pierced it will guarantee an easy child birth” (Kyger 21). It is interesting to see how small notes about child birth like this have a great impact, because, on the one hand it shows Kyger’s own insecurity about having a baby, and, on the other hand it also shows the unintentional pressure laid upon her by her husband.

As their stay in Japan progresses, Kyger and her husband are increasingly returning to the bohemian lifestyle they were accustomed to in America. A lot of their American friends join them in Japan. This results into scenes in which Kyger is confronted with her husband’s late night drinks and the accompanying attention of other women:

Monday night Jim went out with Gary’s assistance to get laid. Gary getting back late, since he had to get it all fixed up with this bar girl. Strangely anxious & upset while waiting for Gary to return. Slept alone, dream I am naked in a cage being offered to Jim Hatch or offering myself. Crouched down (Kyger 112).

Scenes like this are reminiscent of the scenes depicted in the novels of the male Beat authors; the women wait until the men come home. However, with her *Journals*, Kyger is able to show this situation from her perspective and to reflect on it. Sexuality is in Kyger’s *Journal* implicitly present. She does not mention the act of sexual intercourse but rather reflects on its absence, by for example wondering: “what does it mean when you turn away from me at night?” (Kyger 15). Later on in the book, other Beat authors and poets are mentioned frequently. For a great part of their stay in Japan Kyger and her husband were accompanied by Allen Ginsberg. While visiting he tells them various stories about Kerouac and, for

example, Burroughs. Throughout the book it becomes clear that their stay abroad is mainly based upon Kyger's husband's literary success and she is in the presence of other male Beat authors praising their fellow male contemporaries. Although, again, implicitly, Kyger's own struggle as a female author shines through the pages. The *Journals* can be seen as a collection of her experimental writings while living in the shadows of her male writing friends. Kyger is also enrolled in Japanese lessons and follows a course in order to become a Zen master and it is striking that sometimes the diary entries about her husband, Kerouac and Ginsberg are followed by an account of one of these lessons in order to show she was doing something useful too. Very often her feeling of being incapable of writing becomes apparent: "I wish the world would stop working when I do. All the poems written while I am asleep" (Kyger 18), indicating how Kyger felt that a lot of poems were produced while she was not in the position to work on her own poetry while supporting her husband's career while staying in Japan and India.

Although the themes in Kyger's *Journals* and other works are characteristic of the Beat Generation, she did not like being called Beat poet. This, because of her feeling "that "Beat Generation" writers constituted a "brotherhood" in which she was not fully welcome" (Carden 25), and this emotion is very visible in her *Journals*. In the diary entries, she often mentions what the men were saying during their conversations and it seems as if she is in awe of their literary abilities. However, Kyger's own voice is only heard in the diary entries, and never in the accounts of the conversations between her husband and, for example, Ginsberg. While reading the entries, you can almost feel Kyger withdrawing from the scene and sitting in the background, listening to the men.

In conclusion we can say that by merging different kinds of narrative, Kyger is able to provide for a critique on her experiences of being a female author among already successful Beat authors. At the same time she is able to provide for an illustration of a woman struggling

with societies expectancies in the nineteen-sixties. We the latter also happening with *Come and join the dance* and *Loba*; these two works also foregrounded the male-female dichotomy and made the reader acquainted with female representation in a time in which male-dominance was a fixed idea in society. Kyger differs from Johnson and di Prima in the sense that she choose to give her work a strong autobiographical character. Because Kyger's *Journals* consist of diary entries, her book acquires a certain necessity because of its personal character. This already touches upon the matter of life writing which will be dealt with in chapter 3, since the recording of personal memories will prove to be vital in examining female representation and agency in literature.

### Chapter 3: Heroines in retrospect?

In 1990, Carolyn Cassady published her memoir *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac and Ginsberg*. Being the widow of Neal Cassady, who was the person behind the famous character Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the road*, Cassady grew tired of all the attention she received because of her marriage to Cassady. During this marriage, Cassady also had an affair with Kerouac, which increased the interest in her persona and her stories. However, in the documentary *Love Always, Carolyn* (2011), Cassady reflects on her experiences with being associated with the Beat Generation as the wife of Cassady and the lover of Kerouac and claims that this connection is the only interest there is in her. In the documentary, the interviewer asks if she wants this view to be clear in the documentary and, in front of the camera, Cassady answers: "yes of course, that is the only reason anyone is interested in me. Because I was married to Cassady and a lover of Kerouac. That is *all* the interest there is in me. No one has ever cared about anything else. Even you – so far". Later in the documentary it turns out that Cassady wrote her memoir in the hopes of being left alone by Beat Generation enthusiasts and scholars. *Off the Road: My Years With Cassady, Kerouac and Ginsberg* is an example of a memoir that was written with a certain purpose. This chapter is concerned with two other Beat Generation memoirs and the authors' relation to Beat Generation discourse through these memoirs.

#### 3.1. Life writing: the memoir and agency

Johnson's memoir *Minor Characters* and di Prima's memoir *Memoirs of a Beatnik* differ greatly from each other. For example, Johnson's was published in 1983 and di Prima's already in 1969. It is, therefore, interesting to analyze these memoirs in light of their connection to the Beat Generation. Both authors depict in their memoirs their experiences of

being a struggling female author during the nineteen-fifties and the nineteen-sixties, however, in very different ways. What is at stake when a memoir is written? Analyzing these two particular memoirs gives us more insight into canon formation and the inclusion or exclusion of these female Beat authors.

Larson points out that a memoir often has an emotional urge to it; the author chose a particular part of his or her life for a reason. Therefore, Larson argues: “we can call a book that emphasizes the *who* over the *what* – the shown over the summed, the found over the known, the recent over the historical, the emotional over the reasoned – a memoir” (ibid.). We see that for Johnson and di Prima the aim was to give an account of their experiences as struggling female authors in the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties against the background of the emerging idea of Beatniks and Beat literature. He continues to say that it is important to take into consideration the “intervention” of the author of the memoir. Memoirs are easily taken as the truth, while it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly the truth is. He wonders:

But what is truth? Where does it exist? In memory? In the writing? In the intermixing of the two? Anyone who wants to tell the truth soon learns that the truth may not want to be told. [...] Truth-telling requires a kind of demystification of the ever-mystifying notion of how memory works. To get at the truth (fact and emotion) of what happened, we must understand, as concretely as we can, *what the past is and how we relate to it in the present* (Larson 33-4, my emphasis).

The latter is interesting in the light of examining the memoirs of Johnson and di Prima, because it touches upon Bourdieu’s notion that habitus is always affected by past, present and future. The way these memoirs may have been perceived and accepted by its reader might, over time, have been subjected to change. Throughout this thesis, several autobiographical

works have been discussed, however, the fact that Johnson and di Prima chose to write these *memoirs* already says something about their intentions: they want a certain “truth” to be out there. Taking into consideration that Johnson’s memoir was published in the nineteen-eighties and di Prima’s already in the late nineteen-sixties might also give food for thought. Di Prima’s memoir was written and published during the time in which the women’s liberation movement flourished. Therefore, we could already say that di Prima’s motives were more political; her memoir was a way of joining the feminist debate. This touches upon Larson’s other point, for he mentions memory’s characteristic of being simultaneously fixed and moving, since the events of the past are always in relation to the present and can change because of recently acquired information. We could say, for example, that if the women’s liberation movement would not have flourished in the nineteen-sixties, the memoirs of Johnson and di Prima would not have had such an emphasis on their experiences of being a struggling *female* Beat author. This way, they acquire agency to speak in an environment in which they otherwise would have limited reach to do so.

Abigail Gosselin explains how memoirs can be used as counter-stories. She illustrates how memoirs on the one hand can be simplifying, by which she means the memoir is dealing with a clear problem with apparent causes and solutions. These kind of memoirs are often written for the purpose of entertaining. However, memoirs can also be

[P]resented as something radically different from one’s own experience, something that invites a sensationalistic and judgmental gaze at the ‘other’. [...] When memoirs accurately reflect complications of experience they act as mirrors of lived experience [...] (Gosselin 133).

If we look at Johnson and di Prima, we could expect their memoirs to function as counter-stories because they depict their struggles as authors from their female perspective. By writing from a female perspective, Johnson and di Prima are able to give insights into their experiences within a male dominated Beat Generation discourse. Although a novel could do this too, a memoir gives the opportunity to share personal experiences in light of the past and the present, as Larson argued. Gosselin remarks something that is in line with Larson, she says:

A memoir can present an alternative to autonomous agency and singular causation by depicting an individual's agency as complicated and variable, responding to causal factors that are multiple, interconnected, and even unknown and unknowable (Gosselin 140).

Pointing out how an individual's agency is "complicated and variable", Gosselin seems to also suggest its arbitrary character in the sense that it is not necessarily fixed, but dependent of other factors, and is, thus, "interconnected". Smith and Watson have also discussed this interconnectedness in pointing out how life writing is concerned with different factors that influence the "autonomous self" in, for example, a memoir. They mention memory, experience, identity, space, embodiment and agency as intersecting concepts within life writing (Smith and Watson 21-2). They emphasize these concepts in order to illustrate that memoirs do give authors the opportunity to tell their personal story, but that these stories are always dependent of other factors. Therefore, we "must recognize that the issue of how subjects claim, exercise, and narrate agency is far from simply a matter of free will and individual autonomy" (Smith and Watson 54). In the case of memory, for example, we have to take into consideration that memory is not just a privatized activity, but an activity that is

situated in cultural politics, and therefore, also a collective activity (Smith and Watson 25). Memory is affected by its surroundings; “on a daily basis we move in and out of various communities of memory—religious, racial, ethnic, gendered, familial” (ibid.). On the level of identity, for example, the author identifies with the reader in a certain way. Authors of memoirs “make themselves known by acts of identification and, by implication [and] differentiation” (Smith and Watson 38). In the case of Johnson and di Prima, they wrote their memoirs as struggling *female* Beat authors as opposed to male Beat authors. They are, therefore, operating within “symbolic structures that organize human society” (ibid.). There is an ambiguity to this, because Johnson and di Prima want to describe their position as struggling female (Beat) authors, but at the same time it is their aim to, in a way, write themselves into the Beat Generation discourse by claiming their relevance to it. Accordingly, Smith and Watson discuss the matter in which the author of a memoir creates agency, because the abovementioned concepts such as memory and identity are shaped by discursive systems and social structures (Smith and Watson 55). This is also the case because of the various ways in which agency is conceptualized, namely as “changing the terms of one’s social relations, as an oppositional tactic of resistance, as self-empowerment [and] as public visibility and participation” (ibid.). Because Johnson and di Prima wrote their memoirs from a feminist perspective and, therefore, touches upon matters of resistance and self-empowerment, it is important to take this into consideration while analyzing their memoirs.

### 3.2. “*Minor Characters*”

In *Minor Characters*, Johnson reflects on her relationship with Kerouac in the period between 1957 and 1958. Johnson experienced the publication of Kerouac’s *On the road* from up-close and *Minor Characters* consists for a great part of her experiences of being in a relationship with one of the best known authors of that time. Although the memoir received a lot of



acclaim because of her close connection to Kerouac, Johnson also describes this period from the other perspective, namely that of being an aspiring author herself and having to deal with her position as a female author in a relationship with one of the best known male authors of that time. As the (often misinterpreted) title suggests, *Minor Characters* illustrates the “ignored presence, rather than the absence, of women among the Beat writers” (Friedman 233). It is this ignored presence that has become a prominent theme in her memoir, as well as in her novels. Also, there is a two-sidedness to this ignored presence; female Beat authors were ignored as authors in the Beat Generation discourse, but were also largely ignored by their male contemporaries at the time. This is especially foregrounded by Johnson through anecdotes in which she is placed in an inferior position by men. An example of this is her memory of being in a (all-girl) creative writing class at Barnard College where one of her professors asked the class who wanted to become a writer. Subsequently, a handful of girls raised their hands, upon which the professor answered:

Well, I’m sorry to see this, [...] – first of all, if you were going to be writers, you wouldn’t be enrolled in this class. You couldn’t even be enrolled in school. You’d be hopping freight trains, riding through America (Johnson 78).

Johnson remembers feeling totally discouraged by this professor, who clearly thought girls were not in a position to go on adventures that would provide for stories for their novels. Johnson recalls that this happened in 1953, and this shows how in that time women were regarded as being in an inferior position to the men who could go on adventures by “hopping freight trains”. At the beginning of the chapter in which Johnson remembers this professor, she dictates a sentence written by Holmes: “[t]he social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang” (Holmes qtd. by Johnson 77). Subsequently she elaborates

on how Holmes argued how all of the female characters in Beat Generation literature were based upon real people, but were “a type rather than an individual” (ibid.). Funny enough, near the end of the chapter, Johnson writes in italics: “*the social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the girl gang*”, followed by a sarcastic, “Why, everyone would agree, that’s absolutely absurd!” (Johnson 78-9). Throughout the memoir, Johnson gives anecdotes like this in which she mirrors the women’s perspective to the male perspective. By giving the example of the aspiring female authors in the classroom, Johnson shows that there actually were a lot of girls who wanted to become writers but were discouraged by their surroundings. Another example is Johnson’s memory of Kerouac’s publisher coming over to their apartment to celebrate the first good reviews for *On the road*. Upon leaving after an afternoon of celebrating the good reviews with champagne, the editor instructs Johnson to “[t]ake care of this man” (*Minor characters* 171), meaning Kerouac. This reflects the ruling image of the “nursing” female who is supposed to stand by her man. However, at the time of the publication of *On the road*, Johnson was working on her own first novel as well, which was completely disregarded by both Kerouac and the publisher. On top of that, she was also working for a publisher and on her way to being promoted to editor.

The novel that Johnson was working on during the publication of *On the road* was *Come and join the dance*. *Minor characters* is, partly, a retelling of *Come and join the dance*, but is extended with her first encounter with Jack Kerouac and his companions. The beginning of her memoir, like the novel, is an account of her college life and does also tell the story of her life as a young girl realizing there is more to life than studying and, afterwards, marrying. Just as Susan in *Come and join the dance*, Johnson herself did not graduate because she failed one class. Also, Johnson remembers being afraid of marriage and her dependency towards men: “I feel much the same in later years whenever I part from a man I love. The anxiety is not so much over leaving as over an impending *fading of identity*” (*Minor*

*characters* 35, my emphasis). This shows how, while realizing it herself, Johnson feels her identity is confirmed by being with a man.

In the memoir, Johnson gives a recollection of her time with Kerouac. Most of their relationship consists of Johnson waiting for Kerouac to return from his journeys. However, Johnson has her dreams of exploring the world herself. At the time of *On the road's* publication, they shared the same longing for a meaningful life. Johnson remembers:

The “bottled eagerness” of the fifties was about to be uncorked. The “looking for something” Jack had seen in me was the psychic hunger of my generation. Thousands were waiting for a prophet to liberate them from the cautious middle-class lives they had been reared to inherit. *On the road* would bring them the voice of a supreme outlaw validated by his art, visions of a life lived at dizzying speed beyond all safety barriers, pure exhilarating energy” (*Minor characters* 128).

It is striking that although they shared “bottled eagerness” and their shared literary ambitions, Kerouac’s novel became an instant bestseller, while Johnson had to wait nearly five decades for her success. Again, her position of female writer might have prevented this success, together with her dependency on Kerouac. We can see this, for example, in her decision to reject her promotion to editor in order to travel to Mexico with Kerouac. However, this could also be regarded as choosing freedom over certainty. Throughout their relationship, though, Johnson wondered whether or not she was a burden to Kerouac. She would sometimes receive a letter from Kerouac telling her not to join his trip because his destination was not as pretty as he had imagined, which led Johnson to wonder if it was her he wanted to escape (*Minor characters* 155).

There is, however, also another side to her dependency on Kerouac, because she greatly benefited from her relationship with him too. Her written experiences of being a female author during the times of the Beat Generation attributed to the shaping of a *female* Beat canon, because her memoirs draw attention to her earlier works. The same happened with the other female Beat authors who started to write autobiographies and memoirs, like di Prima, Cassady and Parker. Through their memoirs a lot of attention for their earlier works was acquired. In the sense of Bourdieu's different fields, we could say that Johnson's connection to Kerouac and his contemporaries resulted in Johnson acquiring social, as well as cultural capital. Because of this, her memoir was sold well and created, in turn, economic capital. *Minor Characters* was originally published in 1983, then reissued in 1987 and, subsequently, again in 1999. After the success of her memoir, Johnson collaborated with Viking Press in publishing *Door Wide Open: A Beat Love Affair in Letters, 1957-1958*, in which correspondence between her and Kerouac originated from the beginning of their relationship is collected. Furthermore did she write another memoir titled *Missing Men* in which she reflects upon growing up as a female in the nineteen-fifties and elaborates on the troublesome relationship she experienced with men in her life. In 2014 Johnson, again, wrote a book about Kerouac, titled *The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac*, in which she describes Kerouac's French-Canadian background and its influence on *On the Road's* success.

Concluding, we can say that from Johnson's bibliography it becomes apparent that the memoir has proven to be her best-selling genre, mainly because of her connection to the Beat Generation. This, because with the memoir Johnson can combine different characteristic aspects of her writing, such as her perspective on women, female authors and her history with the Beats. As stated, *Minor Characters* was published in 1983, a time in which the women's liberation's movement had already flourished. Therefore we could say that, today, her novel is

not only read for its connection to Beat Generation literature, but also because it is an account of a struggling female author in a male dominated world. This is in line with Larson's notion that memory, and, therefore, memoirs are not fixed and are subjected to their changing presents. If we keep in mind Smith and Watson's argument about the different concepts that the memoir is subjected to and the arbitrariness it produces, we see that this does not prevent Johnson's memoirs from being published and read. At the one hand is *Minor Characters* a product of an author who found herself trapped between her position as a female author in the uprising of the Beat Generation and her connection to her male contemporaries, but on the other hand does it also greatly benefit from this position. In retrospect, Johnson is increasingly acquiring attention and acclaim for her work through her memoirs.

### 3.3. Di Prima's "Memoirs of a Beatnik"

Di Prima's memoir differs greatly from Johnson's. The first three quarters of the memoir consist merely of di Prima's accounts of her sexual intercourse with many different men in her time after college. These accounts are of a highly erotic nature, and, therefore, the book's cover warns that the novel is "for adult readers only". Di Prima does not shy away from sexually explicit language. Like the *Loba*-poems, is di Prima's memoir concerned with advocating female sexuality. Written in 1969, her memoir was regarded as provocative because of its endless erotic passages in which, this time, the men served as "minor characters" in a time in which the women's liberation movement was still flourishing. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, di Prima gives a depiction of the life of a female Beatnik "as though the sexual revolution had already been accomplished" (Kirschenbaum 64).

*Memoirs of a Beatnik* also evoked a lot of confusion. It was not clear what message di Prima wanted to convey with her memoir. Confusion because, half way through the memoir, the reader discovers that some of di Prima's recollections are fabricated; she, for example,

separates a chapter into two sections: one being “What You Would Like To Hear” (di Prima 139), and one called “What Actually Happened” (di Prima 141). This is one of the reasons that some of the later prints of the memoir are called “fiction” (Carden 30). Di Prima herself responded to the many “untrue” sex scenes in her memoir by saying that she wrote them because her editor and publisher asked her to. However, it turns out that di Prima wrote most of these passages before publishing the memoir and that, originally, she called these passages “reminiscences” (Carden 30). Carden emphasizes that we should take the word “memoirs” on the cover seriously, for di Prima wrote her highly eroticized memories “interspersed with convincing detail about her experience” (Carden 31). After all, the book is a coming of age story in which a young woman is looking for her identity as a female author in a male-dominated world.

Throughout the memoir, di Prima plays with her position of being female. As stated, in her accounts of sexual intercourse the men merely serve as minor characters. She describes their actions during the intercourse with the greatest detail, pointing out their flaws in a highly critical and cynical way. In the beginning of the memoir, there is even a passage in which di Prima gives a recollection of a rape she experienced. It is striking that, even in this passage, di Prima seems to be the dominant figure:

I could feel that absurd moustache against my skin. And my fear and horror seemed ridiculous. This was Serge, poor silly Serge, who never got to screw his wife and if he wanted to throw a fuck into me, why I might as well let him. It wasn't going to hurt me. Not a whole lot. Anyway, it didn't seem that I had much choice (di Prima 66).

The passage continues and di Prima graphically describes the rape, but throughout the account it seems as if di Prima is in control of the situation, even patting Serge's arm afterwards. Di

Prima's dominant position towards men is not only apparent in the erotic passages in the memoir. At one point in the memoir, after living in New York some time, di Prima lives with two men, a father and a son, in the countryside, for some time. They are farmers and di Prima runs the household by cleaning the house and providing for dinner when the men come back from their work. In this chapter di Prima creates an ambiguity concerning her feminist point of view. About this period in her life di Prima remarks the following:

I really dug being woman to the three men, cleaning and mending and cooking for them. Looking back on it now, I think it was because they were all working so hard that they came home relaxed and easy, pleased with the food, pleased with the house, delighted to have a chick around it at all (di Prima 95).

I lost myself in my new-found women's role, the position defined and revealed by my sex: the baking and mending, the mothering and fucking, the girls' parts in the plays— and I was content (di Prima 105).

It seems like a confusing chapter when first reading it because it seems as if di Prima is confirming the female role of being a housewife that was prevalent in her contemporary society. However, in this chapter it is clearly di Prima's decision to be in this particular situation. On top of that, the reader discovers that she is having sexual intercourse with both the father and the son. In the course of the chapter, however, di Prima decides that it is time for her to go back to New York, leaving the two men behind. This shows that she was in control of the situation by illustrating the possibility of fulfilling the role of the housewife and at the same time exploring her sexuality and having the choice to say goodbye to it all and to move back to New York. Carden praises di Prima's experimental narrative and argues that the

book should be called a memoir. She says: “[b]ut I insist on taking the “memoir” claim seriously—to do otherwise would dismiss the book’s other centres of representation and ignore di Prima’s self-conscious manipulation of cultural assumptions about sex and sexuality” (Carden 31). In other words, Carden thinks that through di Prima’s way of presenting a male-female divide in her memoir, in which the female is dominant, she is able to give a critique on the way women’s role in society is perceived. This is in line with Smith and Watson’s argument that memoirs are often characterized by an emphasis on identification, implication and differentiation. Could we then also argue that di Prima is, in doing so, creating agency for herself? Carden argues: “*Memoirs of a Beatnik* emphasizes female choice, agency, and freedom in ways that subvert and displace the male-dominated pornographic “theatre of the mind” (Carden 36). This, too, is in line with Smith and Watson’s notion that agency can be a tactic of resistance, as self-empowerment [and] as public visibility and participation, although we have to keep in mind that this is agency is not autonomous because it is always formed by discursive systems and social relations. We see this happening with di Prima in the sense that she is writing from a female perspective that is at the same time formed by her idea of being a “Beatnik”.

In her memoir, di Prima remarks that at the time the term Beatnik had not yet been coined (di Prima 111), neither was there yet awareness of upcoming “beat poetry” (di Prima 112). However, the last part of the novel consists of di Prima getting acquainted with prominent Beat figures such as Kerouac, Ginsberg and Corso. The passage mentioned before of di Prima realizing there were more people like her after reading Ginsberg’s “Howl”, and having the feeling that she was going to meet her brothers and sisters does, however, indicate di Prima’s awareness of an upcoming “generation” or movement. From her memoir it also becomes apparent that she deliberately creates the image of a female Beat author, in opposition to the well-known male Beat authors. By doing this, di Prima created her own Beat



persona through her memoir and benefited from it. Looking at *Memoirs of a Beatnik's* publishing history, we can say that during the rise of the memoir in the nineteen-eighties, di Prima's memoir experienced a second life; it was reissued in 1988 and then, again, in 1999. However, unlike Johnson, di Prima's bibliography is not centred around the Beat Generation; it is just her memoir that mentions it explicitly. In 2001, she published another memoir, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, in which she reflects on growing up as a young woman in a conservative Italian family and the next three decades that followed. In this memoir, di Prima, again, advocates female sexuality. She is still active as an activist in the fat acceptance movement, which also illustrates her goal to bring attention to marginalized groups of people.

Concluding we can say that di Prima's memoir is clearly meant as a book in which she uses the particular narrative tool of the memoir to bring attention to women's marginalized position in society. Although not particularly aimed at creating a female Beat canon, like Johnson, di Prima did contribute to it through her connections with Kerouac and his contemporaries. In retrospect, di Prima's memoir does belong to the other memoirs of, for example, Johnson and Cassady. In turn, this attention for her memoir resulted in the increase of popularity for her poetry for which she is most recognized. This illustrates how the habitus of the readers of Beat Generation literature in the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties differs greatly from the readers of today because of altering worldviews towards female representation and women and literature. We also see that the cultural and symbolic capital that the Beat Generation created still exists but is subjected to change; because of a growing interest in female Beat literature we can say that the Beat canon is expanding. Memoirs such as *Minor Characters* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* contributed to this because through these memoirs Johnson and di Prima constructed their own Beat personas and, therefore, wrote themselves into the Beat canon.

## Conclusion

This thesis examined possible explanations for the exclusion of female authors within the Beat Generation discourse. The celebrated literature of the Beat Generation has for decades been regarded as a product of some well-known male authors, however, there were also female authors who wrote about the themes the Beat Generation is known for. The interest in these authors has been increasing recently. This thesis was, therefore, centred around Johnson, di Prima and Kyger and their respective works.

Before looking into inclusion or exclusion within the Beat Generation, the coming into existence of generations and social groups was taken into account. In doing so, Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" and his field theory were used as a framework. These matters were important to take into consideration in order to avoid generationalism; generations and social groups are not just named groups of people with a shared cultural or historical background. Bourdieu's notion of habitus helps us to illustrate this, because he argues that individuals are driven by innate dispositions. These innate dispositions work as structuring structures that produce "objective practices"; habits people inherit and reproduce through shared history and culture. Through these social structures, individuals perceive and react to the world around them and, subsequently, agency comes into existence; social groups have agents who act out certain habits that gain a dominant position in that particular social group. As a result, the agents within a social group are creating a homogeneity of habitus. Therefore, we can argue that a social group is characteristically exclusionary. However, chapter 1 also pointed out how these structures of habitus are always subjected to their ever changing environment, and are, therefore, never fixed. Thus, the past, present and the future will always affect habitus within social groups.

These dynamic structures are also visible in Bourdieu's field theory. This field theory was used in chapter 1 to illustrate the workings of canon formation. As in social groups and the accompanying matter of habitus, are Bourdieu's different fields also directed at acquiring a dominant position in a specific field. Through this hierarchal system different kinds of capital are produced. This was used in order to explain what is at stake while sustaining the idea of a specific literary generation. Through their relationships with each other, the authors of the Beat Generation acquired social capital which, in turn, produced economic capital through their best-selling novels. Over time, symbolic and cultural capital come into play; certain Beat novels end up in the Beat canon. However, the different social fields are always in relation to each other and are, therefore, subjected to change by, for example, changing world views.

The analyses of Johnson, di Prima and Kyger's works illustrated how these authors, through their works, responded to their marginalized position as female authors. Although their approach to depicting women's position in society differed greatly, the three authors used their views towards female representation in order to critique their marginalized position. Still, an ambiguity was visible because of their relation to the Beat Generation because they also benefitted from it. Johnson, for example, wrote a typical "Beat novel" from a female perspective with her *Come and join the dance*, but also used her past relationships with, for example, Kerouac in order to sell her memoirs. Di Prima's main aim was to advocate female sexuality and, with this, broke open fixed ideas concerning the societal norms for women. Kyger, in turn, achieved this in a different way by writing autobiographical accounts of her travels to Japan and India. Although her writings especially gained recognition for her marriage with Beat poet Gary Snyder, Kyger's *Journals* did provide for more insights into her marginalized position of being married to one of the best known Beat poets.

Kyger's autobiographical work already illustrated the importance of life narrative to these female Beat authors. As we saw in chapter 3, the memoir does provide for a narrative tool that, in a way, creates agency. The memoir has always a certain urge to it; the authors want to have a certain truth to be out there. We saw that memoirs can function as counter-stories in order to function as a mirror and to expose the "other". However, as Smith and Watson argued, it should be taken into consideration that the author of a memoir can never write as an "autonomous self"; agency is always concerned with matters of memory and identity. These matters are in relation to each other because one's memory is part of a cultural, shared memory. The same is the case with identity; the author relates to something and someone by writing from a certain position. This thesis, therefore, analyzed two completely different memoirs; *Minor Characters* by Johnson and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* by di Prima. Johnson's memoir leans heavily on her past relationship with Beat author Kerouac but, at the same time, illustrates her experiences of being a "minor character" in the Beat Generation discourse. Di Prima used the memoir as a narrative tool to create her own Beat persona and, at the same time, to advocate female sexuality. In retrospect, their memoirs resulted in several reprints of their earlier works. In the light of the growing interest in the advocating of women's rights today we can see that Johnson, di Prima and Kyger's works are regaining relevance, especially through their memoirs. This is in line with what Bourdieu argued, namely that habitus is never fixed and always in connection to its past and future. Through their earlier works, female representation becomes visible and Johnson, di Prima and Kyger's relevance within the Beat Generation is reconsidered. Therefore, we could argue that they achieved to write themselves into the Beat canon through their autobiographical works.

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