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# The Bird That Flew Backwards

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The Bird that Flew Backwards

Robin F. Gow

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Abstract:

*The Bird that Flew Backwards* examines women poets from literary Modernism in the 1910s and Beat culture in the 1950s. Analyzing these eras in tandem reveals contrasting historical constructions of American womanhood and how sociocultural trends influenced how the “poetess” constructed herself and her work and illustrates the retrograde nature of women’s rights in the 1950s. Through close reading, digital mapping, and historical background, *The Bird that Flew Backwards* establishes a new critical perspective by linking the more well-known Modernists with lesser-known women in 1910s Greenwich Village Bohemia. This linkage between eras branches off to explore themes of formation of identity, queerness, and women’s sexual/spatial agency.

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## Chapter 1: The Bird that Flew Backwards

We often view history as linear—in a constant state of progression. Many feminist historians describe feminism’s progression as occurring in “waves.” “Waves” more accurately accounts for a less continuous illustration of how gender politics have “progressed” towards equality. We could create a chronology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and point to the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1920 onward to 1965 when *Griswold vs. Connecticut* protected the rights of married couples to use birth control. If we wanted to keep going we could take the time-line up to *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973 and point to the progress of women’s right to choose. This is how history is often presented but it creates a fallacy of consistent forward motion, as if rights for women have been in a constant state of progress throughout history. Similarly, we could look at women poets at the turn of the century: Modernists like Gertrude Stein or Edna Saint Vincent Millay and Harlem Renaissance writers like Zora Neal Hurston to point to the progress women have made carving out their voices in literary history. We could then point to the counterculture mantras of the Beats to conclude that indeed women have been in a constant process of liberation. But, we can see in 2017 that in juxtaposition to just a decade earlier the political climate has shifted and women’s marches across the country signal a rising fear of losing access to adequate health care. Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez argue mass media has fed women “the myth of post feminism” and has done so throughout history (878). The myth that feminism has reached a point where it is no longer necessary because women and men exist equally and therefore attempts to assert equality are demonized as “unnecessary” women’s complaining.

Let’s go back to two of the “landmarks” I cited before, the right to vote and the wider spread dissemination of birth control. There is a stretch of almost fifty years between them.

Stone and McKee write in their analysis of gender and culture in America that “American womanhood has been and continues to be discombobulated—culturally broken up into incompatible parts” and comparing women of the literary movements in the 1910s and 1950s illuminates the fragmented state of American femininity (159). Diane di Prima, arguably the most iconic Beat woman, would title her first volume of poems *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*, a line taken from her poem “The Window” evoking the theme of de-lineal time in her work. For women of the Beat movement their bird had flown backwards in comparison to the Modernist women before them. When we look at the two eras of writers in tandem we can see the in their work and in their lives how differently their gender shaped their craft and how history has remembered them.

When we think of “Beat Poets,” literary history has perpetuated the fallacies that 1) Beat ideology was constructed the same by people of all genders in the movement and 2) that the movement’s most important and predominant contributions to literary history were men (Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg). Because of the overt masculinity of the most predominant Beat writers, the title “Beat Woman” therefore instills the idea that these women participated in a movement rather than helped shape it. Their title itself “Beat women” speaks to the contradiction of their existence as women in a movement centered around “male adventure irresponsibility” where male icons of the movement saw women as existing for “sexual satisfaction” (Breines 391). More than just reclamation work that needs to be done for Beat women. Anne Waldman herself, a later generation women poet from Greenwich Village who would emerge much later in the early 1970s, calls the early Beat women a group of “troubled characters” (Waldman ix). For the most part, these women do have their names written down in the history of the era, but they lay in a nest of “troubles.” In this knot of mental illness, affairs,

drugs, and bohemian antics these women's identities as individual artists, reformers, and innovators are muddled by tabloid-like headlines.

Beat women's overall overwhelmingly crucial contributions to the movement have been overshadowed by their legacies rooted in misogyny. If we want to reclaim the voices of Beat women, we need to delve deep into their condition, bury ourselves in their poems. We need to dig decades back to trace their lineage beyond just their association to men of the 1950s; these women looked longingly at Modernist women out a window to the past. It's not enough to call these women "casualties of their time" because to call them "casualties" is to close the book on them. These women are not dead and if we have their poems and their writing they do not need to just be casualties of their time. We can acknowledge their struggles without leaving them "in the twilight of great men," as Waldman describes them (ix). Beat women heard the distant voices of women writers and longed to permission to speak with their volume. Beat women were not the parameters participants, they were themselves a different breed. They wrote in silence but the voice they developed there echoes with the struggles of the fragmentation of women's identities, while also forging a new order of counter-culture resistance.

Beat women emerged from the era of the cult of domesticity, the glorification of the nuclear family, the American dream of white fences and TV dinners. Men returned home from service in World War II and came back to start families. The G.I. Bill allowed former servicemen to pursue free university education. These thousands of men were encouraged to seek out fulfillment through education thus coming into their role as the "bread winners" of the households. As the nation attempted to return to "normal" after war, a restoration of gender roles became a holy institution from which the economy was promised to continue to boom and the nation forge ahead. Women were becoming wives and mothers at unheard of rates and though

women took roles in the workforce during the war, housekeeping and raising a family were considered ideal female roles (“Women Roles”). While there are many reasons for the cult of domesticity in the fifties, many historians note that it reflects societies desire feel liberated from past decades of hardship. From the depression to World War II America the family was often fragmented, torn apart by poverty or war. The strong family unity at least symbolized a new era of stability and prosperity, and women were not invited to take their part; they were expected to. Failure to cultivate the domestic kingdom was to fail women’s place in the dawn of new, free America. Stone and McKee write in their analysis of gender and culture in America that “American womanhood has been and continues to be discombobulated—culturally broken up into incompatible parts” and women of the 50s were at a focal point for incompatible ideal (159). This contradiction lies at the heart of many women’s discontents; overwhelming notion that women were to be fulfilled by their sacred roles as wives and mothers.

A decade later Betty Friedan would give a voice to 1950s homemaker women and ask, “Is this all?” (Friedan 15). Friedan explains this era of women “learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights; the independence and opportunities that old-fashioned feminists fought for” (16). While more women than ever could enter the work force and attend universities, their pursuits were often condemned as masculine or selfish. This is a shift from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when education for women was more valued. Harvey writes that above all “marriage had an inevitability in the fifties that it has never had since” (69). Women were encouraged to tether whole beings to their roles and wife and mother and become “Mrs. Someone” (Harvey 68). A study from 1959 revealed that in the fifties “two out of three women dropped out of college to get married” (Harvey 70). That statistic alone conveys that the “Mrs.” degree was more than a joke, it was, as I noted before, an expectation.



Writing and poetry have historically been gendered masculine, but that pressure intensified in the glorification of men's and women's separate sphere in the fifties. There were no women writers; there were women who wrote. By that I mean women who wrote would feel their writing was a vanity; a selfish indulgence and not a valid expression. Entrapped in the worship of the homemaker women writers failed to see themselves as such. My grandmother, Priscilla Connor, kept journals of her life in the 1950s. She wrote poetry but expressed that she felt it was a "silly game" rather than an art form. Connor only shared her poetry when it was a gift for someone else, thus validating her work because women were so trained to not "indulge" their own ideas. Pre-cursors to the beat women's movement, like Madeline Gleason who emerged in the early late 1940s-early 1950s, often refer to poets as exclusively male. In "The Interior Castle," written in 1944, Gleason explores the "interior" struggles of the poet. Her poem likely alludes to a religious writing by Saint Teresa de Avila. Avila's piece (from the 1500s) focused on the stages to become closer to God and thus Gleason uses this allusion to position poetic achievement as the "God" which is being strived for (Detweiler and Jasper 48). The Christian God is masculine and this therefore further genders writing and poetry. Gleason writes, "The insecurity of the poet/ is his security" and continues to gender the subject male throughout the poem (Gleason 31). Being male permits her "poet" to revel in "insecurity" and "unknowing," a type of uncertainty that was not permitted to be felt by women of the 50s, as they were to be fulfilled in their traditional roles while men sought new horizons (Gleason 31-32).

With the war over, white middle to upper-class white men certainly felt a degree of uncertainty in their own situation, pursuing new fields of study and seeking an identity as well as financial stability to support a family. Young men questioned whether they would find fulfillment by starting families and traditional employment. Society recognized and sympathized

with this era of “common” man’s “soul-searching” spirit as demonstrated by the work of Paul Goodman (a “post-war” social scientist) who wrote on male delinquency because of “young men” being “disaffected from dominant society” (19). In, *Growing Up Absurd*, Goodman explains the problem of “what to make of oneself” belongs “primarily to boys” because “a girl does not have to, she is not expected to ‘make something of herself... she will go on to have children which is absolutely self-justifying” (21). Within this collective mentality, a man’s pursuits (whether for a more traditional career or for the arts) were at least understood by dominant culture while a woman’s search for meaning would brand her as masculine and undesirable or if she already was a mother, she would be thought of as selfish or unusual for not being content as a queen of domesticity. American women’s roles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are discontinuous at best. While women’s discontent during the 1950s is well-known and historically acknowledge, it is seldom seen as such a retrograde movement. The core values of society in the fifties were drastically different from those at the turn of the century in the teens. Not only were women prior to World War II searching for their own individual voices, this enterprise was considered noble. Women could seek fulfillment outside of (while still adhering to) traditional roles of wife and mother. The “New Woman,” as she was called, was of course “New” and “radical,” but, at the same time the kind of revolution she called for did not depart so far from a broader culture of Progressivism across the nation.

Though even upper class white women in the 1910s did not have some of the most basic rights that women of the 40s and 50s had, like the right to vote and legal access to contraception, America’s climate of “progressivism” benefited them and helped created the atmosphere for the “New Woman” to emerge. “New Women” artists were forged in an era where education and learning were more closely linked than ever to middle class life. Clare Eby explains that reading

“became central to middle class identity and aspirations” and more than that, people believed reading was a tool for “individual and national progress” (5). Reading was considered a masculine or feminine activity; all members of the middle-class household took part in reading to be informed about the current state of the world. Reading was central to being able to socialize with others who were also reading; to be well read reflected one’s class. At the same time education for women was more valued than ever.

Though women did attend universities in the 1950s, the social climate in the 1910s promoted women to pursue independence and free through education. Progressives argued for the importance of women’s education as a step to reforming society. Believe it or not, “the percentage of college students and professors who were women were greater in 1920 than in 1960” (Rudnick 70). Gertrude Stein delivered a speech to a Baltimore women’s college in 1899 entitled “The Value of Education for Women” in which she stressed the importance of college to “prepare one adequately for the complexities of this nineteenth century existence” (Stein 1). Stein draws attention to women’s “duty to the community” to be able to work outside the home for social causes (3). In addition, she elaborates on how independent thinking women make better wives and mothers, saying that women must address the “moral” problems of their households (Stein 5). Stein gets to the heart of the progressive era ideology when she concludes, “The life of a college is on a small scale the life of this world, as you sow small so also reap and it is here that for the first time that one is thrown wholly on themselves” (11). Her proverb “as you sow small so also reap” reinforces the progressive ideology that widespread change begins with small-scale intimate relationships. (Stein 11). Progressives asserted that women needed education to be equally informed members of society. If one half of the population was uneducated progressive reformers argued this would lead to an inability to for society to move

forward. As a result, between 1900-1920 there was a “1000 percent” increase in female enrollment to public institutions and a “482 percent” increase in enrollment to private ones (Rudnick 82). While we can see issues with valuing women only for their moralizing potential, nonetheless this social climate helped women balance being free-thinkers and holding on to their femininity.

Progressivism itself was not all that radical in terms of its goals for women. Progressives, specifically marriage reformers, did not seek to totally dismantle family systems, but rather re-think individuals’ roles within household and communities. (Eby 7). For example, one prominent New Woman, Elise Clews Parsons, was a high achieving sociologist, receiving a PhD from Columbia, while, at the same time, she had a more traditional marriage and raised four children. Her writing about women also champions wifely duties and motherhood as emblems of women’s ability to participate in the social/political sphere equal to men. (Lavender). By “seeing marriage as a microcosm for society” New Women did not challenge that institution but rather critiqued marriage with the goal of creating a better society for all. (Eby 8). New Woman scholar, Ruth Bordin writes in the biography of New Woman, Alice Palmer, that “by 1900 the concept of the New Woman had almost replaced the cult of domesticity and the doctrine of spheres” (Bordin 2). Bordin goes on to comment that it was “the emphasis on independence that made her truly new” (3). For the age of the New Woman “independence” was not depicted as a threat. While “the economic component” of freedom “waxed and waned” for the New Woman, her career and professional poise were paramount. (Bordin). Gertrude Stein even suggests there could be “bread-winning” women when she argued for the necessity for educated women (8). New Women were certainly not existing without any criticism or shock from older generations, but the tools with which they used to achieve their freedom allowed them to push back against

traditional gender boundaries. At the same time as this rise in “reading” culture and valuing education for all sexes, the suffrage movement was gaining force. Suffrage efforts coincided with the rise of literary Modernism and the fame of notable Modernist women. By looking at the tactics of suffragists, many of who were New Women Modernists themselves, we can gain insight into how the New Woman negotiated her radical voice and politics.

The significance of the suffrage campaign to my analysis is twofold: the campaign asserted the importance of women in the political sphere and by looking at the campaign’s relationship to modernism we can gain insight into the tactics women used to gain voice in the public sphere. The suffrage campaign succeeded in bringing a woman’s issue to the forefront of American politics; that alone conveys the different tone of the 1910s compared to the 1950s. In *Making Noise, Making News*, Mary Chapman analyzes the ways in which suffragists carefully persuaded the public. Chapman argues using print culture like magazines, posters, and even printed shopping bags allowed suffragists “to be strategically less visible and make their voices less gendered” and therefore “less controversial” (4). Because reading was so valued at the turn of the century, literary and visual “voices” had much more power than they would by the 1950s. This culture allowed women’s literary and political work to disseminate across media forms partially because print could “unmoor the suffragist voice from its gender and speak more freely” (Chapman 5). On top of just the “thrown” voice of women activists, the activists themselves had re-branded, they refuted the “masculine” stereotype of the first wave of suffragists and instead was often both college educated and feminine, conveying she could be both an intellectual and not lose her femininity (Chapman 5). Chapman directly notes that white upper class women could “violate gender norms by performing print cultural stunts, knowing that their class and race positioning would protect them,” which also draws attention to some of the privilege of

New Women activists (6). Still, the suffrage campaign disseminated women's work in a way that no movement did in the 1950s.

While using modernist aesthetics like spectacles and performance art pieces to mask their gender in public, suffrage campaigns also equally helped spread the work of modernist women's work. Suffrage efforts created dozens of literary journals like *The Woman Voter* and *The National Women's Party Magazine*, which would feature work by prominent women writers like Edna Saint Vincent Millay and Charlotte Perkins Gillman (Chapman 8). More than just having their own publications, literary magazines like *The Masses* devoted whole issues to suffrage; highlighting the voices of women and men supporting the women's vote. By the fifties, most magazines in Greenwich Village hardly ever have one woman author. *The City Light Journal*, goes it's whole 1950s history without featuring one piece written by a woman.

The tactics New Women used to assert their independence and individuality were not equally accessible or appealing to the women of 1940s and 50s. While New Women pushed back against women's submissiveness and submergence into the household, the works and personas of New Women writers illustrate their situation of controlled rebellion. These women would best be described as eccentric and avant-garde but always under a guise of dignity, class, and professionalism. As we saw with the suffrage campaign, subversion was always careful and controlled to not gender the voice in public and not masculinize the New Woman. Economically, most New Women also came from very privileged backgrounds, permitting them more agency even in their romantic relationships because they did not need to rely on their husbands for support. Removing the economic factor did not mean New Women didn't still struggle to negotiate equality in their relationships with men, but, New Women and their men actively

strived for a more equal marriage. They saw the “new” marriage as a cultural experiment towards equality.

Though the marriage and relationship experiments of Modernists and reformers of the 1910s weren't quite as radical as they might have liked, the attempts at reform are significant because they highlight at least an effort towards equality. Modernists and “bohemians” desired to break into the “new” and deconstruct traditional relationships and gender roles, but New Women still faced sexual exploitation and inequality in their “free love” relationships. In *Till Choice Do Us Part*, Clare Eby examines how progressive relationship ideologies played out in the lives of New Women. Eby explains, “translation of theory (meaning theories of free love and equality) to practice is always tricky because two spouses never experience marriage identically” (xix). Still, Eby illuminates how mentalities about marriage had shifted “progressively” by looking at individual relationships like that of Neith Boyce and Hutchins Hapgood. By age twenty, Boyce herself had published her first book and was praised by critics. She was well established before entering the “flexible” marriage with Hapgood (Eby 137). Boyce was strategically guarded even in her marriage and wrote that “retreat” for the marriage would be easy if “either of them didn't like it” (Eby 137). She continued to work, despite Hapgood's rich background. Their relationship highlights one of the goals of marriage reform, which was for both partners in a marriage to be able to “choose to work” to find fulfillment inside and outside the relationship (Eby xviii). While Hapgood's harbored “ambivalence towards feminism” Hapgood outwardly supported Boyce as a writer and an artist (highly uncharacteristic of the 1950s) (Eby 156). For Boyce, domestic duties, like taking care of their four children certainly created massive inequalities and Hapgood didn't always recognize the lack of complete balance in their relationship. Still, Boyce could hold firmly on to her individuality and be recognized as a valid artist and a woman.

Albeit love and relationship struggles, New Women's inability to access complete sexual freedom and romantic equality did not create as precarious a situation as it did for the women of the 1950s. I would argue looking at the ideals of marriage reformers reveal that the 1910s was actually much more progressive than the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century towards equality in relationships. Marriage reformers valued "mutually satisfying sex" which drastically different from the depiction of women's sexuality (or lack of permission to have a sexuality) by the 1950s (Eby xviii). New Women's economic independence, higher class status, and overall promotion of "high art" would to more of them being canonized and to them having more stable living situations. New Women's writing was heavily linked more formal written traditions, thus giving them agency to strategically delve into societal taboos like female sexual expression and gender non-conformity. Themes of nature and the sacred in their works illustrate these women's connection to the Romantics, which further validated their work because of its link to a broader literary tradition. Women artists, writers, and poets of the early 1900s still faced challenges to be heard among their male counterparts. Yet, many found their own success and could sustain themselves on their own. Rudnick suggests that women's "literary production" was "greater during the Progressive Era than at any other time in U.S. History until recent times" (69). Their success and canonization is certainly not unrelated to their class, but, the social climate played a huge role in their formation. A perfect example of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century "poetess" is the highly regarded, Edna Saint Vincent Millay.

Edna Saint Vincent Millay. The regality of her name suggests her persona as woman and as an artist. Nancy Milford introduces Millay as "one of the most celebrated poets in America during the first half of the twentieth century" (Milford). Millay is one of a handful of women to receive such praise and acceptance into the canon. There is not denying that Millay's poetry



displays a high level of skill with form as well as the manipulation of it, but it is also crucial to look at why specifically Millay as a figure and as an artist was able to thrive. Millay did not emerge from a vacuum and neither did her highly regarded modernist sisters. In Floyd Dell's biography of Millay, he notes that "There was much reading of books" in Millay's childhood, and that her and her sisters would make up their own "dramas, songs, and music" (43). The value of independent thought and imagination was instilled from a young age for women of this generation. Dell speaks about meeting "Mrs. Millay" and how Millay's mother "valued learning and taught Edna to value it" (43). Millay attended Vassar, a women's college, a place where women like her were given the tools to be both women and artists (Dell 46). Dell's memoir then details her move to Greenwich Village and change in appearance, noting that "she cut her hair short like the rest of the girls" which I think is incredibly important because his observation notes that "short-haired" New Woman was more normalized than not (46). The phrase "like the rest of the girls" removes some of the radical connotations of hair-cutting, in the microcosm of the Village. At the same time, in the context of the 1910s across the nation, a woman cutting her hair would be read as a radical declaration of independence.

Millay's work ranges across topics but a large amount of her poems clearly draw inspiration from the Romantics as seen in how she celebrates the natural and emotional experience. For example, a poem from her earliest collection, *Renascence and Other Poems*, "God's World" the speaker experiences God in nature and calls out "Lord, I do fear. Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year" (Millay 22). The poem evokes a similar sentiment as Wordsworth's iconic poem "The World is Too Much With Us" and Millay finds great praise from critics partially because she was able to display originality while also working within existing forms and "traditional" subject matter drawn from the English Romantics. Her goddess-like mannerisms

support her poetry as something divine or otherworldly for displaying such finesse with form; Floyd Dell even openly calls her “magic” (Dell 42).

Though Millay’s image in history remains as the nymph-like poetess, Milford also describes Millay as “cultivating a public image of independence and rebellion” (vi). Millay is also well known for her attention to “social and political causes,” like women’s rights and labor reform. Using her graceful goddess persona and skill with formal language Millay could address topics otherwise not suitable for women at the turn of the century to talk about, taking part in the “thrown” voice the suffrage campaign used for their own efforts. Deborah Fried writes in her exploration of Millay’s sonnets that “she was called upon to uphold the tradition of binding lyric forms against the onslaught of what her supporters saw as a dangerously shapeless modernism” (8). Floyd Dell described Millay as “a rebellious genius” with the “mask of respectability thrust upon it,” conveying that he recognized her usage of “respectability” to promote a more “rebellious” message (Dell 41). I would argue that Millay did not have this “mask” “thrust” upon her. Her language mastery conveys that she calculated her social rebellion. New Women delved into women’s sexuality and pleasure and Millay displays these themes sewn tactfully in her formally constructed sonnets. In her collection *Second April* her sonnets are especially fantastical while also dripping with a mythical type of pleasure. In sonnet II she begins, “Into the golden vessel of great song/ Let us pour all our passion; breast to breast/ Let other lovers lie...” (Millay 134). Millay pairs passionate love and pagan-like imagery akin to the Romantics. Other modernist women played with themes of nature and sexuality but by their relationship to form was different from Millay’s so they have not received the same level of scholarly attention and praise. Fame or no fame, a society interested in progress and education provided Modernist women the freedom to pursue their artistic goals.

A variety of “poetess” perspectives is needed to explore what it meant to be both a poet and a woman at the turn of the century. If we look at women writers and poets in the 1900-1920 Greenwich Village scene as a sort of spectrum with Millay as the most formalist and “mainstream,” we would find poetesses like Mina Loy at the other end; both overlooked by literary criticism. Loy’s work acknowledges form but seldom employs typical poetic structures like sonnets or verse. While Millay’s work features innovations to poetic form, Loy was a poet who purposefully fragmented poetic structure in a different way than Millay. Loy delved into similar topics as Millay, such as nature, emotion, and more revolutionary themes like the experience of female sexuality and the erotic. Without the guise of formalism or clear ties to former masculine literary traditions like the Romantics, her radical poetry would mostly exist as a passing spectacle in the Village. Loy does not find the same recognition in academic spheres like her celebrated sister, Millay though during the 1910s she certainly succeeded in drawing attention. Till recent attempts to reclaim the work of women writers, many “bohemian” poets were eclipsed by the more iconic figures of the modernist movement. Loy was recorded saying she strived to be “the most original woman of her generation,” a goal somewhat different from that of other writers who strived to make themselves known as part of their attempts to draw attention to social issues (Conover xiii). Without a desire to appeal to a broader audience, Loy is a great point of reference for looking at the varied experience of being a “bohemian” woman poet at the turn of the century. While Loy wasn’t from a wealthy background, she did garner the support for some wealthy patrons like Mabel Dodge and Ezra Pound who helped support her artistic escapades in the avante garde. (Conover xv).

Artists of all genders in the Village created personas for themselves, and, as I mentioned, even Millay cultivated an air of graceful rebellion. Specifically, poetesses like Loy used their

artistic personas to guard their femininity when sharing her radically erotic art in the public sphere. Rodger Conover explains in his introduction to Loy's most famous collection, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, that Loy had a deep desire to "stay unknown" and to "camouflaged" while frequenting the Village gatherings (xxiii). She often dressed up in masculine clothing to various readings and there had even been myths that Mina Loy was a made-up person, all to Loy's own delight of course. Loy's art of the "persona" could serve as a mask to protect a woman artist from being too connected to the taboo content of their work, much as suffrage print culture functioned to give women more control over their gendered voices. Loy and others believed new forms were needed to strive for progress and that "such extremely free verse was a piece of modernism of the arts and the women's emancipation movement" (Burke 230). Using a persona protected her so that she could write in the style she believed was needed to articulate her female experience and promote social change (Burke 230). It's important to note that it was not as shocking for a man at the same time to write poems on sexuality or gender like New Women did. One critic, Alfred Kreymborg, even wrote about Loy's work that "had a man written these poems, the town might have viewed them with comparative comfort" (Burke 488). Kreymborg alludes to the contradicting messages New Women received about sexuality. While the Village embraced "free love" at the same time "sexual norms did not advocate for promiscuity" (Trimberger 109). Free love was more a mantra than an actual set ideology because "free love" provided no guidance on how to navigate couple's different preferences towards monogamy or complete sexual freedom.

Under her avant-garde mask, Loy's writing destroyed and abused form to convey the conditions of female love and desire. In one poem, *Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots*, she addresses both gender inequality and erotic escapades:

Men's eyes            look into things  
 Our eyes            look out (Loy 21)

The speaker feels the penetration of the male gaze when she attests that “Men’s eyes look into things” (Loy 21). Loy makes clear her attention to gendered dynamics in sexual relations with her use of enjambment between the two lines and the extra spaces between “men’s eyes” and “look into things” to create a pause in the flow of the line in an unconventional way, thus, drawing more focus to the submissive vs. dominant dynamic represented just by men’s and women’s (our) eyes. The parallel structure here draws a concrete separation between how men and women’s gazes function differently. Loy radically questions the institution of virginity and marriage through her use of free verse to illustrate the “white” promise of marriage verses “expensive” reality (Loy 22). Her sexual imagery can be both tactile and lofty, for example, she writes:

So much flesh in the world  
                                  Wanders at will

Some            behind curtains  
 Throbs to the night  
 Bait            to the stars (Loy 22)

Use of words like “throbbing” and “flesh” embrace articulating physical sex acts rather than only communicating sex through metaphor. She balances physical intimacy with use of natural images like “stars” to elevate the physical sensation to a spiritual plane. The pauses Loy creates with spacing are extremely innovative and replicate the complex layers of female sexuality; the tension between being pure and experiencing erotic sensation. Loy’s spacing also mimics deep breaths as if the speaker evokes the heat of pleasure.

Another Village poetess, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, wrote on into the 1920s and radically challenged the expectations of her sex. Ironically, like many other writers in the period,

she was a German immigrant but identified more with the writing scene in New York so she considered herself an American poet; she was in fact a Baroness. The Baroness's work was "boldly erotic" to the point where she has multiple poems about ejaculation & orgasm (Gammel and Zelazo 18). In one poem entitled "Ejaculation" her speaker, at the point of orgasm, cries out "I want to die—I want to live—" (Freitag-Lorninghoven 43). While performance of poetry was growing in popularity in the Village, the Baroness took performance to the next level, "performing sets" of poems that critics compared to "firecrackers" (Gammel and Zelazo 7, 13). Her use of sonic qualities and onomatopoeia in her work draws on jazz-like musicality used by the next era of Village poets, the beats (though most of them would likely never know her because she was "Village" famous, but seldom published). In "A Dozen Cocktails—Please," she mimics the sounds of her images of "Serpentine air currents" following the image with "Hhhhhphssssssss!" (Freitag-Lorninghoven 50). While her sets were more comparable to performance art than spoken word, recognizing her innovation style provides insight into how performance could influence writing.

Often New Women are characterized as an eccentric class of upper-class white women, but it's important to recognize similar poetic themes from poetesses outside the Village or typical Modernist canon. While black women had more severe barriers of "class and prejudice to overcome" the early 1900s was a period of "social and political ferment for middle-class African Americans (Rudnick 72). An influx of black women's writing from the Harlem Renaissance illustrates the social and political climate at the turn of the century bolstered women poets of many different backgrounds. Women poets of the Harlem Renaissance movement also wrote on women's sexual experience and love, while also using poetry as a place to express their struggles

as women of color<sup>1</sup>. Especially Harlem Renaissance women continued to write on into the mid-1930s while the bohemian scene at the Village morphed because of American's involvement in World War I. Unlike the Moderns, women poets of the Harlem Renaissance considered use of western traditions like the ode or the sonnet to be a "political act" as these forms had been "forbidden to their grandparents" (Honey xxxviii). Publication in Harlem through African American magazines was common for these women despite their subsequent lack of scholarship written about them. Similarly connected to the influence of the Romantics, women like Gwendolyn Bennett and Mae V. Cowdery used their love poetry as an attempt to "speak in a straightforward and authentic manner" (XLVIII). One poem, "Secrets," by Gwendolyn Bennett depicts beautiful tactile affection as the speaker describes writing a song "as my finger might play with your hair..." (Honey 10). Bennett also pairs golden imagery with memories of touch to demonstrate the divinity of touch in lines like "I shall make a song like your hair.../ gold woven with shadows green-tinged" (Honey 10). Mae V. Cowdery displays more visceral sexual imagery, such as in her poem "Insatiate," where she describes how hunger for "meat and bread" could never be enough to sate her desires for a "finer table spread" (Honey 56). She goes on in the next paragraph to amorously describe the "spread" as a beautiful woman with lips "rubies red" and "eyes two sapphires" (Honey 56). In another poem "Lines of a Sophisticate," Cowdery directly expresses her desire for passion as "carnal anticipation" (Honey 57). Harlem Renaissance women's writing on sexuality and desire parallels the similar lofty and "Romantic" tone which Millay employs. This parallel conveys the way in which this tone permitted women of the 1910s a more widely acceptable format to express passion without setting themselves as

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<sup>1</sup> While the Harlem Renaissance began at the same time Modernist poets were gaining notoriety, historians debate over the exact span of the Harlem Renaissance as a movement.

far out as a poet like Mina Loy. Women of the Village and Harlem's innovative uses of form tactfully brought gendered experience into the public sphere.

The avant-garde and "counter-culture" poetesses of the Village in the 1910s, like Mina Loy, in appearance alone, looked drastically different from the image women strived for in Post-World War II America. One portrait of Mina Loy shows her, eyes closed bearing long intricate earrings, head tilted as if listening to a melody is emblematic of the disconnect between the conditions of the forerunners to the beat movement (Kinnahan 31). Loy's mystique of grace and high-art severed her persona from the experience of mostly middle or lower class families from which the beat movement emerged. Beats sought to distance themselves from high-art because of the Moderns' associations with wealth and high-class society. The Beats were supposedly the voice of the "common" man. Erotic poet Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was even a baroness. The Baroness didn't need to make a living at it; she could live "as a work of art." Her ornamented and artsy persona could not be better demonstrated than by a picture of her from the George Grantham Bain Collection at the Library of Congress that depicts her in a feather headdress, tights, one foot in the air arched like a bird (Gammel and Zelazo 3). She looks like eccentric royalty. The "poet" of Post-World War II America glorified poverty and therefore created her artistic persona in opposition to the bohemian ornamentation of the 1910s. New Women, for the most part, did not "challenge the notion of innate sexual difference," while playing with gender they upheld the "poetess" as "other" to the poet (Stone and McKee 49). The beats, men included, glorified the working-class mentality and therefore these images of turn of the century poetesses couldn't realistically function as practical role models for women artists in the 50s and 60s, not to mention New Women were almost exclusively high-class women with a large degree of economic freedom from men. While many Beat women read, and enjoyed



Modernist women's work, the drastically different social climates separated them on a fundamental level.

Though the canonized male Beat writers were not initially part of dominant culture, their masculinity gave the agency to push toward the unknown and reject existing written forms and structure. Their female counterparts would be left torn between the pressure to conform to gender roles and or to pursue the new liberated "beat" lifestyle that would never actually be accessible to them in the same way it was for men. Joyce Johnson, emblematic "beat" woman, writes in her memoir, *Minor Characters*, that restless women like her left home "violently" to lead "precarious lives" (xxxii). Johnson remarks, "no one had taught us how to be woman artists or writers" conveying the chasm beat women felt between themselves and the "rebel men" they ran with (xxxii). Beat women wanted to reject gendered dynamics that Modernist women did not encounter the same because of the value of education and reading in the 1910s. At the same time Beat women wanted to emulate their male colleagues who believed their own counter-culture stand point did not need a keener gendered focus. Older generations cried that these young beat men were "delinquents," men like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs. Beat men would put forth what would come to be known as some of the most influential writing of the twentieth century, not only because of their innovative styles, but also because of the social, sexual, and artistic freedom that their gender provided them.

To analyze the work of beat women, establishing the position of their male counterparts is equally important, especially because their work and personas would become the standard against which beat women were measured and the image they would strive to attain. For example, Joyce Johnson said that during her first writing class at Barnard, the professor told the girls after asking if they wanted to be writers that "if you were going to be writers you wouldn't

be enrolled in this class” and went on to say if they truly wanted to be real writers they would “be hopping on freight trains, riding through America” (Johnson 81). This “Professor X” articulated the growing position of academia to value writing “in the moment” Previously, academia valued revision and time spent perfecting writing; the new norm was that writers were inherent geniuses and their work was most pristine and true as it was produced in the moment. Johnson reflects that after this declaration that “the would-be writers” in the class “understood instantly that of course there is no hope” and the hopelessness Johnson articulates here is tied to the innate masculinity of the emerging voice of literature (Johnson 81).

To travel, to be independent, to have “experiences” were and are all male privileges, in an era entrenched in tethering women to the home. One of the traits of the New Woman was her freedom to have experiences that went as far as traveling to Europe (Rudnick 69). Beat men could travel to fill the voids and remedy the disillusion they felt, but, without husbands or families to support them, beat women had to work to subsist from day to day, haphazard as their survival often was. Barbara Ehrenreich describes the Beat man in her book *The Hearts of Men* as existing in rejection of both “job and marriage” (52). She goes on to examine Beat men’s “immaturity,” commenting that at the heart of their dissociation from marriage was an allegiance to “blue collar masculinity” and a “nihilism withdrawn from human attachments” (Ehrenreich 56, 54). It’s this glorified misogyny and impulse to detach that afflict men and women Beats differently. Though Kerouac views women as accessories to his adventures, he relies on women for places to sleep, meals, and desperate intimacy throughout *On the Road*.

*On the Road* and Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” function as beat men’s megatexts and both works champion working-class sexism and brotherhood as the ultimate countercultural forces. Analyzing the roles of women in these works provides us with insight into the fraught position of

the beat woman artist and how women could negotiate being both “beat” and a woman; an almost oxymoronic situation for Beat historians. Analyzing hyper-masculinity in *On the Road* is no difficult task. Most women in the iconic novel don’t even get names. To Jack and his buddy Dean they’re just “girls, girls, girls”—they are an aspect of the male joy-ride. In just about every scene Kerouac makes sure to provide a demeaning physical description of the women he encounters. In one scene, he meets two girls at a bar (as he does for basically all three-hundred pages of the novel) and describes them as a “young blonde,” the “fat brunette” and then dismisses that they were “dumb and sullen” as if he had talked to them for more than thirty-minutes (Kerouac 32). Ehrenreich explains “Beats included women only as experiences” (171). Note Ehrenreich’s word choice. Beats (men) “included” women; they did not consider women to be part of them. When women fail to provide adequate “experiences,” Kerouac jumps into overt misogyny. He calls women who wanted to be more than just “seat-fillers” for him and his boys “untamed,” “shrew[s],” “wench[es],” and much more (Thompson 6) (Kerouac 75, 85).

At the same time, the true intimacy Beat men desired remains unexpressed by Kerouac’s narration save scattered moments where he gravitates towards women to find some sort of valuable connection. David Savran writes “Women, when they appear at all in these narratives, function as girlfriends, whores, wives, mothers; figures defined almost exclusively by their relationship to men” (44). In moments of dissolution beat men turn, shamefully, to the feminine and when they don’t find immediate fulfillment they turn back to their hyper-masculinity to dissociate from feelings of isolation and emptiness. In one scene Kerouac reflects “I tried everything in the books to make a girl. I even spent a whole night with a blonde girl on a park bench” (Kerouac 73). First, his use of the word “make” conveys how he views women as a piece of his “puzzle” so to speak, that he must find one that can cater to his emotional needs in how he

envisions that position being filled. He doesn't want to "meet" a human, he wants to "make" a girl. By never naming the women of his encounters, he dehumanizes them while also diminishing the worth of the connection he had to them so as not to feminize himself. He spent a whole night with this woman who we only get to know by her hair color, illustrating how much the Beat men saw women as repositories for their own emotional struggles, which they refused to account for in their writing. For being so countercultural, Kerouac neglects to realize that his hypermasculinity neither truly refutes consumerism or liberates him, it only functions to wreak emotional havoc on women he crosses paths with and leave him with nothing but pseudo "middle-class" angst. Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" asserts the same working class masculinity in less blatantly sexist language and provides further insight into the beat's characterization of bread-winners as emasculated by capitalism.

"Howl" still exists today as a counterculture manifesto and is seldom criticized for its phallogentric language. The poem's rebellion is at the expense of the feminine and more specifically women who also wanted to challenge binding constructions of gender in the 1950s. What does the poem say to a young woman poet who would hear this and be equally inspired and unable to participate in the rebellion the poem promotes? Zimmerman writes "Allen Ginsberg became a kind of sexualized father figure" for counterculture and thus also "became a frequent point of reference" for counterculture in the press" (133). The emblem of a movement being a "sexualized" "father" conveys the deep alligance to masculinity the Beat movement was founded on. "Howl" itself is especially violent; the language is penetrative. Ginsberg literally writes his generation "let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists" which creates an uncomfortable image of assault and somehow validates the assault as a part of this rebellion he prophesizes (Ginsberg 15). In another line, Ginsberg glorifies a masculine tolerance for pain,

equating the act of self-inflicted harm as resistance to “capitalism” when he writes his generation are those who “burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism” (Ginsberg 4). The poem oscillates between being hyperbolic and direct, but whether Ginsberg uses self-harm as a hyperbole doesn’t matter, the message of self-mutilation as resistance and a display of masculinity still comes through. “Howl” also has a constant thrust forward; the images are meant to hit you and then become eclipsed by the next image. The poem does not want you to pause and have time to hold onto any one image and this stylistically cloaks some of the poem’s grotesque misogyny.

The continued hyper-masculine tone characterizes consumerism and white collar men’s work as emasculating making “Howl” a misogynistic anti-capitalist rebellion. Barbara Ehrenreich asserts “The class that inspired the beats was virtually nonexistent” and yet Ginsberg asserts his own “working class” oppression over other groups (women and racial minorities) (58). He even begins the poem by describing his “people” wandering through “negro streets” while never addressing racial injustice he dangles the racial terminology to grossly equate it to his own situation as a so-called lower class male. This poem is for men, it’s addressed to men. In another line he makes the gender of the children of his rebellion clear by characterizing them as those “who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling” (Ginsberg 4). The term “girls” infantilizes women and counting them by the “millions” illustrates how Ginsberg too was depicting women as a disposable aspect of the beat experience, not to mention his derogatory language to refer to a vagina. Watching the rise of the voices of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and other iconic men of the time women artists identified with the impulse to rebel but were instantly conflicted when confronted with the overtly sexist language of their male contemporaries.

A large amount of scholarship written about “female Beats” looks at their relationship to the male beats. Gillian Thomson writes in her analysis of gender performance of beat women that “readers of female Beat literature (as well as scholars), tend to read such pieces to find out more about the men or the women in their relationship to (or with) the men (3). By focusing on women as “minor characters” in a movement (as Joyce Johnson more ironically titles her own memoir) scholarship reinforces the idea that beat women did not shape the movement but were taken for the ride, pulled along as part of the experience of men they slept with. Johnson’s own memoir focuses equally the lives of other women Johnson was friends with her own struggles to find an artistic voice caught between conflicting ideologies of the Beatnik, collegiate, and good 1950s girl her parents wanted and yet the memoir is marketed as the story of her relationship with Jack Kerouac. Even Johnson reflects in the memoir often feeling as though she was “hanging around and back at the same time” never at the heart of whatever was going in the Village (41). While Beat women were frequently on the physical sidelines on reading at the Gas Light Café or some party on MacDougal Street; the body of their writing testifies to their existence as more than just “a subculture within a subculture” as Thomson describes their role (1). It’s important to not only re-evaluate the role of Beat women poets but also the women who were part of the movement who did not write or published during the time.

I want to reclaim the women who have previously been referred to as “The Muses.” These women like Joan Burroughs and Edie Parker emerge as grotesquely fascinating anecdotes in the lives of the men who they fell in love with, but I think continuing to read them that way only reinforces the idea that the course of change and radical new literature was driven by male Beats. We’ve already seen that deconstruction of form was already being employed by modernist artists far before the dawn of the 1950s—what male Beats did was re-brand their revolution with

their own suave style of “rebellious” misogyny. Women who have been called “muses” to people like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg did more than just sleep with them and dress in black tights in the foreground of dingy Village apartments; these women were themselves artists and contributed to the movement in ways even outside of their writing. Brenda Knight describes Joan Burroughs as a “seminal” figure and depicts her apartment in New York as a “nucleus” for “characters who played a vital role in the formation of the Beat” (49). Her death at the hands of her own husband, writer William S. Burroughs, has overshadowed her role as an orchestrator of gatherings and patron of the ideology of the young movement. Because her work is characterized as “women’s work” (hosting guests, taking care of visitors, organizing events), it was devalued. For example, McDowell uses, Beat muse, Carolyn Cassady’s memoir *Off the Road* to comment on how despite claiming to reject all values of ‘home’ and ‘stability’ Beat men still returned back to her through their travels. McDowell writes “Carolyn Cassady demonstrates, the beats with whom she was involved (Kerouac, Cassady and Ginsberg were the key figures) consistently returned to the version of ‘home’ that she provided” while at the same time claiming that they did not need that stability she provided for them. (414). When we zoom back and look at the roots of the Beat movement we see a sea of women like Joan Burroughs and Carolyn Cassady who both write and contribute to the Beat community in ways other than just promoting their own art like male Beats did. While celebrating the written work of the Beat women, we should also give credit to them for their contributions to the work of Beat men; many famous works of Beat men were even typed by the women they were seeing at the time, like Elise Cowen helped edit and finalize Allen Ginsberg’s famous book of poems *Kaddish*. The line between those whom literary scholars and historians have dubbed “muses” and “poets” is blurred, because the women of the movement collectively bore the huge emotional and physical work of the male Beats.

Unlike the Modernist women, a cohesive mask for Beat women was not as easily crafted. For Modernist women, they could navigate the Village almost as a performance art piece; the sometimes erotic and shocking material of their poetry could be explained as just another part of the performance a style high art. Their wealth and education further clarified to broader society what they were and that they might be writing so “inappropriately” as more of an experimental of knowledge rather than a direct affront to the status quo. Beat women came from middle-class families, neither poor nor wealthy, but, “respectable” as Knight calls them in her essay “Sisters, Saints, and Sibyls” (4). They often had to live at home till clumsily fleeing in search of themselves in the Village. They searched desperately for a place they could fully explore their identities but often felt like their true self was in limbo between conforming to mainstream ideals and the need to be more radical when they entered the Village.

Joyce Johnson described her life at home as “living her second life” while also expressing the pressure to perform when she went out to explore the Village as well (15). Johnson calls even the attire of the male Beats a “deliberate costume,” which conveys the performative nature of Beatdom. Within the push and pull of these poles of identity it was difficult for women’s voices to be heard among the work of their male colleagues. Their poetry explores the complicated tension of their positions and often celebrates their very existence as radical. For many Beat women, their act of writing was a way of validating their struggles and permitting themselves a space to feel their emotions. Beat women stripped away the performativity of the early bohemians and used writing as a confessional. Their methodology for revolution was the power of translating their own lives into words. Beat women wanted to be writers but they knew they would never be viewed and taken into the inner most “Beat-circle” with the men who they often idolized. Just as an example of the, the popular Beat literary



magazine, *Yugen*, features the work of only one woman in its eight issues, spanning the course of four years from 1958 to 1962. That woman was Diane di Prima, dubbed poet “priestess” and safely the archetypal Beat woman (Knight 123).

Di Prima noted in an interview with Anne Waldman in the *New York Times* that literary and artistic connections in the Village in the 1950s were passed “male to male” (Knight 124). Di Prima resolved to break through the “masculinist” face of the poetry scene to assert her work on the same level of her collages and to a degree she succeeded by becoming the female face for the movement (Quinn 19). Yet, there still exists little scholarship done on her work and she is probably best known for being a sex symbol. Characterization of di Prima as a deeply sexual person is not false. Sex is a main theme in her *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. But, the current conceptualization of her sexuality is so closely linked to the men of the Beat generation that scholars have colored her work “pornographic.” Audre Lorde explains in her essay, “Uses of the Erotic,” that erotic power exists in women’s typically “unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” as “the chaos of our strongest” emotions (53-4). Di Prima is unapologetically in touch with her erotic power. I would argue a lot of her success comes from her ability to harness her erotic power. Libby writes that di Prima’s work “values experience that breaks out of usual categories,” which illustrates how di Prima could reinvent the Beat fixation on experience to make it a source for erotic power (48). When these critics reduce her work to pornography, failing to glimpse its erotic power. (Lorde 54). For example, even an anthology of the lives of Beat women by Brenda Knight includes on the second page of her biography that she had an orgy with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg (125). By returning to writing of Diane di Prima, we can revive and celebrate the erotic power she asserts.

Beat women are often characterized as promiscuous because of how Beat men characterized them; their images of “girls, girls, girls” cycling through narratives like *On the Road* haunt the sexuality of Beat women. For Beat men, sex was supposed to be an experience in their lives and in their writing, a sensation of pleasure. The reality was that Beat men equally felt a desire to have intimate human connections and often pursued women as a chance to feel closeness that they couldn’t express with their male peers. Beatnik men are seldom known just as sex-figures despite equally writing about sexual acts, while Beat women like di Prima are remembered as hyper-sexed. For instance, take Al Fowler’s poem from the first addition of the *City Lights Journal* (a publication that failed to include on women artist or writer). In his attempts at intimacy are intrusive, as he writes “I see you linger there” and “I feel your thighs pass each other,” which are both voyeuristic and describe his sexual intentions toward a woman he never met (Fowler 62). He continues “how I love to play your body like a pink violin”; the act of “playing” someone else dehumanizes them and position him as dominant and in charge of the course of sexual action. Beat women’s poetry acts as a reclamation of their bodies (use of the erotic) in the face of their celebrated objectification in men’s works; they forge a connection to the reader, bringing them in closer to share an experience together.

“The Window,” evokes the erotic without being as explicitly sexual as some of Di Prima’s other poems, illustrating Beat women’s radical exploration of emotion. The poem begins “you are my bread” thus establishing a type of intimacy with the reader in direct juxtaposition to masculine prophetic voice heard from male Beats. In the third stanza, di Prima writes “this kind of bird flies backward/ and this kind of love breaks on a windowpane/ where no light talks” (Di Prima 18). She uses the jarring image of a bird that “flies backward” to represent uncertain passage of time; a motif reinforced later in the poem when she writes “the sand here/ never

shifts” (Di Prima 18). This bird that flies backwards emblemizes the situation of a Beat women, a generation of writing on the wings of bird who has flown backwards. This generation of women saw the strides for women’s rights that were made by the previous generation being actively revoked, pulled out from under them. Di Prima also uses these abstractions of time to celebrate and embrace the cacophony of emotions she feels for the “you” of the poem. “The Window” flaunts deep eroticism through its intimacy and striking images like “love” that “breaks on a windowpane.” Di Prima conjures images that evoke the feeling she wishes to share with the reader and part of the success of her work is her work’s ability to replicate her own emotional experience. The erotic power lies in her refusal to give any sense of concrete sentiments.

Diane di Prima and other poets like Hettie Jones refute the notion that Beat women were victims of the movement. Their writing demonstrates a keen awareness of their position to men, at times lamenting inequality and other times celebrating being female. By criticizing their male peers or blurring the gender binary, Beat women don’t just challenge the parameters of the Beat movement; their body of work revises what it means to be “Beat.” Their path to non-conformity is formed from female empowerment and challenges to the patriarchal structures at play in broader society as well as in their personal lives. Di Prima begins “THE MAGICAL PRACTICE OF EVOCATION” with the line “i am a woman and my poems/ are woman’s: easy to say/ this...” to illustrate her awareness that whatever she writes is colored by her gender (di Prima 20). While Di Prima may or may not have encountered Mina Loy’s work directly, there is a clear parallel between the two and how their rejection of conventional form works to reinforce their deconstruction of masculine language structures to create bold new visions for femininity in writing. Di Prima goes on to celebrate the resilience of women; not only herself but all women

saying, “the female is ductile” and later “the cunt gets wide/ and relatively sloppy/ bring forth men children only/ female/ is/ ductile” (20). The persona of the male Beat is off on his own, an individual artist and di Prima asserts the common female experience as a refusal to ascribe to the male Beat script. Her usage of “cunt” functions as a reclamation of her own body and refusal to be objectified as an aspect of male experience. She also uses “cunt” to describe birth and creation rather than just pleasure as a way of depicting women as creators (artists). She repeats the word “ductile” as celebration of women’s ability to break without losing toughness. She also makes a witty cut at male Beats when she writes “men children” as a way of alluding to the emotional immaturity of her male contemporaries. While di Prima was herself a mother, I think because she is talking about all women she uses the imagery of childbirth more as a reconceptualization of art formation the female perspective rather than only a discussion of motherhood.

Beat women were mothers. left to do the work of raising the children of Beat icons. Men could run and go off on their soul-searching adventures untethered to any consequences from their open sexuality. Women were left to find underground doctors to perform abortions or become single mothers. Again, scholarly attention turns to Beat women’s motherhood only in the interest of how their children links them to the men of the movement. I want to look at how Beat women embraced the idea of motherhood in their lives and in their writing, yet another illustration of their “ductility.” Brenda Knight affectionately calls Hettie Jones “Mother Jones” mostly because of the brief “nuclear” family she shared with Amiri Baraka (183). As far the Village went, they were “nuclear” though being an interracial couple in the 60s had its own set of struggles. As Baraka got deeper into the black power movement, he grew apart from Jones and left her to raise their two girls. Jones didn’t publish poetry or fiction during what would be considered the Beat generation, her work was mostly for music magazines like the *Record*

*Changer* and then later the *Patterson Review* (162). She was instrumental in the publication of many Beat poets work in her role as editor of *Yugen*. To piece together and compile eight additions of a literary magazine is an art and her role as editor isn't nearly as highly regarded as it should be, because those skills are both feminized and not appreciated as part of the Beat movement. Beats weren't supposed to need editors, their work was supposed to be raw and "real." To re-think or arrange writing would be to feminize it or to "mother" it.

Jones finds power by expressing the struggles of motherhood in the Village while reconceiving traditional standards for 1950s motherhood. In "Rabbits Rabbits Rabbits," Jones recounts a trip to "the clinic" (abortion clinic) to deconstruct the shame surrounding women getting abortions. Feminist theorist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir writes in her Introduction to *The Second Sex* that some people define a woman as "a womb" (23), thus, coding abortion as a rejection of "womanhood." De Beauvoir notes that women are urged to "Be women, stay women, become women" and thus Jones's new visions for womanhood both explore the body as well as work against gender essentialism. Jones's depiction of struggle for autonomy and societal expectation at the site of an abortion clinic illustrates in the eyes of society to own a uterus is not enough, a woman must fulfill the roles of the woman, must partake in "femininity" and therefore motherhood.

Jones writes "I find I can't suffer the pain/ of another woman's love, or/ absorb her losses," which illustrates a common theme of Beat women's writing, the desire to connect with other women and to share common struggles (Jones 193). Jones continues "so I sit and wonder why/ the woman beside me/ has a face full of wrinkles/ above her pregnant belly," using "wrinkles" to convey the physical mark of pain etched on the bodies of women because of oppression (194). Again, her "wondering why," conveys a sisterhood and desire to share the

burden of motherhood, which in this case is the decision to not be a mother. Subtly the poem functions as an inversion of traditional motherhood because the speaker of the poem is in fact being “mothering,” because mothering is characterized as empathizing and showing affection and care for another. This other person is not her child but another woman who she writes shares “the same story” as the book of poems in her lap (194). The warmth of these women’s silent connection in an abortion clinic, which is often depicted as cold and medical, de-stigmatizes women who get abortions. Women who have had abortions are often called heartless or selfish and Jones asserts their right to decide when to be mothers and displays how women in another sense are “mothering” to each other by being supportive.

In “Sonnet” Jones draws attention to unequal gender dynamics influencing relationships with men, what Joyce Johnson would describe as “the actual physical pain” of loving a man (34). In the first two stanzas, she illustrates disparities between her own experience and the societal depictions of romance by saying “Love never held my hand/ like those summertime couples/ palm to palm” (Jones 191). By choosing the word “love” instead of “he” at the start of the poem, Jones relays that she will critique the broader social construction of love rather than just expressing her experience. This technique accords with Beat women’s desire to share an intimacy with their reader and achieve revolution through collectivity. In the line “palm to palm,” Jones uses an image of balance to refute the concept that a man and a woman could share equal part in a relationship (191). In the third stanza, she finally genders “love” “he” and calls him the “grandmaster” (191). By waiting to denote “love” as masculine till the second half of the poem she mimics women not initially understanding the power dynamic they experience when they fall in love with a man. Jones continues “he laughed when he came on/like gangbusters,” commenting on abuse of women’s love as an experience. The term “gangbusters” originates

from an action radio show of the 50s and highlights the thrill men felt jumping in and out of love with different women (Sterling 237). She concludes “who/ could refuse him,” which demonstrates yet again Beat women’s hyper awareness of their bind being caught loving men who would never see them as equals. Through the act of writing, Jones reclaims the voice “love” has took from her while again bringing the reader in closer to empower her as well. Beat women are seldom noticed for their ability to take love poetry in new and radical directions, encompassing the complexities of relationship dynamics as well as celebrating non-romantic love.

Elise Cowen is a crucial figure when analyzing the role and work of female Beats. While Diane di Prima and Hettie Jones continued to have careers well beyond the Beat era, Cowen died by suicide and most of her work was destroyed by her parents, who were horrified by themes of homosexuality and sexuality in her writing (Trigilio xv). Cowen’s surviving work is a testament to the female Beat voice of collectivity and usage of intimate writing. She reveals all aspects of herself in her poetry and poems blend with journal entries. Far too often her story is reduced to the tragedy of the mad artist-woman who died too young. Like Sylvia Plath, even many of Cowen’s contemporaries were fascinated by her death and in doing so failed to recognize how her work was part of the voice of their time. Kerouac started a rumor that her death was an accident, that she hadn’t meant to jump out the window of her parents’ house but that she was reaching for something unattainable outside the window (Trigilio xv). Rumors seem harmless, but they convey a lack of accountability for her death and a refusal to acknowledge the complexities of her life. Many Beat women and artists had mental health struggles so instead of reducing them to their illness, it is important to see how themes of depression and isolation manifest in their work.

Cowen's work displays her joy, her resilience, and her connection and appreciation of other Beat women. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's explain disabilities often function as "a stock feature of characterization" or "opportunistic metaphorical device" (205). In Cowen's case, her depression and psychosis function in both these ways. She is even called "Beat Alice" in the collection "Women of the Beat Generation," which is a tactful allusion to Alice in Wonderland, thus underscoring Cowen's disconnection from reality (Knight 141). Women writers weren't so often characterized by their archetypes. So far, we have di Prima (the lady of the night), Jones (the mother woman), and now Cowen (the mad woman). There is a grotesque fascination with the mad woman writer. Cowen was certainly not the first; you can easily see the same tropes used when characterizing Emily Dickinson or even Virginia Woolf. Their mental abnormality or social non-conformity reaches the cusp of what can be understood and thus it becomes their only defining quality. Men of the Beat generation had huge mental health struggles. Ginsberg bonded with Cowen over having spent time in the same mental institution and yet, because he's a male poet his defining characteristics in historical writing are his style and poetic voice and not his disabilities (Knight 149).

Cowen's tragic death means she's often used as an "opportunistic metaphorical device" especially for feminist discourse attempting to illustrate the dire situation of women during the 1950s (Mitchell and Snyder 205). Elise Cowen and other women of the Beat generation who would die by suicide shouldn't just be used as examples of "casualties" of the era. Accounts of her life always illustrate her descending into madness and then death. In Leo Skir's piece "Elise Cowen: A Brief Memoir of the Fifties," he uses her death as a framing for the "story" where he talks about his relationship to Cowen. Even the title of the piece, "A Brief Memoir of the Fifties," conveys Cowen's role as a metaphor to represent the entirety of an era. He begins by



picking up the phone and hearing “*she jumped out the window. From her parent’ apartment. The seventh story*” and ends again repeating the exact same line in italics as the beginning (Skir).

This repetition traps Cowen in a cycle, so that her death is replayed repeatedly. If scholars want history to stop repeating itself with the death of women writers they need to cut the loop they’ve trapped them in. I’m not suggesting we need to forget that she was mentally ill, I’m just suggesting it not be used as a metaphor for lost female genius. If we truly want to embrace Beat women’s genius, we need to look at Cowen’s unpublished work as part of the collective voice of her sisters and not simply the product an aloof woman, “masculinized” by her boyish appearance and gender-bending themes in her writing (Trigilio xxi).

Cowen too celebrates women as a collective and specifically explores a visceral connection to her body. Like other Beat Women, her connection to her body is much different from previous women writers from Greenwich Village. While writers like Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein certainly wrote in detail about sex, Beat Women convey a personal and vulnerable connection that isn’t quite the same as the more artistic and provocative depictions rendered by the Moderns. Throughout her poetry, Cowen uses “cock” and “cunt” to talk about sex and her own connections to sexuality. Both terms for genitalia are derogatory and Cowen does this purposefully draw attention to the fraught sexual dynamics she faces in her own life. In “I Wanted a Cunt of Pure Golden Pleasure,” Cowen creates a dissonant tone by pairing “cunt” with “golden pleasure” (Cowen 89). Cowen continues she wants the pleasure to be “purer than heroin,” inserting the addictive quality of pleasure and sexuality. Through Cowen’s life, she struggled with inequality in her romantic relationships; she often comes close to worshipping her partners. Often her poetry reads like journal entries, but Cowen is expressing a fragmentation felt by other Beat women and women of the 1950s, a disconnection between wanting to partake in “golden

pleasure” and then the reality of the “cunt.” The misogyny of her society penetrated so deeply into her being that it had the power to designate what word would be used to describe her genitals. Her queer perspective is crucial because it illustrates how love and romance were difficult for women of all sexualities because of the pervasiveness of 1950s gender norms and repression of sexuality.

Early Beat women kindled a fire of collective liberation that would continue to build past their time. Near the end of Joyce Johnson’s memoir, she begins to describe the changing climate of herself and the village as framed by the death of Elisa Cowen. Johnson reads the obituary of Cowen and reflects “For a long time I sat staring at the word WOMAN. Had we both grown up, then, become women?” (256). Johnson’s fixation on the word “woman” reiterates the fragmented definition of womanhood, especially for Beat women who lived in a liminal time between 50s and the more widespread “cultural rebellion” through the sixties. This harken back de Beauvoir theorizing “one is not born but becomes a woman” (23). Johnson’s choice to say they had “become women” poses womanhood as something that happens to a person, rather than something a person would actively claim, further conveying the lack of control these women felt when balancing so many social and cultural pressures to try to form an identity. Johnson accounts Hettie Jones going to have Amiri Baraka’s child alone while he was at a poetry reading and sarcastically writes that “some of us defied death and reproduced” as a way of saying that even though Cowen died, herself and other women faced other types of deaths of identity (Johnson 259). Johnson write “the sixties were never my time” and concludes her memoir saying, “I’m a forty-seven-year-old woman with a permanent sense of impermanence” (261-2). She introduces the sixties as a way of displaying the more wide-spread “revolution” that would come and yet she remains lodged in the liminal space she began to write in (261). Scholars

Johnson and Grace write that “woman-centered Beat literature...anticipated second wave feminism” and that for them the act of writing was “a revolt of personal freedom” (7). Joyce Johnson demonstrates that women were more than just bridges into a new era of writing; their writing was kindling. Their act of writing authentically about their lives and raise the voices of the women around them was their revolution that paved the way for women’s movements in the decades to come.

Anne Waldman wrote most of her work decades after the fire of women’s rebellion was ignited, but her poetry and writing testifies to her allegiance with her earlier Beat sisters. Waldman grew up in the Village, as young as age six she was in a performance theater troupe for children there (Knight 287). She grew up immersed in the Village life. Though she reflects that writing is a field “blatantly dominated by men,” she also notes how she could see writers like Kerouac and Ginsberg as role models and they too encouraged her writing from a young age (Waldman ix). Waldman says, “I was treated extremely well by my male elders... their friendship and support has been a real blessing” (Waldman 290). Waldman even notes that she “never felt an ounce of condescension” from them but we must keep in mind that Waldman was writing in the early 1970s, nearly twenty years about women like di Prima and Cowen were at the heart of Village culture (Waldman 290). Because of the age difference she escaped some of the romantic power dynamics early Beat woman struggled with at least while she was a young poet in the Village. She also struggled to find equality in a romantic relationship but this was less attached to her craft than earlier Beat women who often fell in and out of love with men who had power to make or break their artistic careers. Waldman seeks out what the identity of women is or should be and she stokes the kindling of other Beat woman in her collection *Fast Speaking Woman* published in 1975.

Waldman draws heavily on approximation of Native American, Buddhist, and Celtic chant traditions in her writing, similarly to the earlier Beats. Especially for male Beats, their usage of these forms is at times culturally appropriative. While some studied Buddhism more in depth, taking soul-seeking pilgrimages to the east, many picked and chose what aspects they liked to apply to their own life styles. Rebelling against mainstream culture which was and has been predominately Christian “Beats found a refuge for their restless spirits in the philosophy and practices of Buddhism” (Nisker). For the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the public’s knowledge of practices like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Native American traditions comes from the mouths of the Beats. Kerouac’s famous novel is even titled “The Dharma Bums.” Male Beats would take this ideology and appropriate it to their own goals. Broad concepts like “developing inner wisdom” and “universal compassion” could easily fit into their haphazard lifestyles (Nisker). Taken out of the context of Eastern culture, these religions/practices were turned into tools for male Beats to use against the conformity they saw in Western organized religion. While I still see some aspects of Beat women’s usage of Eastern and Native American traditions as problematic, poets like di Prima and Waldman apply the mixed principles of these traditions toward the collective liberation of women.

Waldman’s “Fast Speaking Woman” and her companion essay, “Fast Speaking Woman & The Dakini Principle,” exemplify how Eastern traditions were invoked towards the purpose of female liberation and exploration of identity. Waldman introduces the poem with an “Invocation” announcing “I am here to sing/ the power of/ poets & lovers/ who lift their hearts in song” (1). Choosing the word “invocation” indicates the spiritual and magical purpose of the poem and serves as a collective call to action, also placing the poem in the context of other epic poetry as far back as Sappho. Waldman invokes the collective for progress in art and women’s

sense of self. Later in the invocation Waldman calls “to modern daughters” and “to sons/ of any color” which represents a desire for equality with a recognition of intersectionality. By choosing an “invocation” instead of a “call to action” or a preface more derived from Western religion, Waldman also attempts to detach her piece from patriarchal structures embedded in Christian traditions. For example, Waldman doesn’t demand that the collective listen to her, but, asks that her words will resonate with others when she writes “May you be roused/ by a/ fast-trembling/ song” (1). She also doesn’t claim the song as only her own by choosing “by” instead of “my” “song.” Waldman thus builds off the style of earlier Beat women to put forth the idea of existing as all women and one woman at once. She draws from Eastern religion as a way of avoiding Western structures associated with oppression. Waldman pays homage to her spiritual guide, Maria Sabina, a Mazartec shamaness, before beginning the poem, which shows that Waldman at least tries to give credit to the cultures from which her style was derived (2).

“Fast-Speaking Woman” acknowledges women’s historical lack of identity and then embraces the unknown as a source of power. This brings us back to Simone de Beauvoir who, while trying to grasp a definition of femininity writes, “It is typically described in vague and shimmering terms borrowed from a clairvoyant’s vocabulary” (de Beauvoir 23). Waldman embraces the vagueness of femininity by honing in on the multicentricity of being a woman; listing or “chanting” pages of different types of women (“shouting woman,” “speech woman, atmosphere woman” “doll woman” and so on) (3). Waldman challenges the characterization of women as empty when she writes “because I am air/ let me try you with my magic power” (3). She hangs onto the “clairvoyant’s vocabulary” and balances the incredibly indistinct magical images with more concrete depictions like “Yoruba woman” or “the old old Polish woman raking & gathering/ leaves mid-October just outside Chicago” (21). The collective of these listed women

achieve the goal of unraveling the notion that there could ever be a definition for woman or that women need to define themselves to men, instead Waldman's poem exists in place of a definition and instead is a celebration of the lack of concreteness which is a woman. Waldman celebrates women's ability to connect to each other and by doing so attacks patriarchal values of independence and individuality.

Waldman's style connects the loudness and volume of iconic pre-war women writers and the deep intimacy and sisterhood present in early Beat women's work. Waldman's essay "Fast Speaking Woman" & the Dakini Principle" details her goals of channeling the voice of all women. Waldman writes "I was focused on my own femaleness and, by extension any woman's" which explains the technique used by other Beat women, the idea that by portraying the uninhibited-self (emotions, feelings, thoughts) the writer could connect to readers on an intimate level (36). Waldman deconstructs the value of individuality, writing, "Any woman might be thinking, saying, the same thing I was to say and name," which celebrates the possibility of shared thoughts specifically of women (36). She draws a direct connection to Modernist Gertrude Stein, when she references wanting to access "every woman's psyche" "bottom nature" "as Gertrude Stein calls it" (Waldman 36). Waldman later compares her work to a piece by Stein called "Lifting Belly" again conveying her desires to connect to that loudness an autonomous figure like Stein achieved, something not achieved by early Beat women. Waldman goes deeper into her inspiration from the shamaness Maria Sabina and writes that she wanted to uncover "the healing properties of the human mind" though use of "sacred language" like the refrain "water that cleans as I go" which was directly taken from Sabina's work (37-8).

Poetry has sacred and healing qualities in the work of other Beat women; their work is a prayer for each other (both consciously and subconsciously). For example, Elisa Cowen

frequently detailed her dreams in poem form as an attempt to understand them and Hettie Jones wrote dozens of short stories and poetry full of hopes for the future lives of her children.

Waldman's poem illustrates a shift in the volume of Beat women's writing, similar in tone to Diane di Prima's "Loba" which would also come out in the late 1970s and has been referred to as "the female version of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (Quinn 22). At the threshold of the Beat Kingdom, Beat women often "prayed" alone. Cowen's poems weren't even removed from her notebook till after her death and Jones only published her writing decades later. These women are so often thought as radical women, black-stockings wearing heroines who were drastically different than mainstream American women who were going to college for their "Mrs." degrees, but if we listen to the fragmented identities they express in their writing we begin to see that the Beat woman was not so far from the average white-middle-class woman of the 1950s. Beat women broke out of the jello mold, but they weren't alone in the freedom they desired.

While not every housewife left to chase rebel boys across the country or smoked peyote in apartments in New York, there was a collective feeling of dissolution felt by women who felt themselves fly backwards. The reverberations of the women who shouted at the turn of the century did not offer them a path to finding that voice that they had. There were women as iconic and innovative as Gertrude Stein and Edna Saint Vincent Millay in the 1950s, only no one was listening to them. While the New Women artists of the teens do not represent all women of that decade (certainly lower class women did not have the tools or opportunities New Women did) there still existed a pervasive amplitude to their speech that was closely linked to the suffrage movement. Not only had their bird flown backwards by the 1950s as far as openness of speech, but, there was also the ghost of previous women to further fragment the identity of women coming of age in the 1950s. With the idea that history only moves forward these women were

unclear about their own status/position as women. They had the right to vote, which signaled metaphorical equality but the lives they lived day to day projected a very jarring reality of inequality.

Waldman writes one of her favorite quotes from her study of Sabina's work is "Language makes the dying return to life" (40). I was particularly drawn to the choice of the word "dying" instead of "dead." "Dying" invokes the idea of process, of continuation. Beat women are not "dead" and neither is their writing. The process of their "death" has been decades of inadequate scholarship repeating the patriarchal violence that was inflicted on them through their lives; each sentence focusing on them only as wives, mistresses, and sometimes whores adds to the process of their "dying." The other important thing about "dying" being a process rather than a state is that it can in fact be undone. It will take more than one paper but if we continue to read Beat women's work and recognize them as having been silenced and not silent we can better understand the greater history they were part of and the crucial role they played in the fragmented history of the identity of American women.



## Chapter 2: Elise in Wonderland

I think an author study is the natural next step towards a greater understanding and appreciation of Beat women, the question then becomes why have I picked to focus on Elise Cowen? Cowen never had a poem published in her lifetime, but, for women writers especially, I think it is crucial to take unpublished work more seriously. By viewing publication as the barometer for measuring individual's impact, scholarship alienates the most marginalized and often most radical voices of a movement, thus has overlooked the impact of Cowen's creative work on the history of American poetry and the Beat movement. Cowen's writing is evidence of the resistance force that thrived among women who may or may not ever have achieved more wide-spread recognition. Cowen's best known currently for her suicide and affair with Allen Ginsberg and I want to put that up front so that we can move forward and more importantly, so that we can more past biography and appreciate her contribution to the Beat movement. Unlike Cowen, most Beat women continued their careers long after the peak of the counter culture scene in 1950s-60s Greenwich Village. Their persistent vocal resistance to gender norms helped pave the way for the next wave of women poets and for women and gender non-conforming poets today. Because Cowen did not have the opportunity to continue to pursue her poetry, as present day gender and feminist scholars, we need to pursue and learn from the depth of her poetry that is left.

Elise Cowen's writing calls on us to reevaluate how we conceptualize women artists even today. Elise Cowen was a queer, disabled, woman who wrote boldly and honestly about herself. Engaging with her work, not only do we gain insight into the oppression individuals at these intersections of identities faced in the 1950s but also an insight into the nuances and intricacies of gender and body still relevant and radical today. Her life has long been reduced to another

suicide story like other renowned women writers such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. In most brief biographies of Cowen her mental illness pervades her narrative; her poems seen as only extensions of her depression or “neurotic” episodes and her suicide a great metaphor for artistic struggle and non-conformity.

I want to center my analysis on Cowen’s writing while also acknowledging how biography can help us better understand the position Cowen writes from. Cowen’s writing on mental illness both acknowledges and refuses shame. mimics and explodes expectations of her gender. Her overall unflinching self-exposure in her poetry puts her body on display as an assertion of her own humanity as well as an act of rebellion. Elise Cowen’s examines 1950s conformity through imaginative exposure and revisions to her body. She criticizes and redefines the sacred, celebrating queerness and female sexuality.

### **How Do We Remember Elise Cowen?**

Before I critique Cowen’s peers’ depictions of her, I wanted to foreground this chapter by looking at what role creating poetry played in her identity. I think it’s important to separate the locus of her writing from how her peers perceived her, especially because a lot of times her peers only write about her when she was having some of her most severe depressive episodes, in doing so they eclipse the fact that she experienced a full range of human emotions like anyone else. Cowen’s illustrates that she refused to be dominated by her mental illness while still acknowledging the constraints her disability put on her physical body. I think we must approach Cowen’s writing from a disability studies perspective to resist able-ist impulses to over-simplify the role her mental illness played in her writing. One disability studies theorist, Ann Mollow, explores the idea of depression as a “disease entity” (290). By using “disease” Mollow conveys how depression is perceived as pervading through all aspects of an individual’s life, “infecting”

all facets of that person. Furthermore, the word “entity” illustrates how, like in present biographies of Cowen, depression is an “entity” that supplants her personality.

Cowen’s piece “I Don’t Want to Make Your Poem” from *Elise Cowen Poems and Fragments* celebrates her ability to assert her own personality and connection to humanity, refusing to be dominated by her depression:

I don’t want to make you poem out of dead  
jonquils & stored crocus bulbs that may never bloom  
again but the shocks of memories that will live again (Cowen3).

I was drawn to the decisiveness that the speaker displays. The speaker asserts, “I don’t want,” which forefront’s the connection between the writer and poem’s the speaker. The writer (Cowen) declares control and intention. The ambiguous “your” opens the poem to the reader, forging an intimate connection as if to divulge a secret. “Your poem” also lays out that the speaker doesn’t write for herself, but directly for the reader, for the collective of readers, for the sake of intimate human connection. By extension, saying “your poem” reflects a greater goal of writing; it reflects a belief that writing is an act that connects the writer to infinite readers.

Cowen’s images of “dead/ jonquils” and “store crocus bulbs” are packed with social and historical significance for women (Cowen 3). Cowen (along with many other poets) often uses flowers to symbolize women’s bodies. The impermanence of these flowers therefore offers up the poet’s own mortality. More importantly, though, the speaker’s attitude toward mortality is not in the least bit fearful or morbid. The speaker is displaying the fragility of her body while at the same time taking control of her voice. Jonquils are the flower that was used during suffrage campaigns, so the “dead jonquil” also holds a double meaning related to the state of women’s rights (Husted Harper 99). Specifically, the yellow jonquil connoted female friendship and sisterhood under the suffrage cause. In *Gentle Warriors*, Stuhler describes a rally in which

women wore “yellow jonquils for the supporters and red jonquils for the opponents” of suffrage. (112). Either way, the jonquil represented a position in the debate and the red jonquils were adopted “in reaction” to the yellow ones being used as symbols of suffrage support. (Stuhler 225). The “dead jonquil” can be interpreted as the speaker’s acknowledgement of the regressive state of gender conformity in the 1950s and lack of women visibility. Her poem recognizes the death and life (life as displayed in the “crocus bulbs”) of waves of the fight for gender equality, and, above the constraints of her time she asserts her poem will live again. The speaker looks to a future reader of any gender who works towards equality. Despite her inevitable demise her poem will live beyond her. More than that, the poem will contain an aspect of herself she had control over and through that her memories will “live again” in other women who wanted and sought gender equality (Cowen 3). I provide this close reading to illustrate the lack of recognition we give, especially to female writers, about the calculated and precise nature of personal and emotional reflections. We see a poem about depression as the expression of an emotion while failing to recognize the deliberate nature of the word choice and depiction of those emotions. When compared to Modernist women, we see the evidence of the recursive state of women’s rights. For Modernist poets like Millay, scholarship pays attention to their precise word choice partially because of the way women of that era have been more adopted into the cannon but also because they employed more traditional masculine poetic forms. While scholars methodically analyze Millay’s line-breaks and use of enjambment they don’t when it comes to the more free verse styles of Beat women and a lot of that can be related to how Beat women radically broke away from more poetic structures.

In the previous chapter, I touched on the problematic characterizations of mentally ill women writers; going forward I will draw on the essay *Narrative Prothesis and Materiality*

*Metaphor* by Mitchell and Snyder to explore the language scholars have used to construct Elise Cowen. Their essay is a foundational text for disability studies and explores how authors use disability as a literary device in their fictions. Their theory is also applicable to narratives constructed by historians and scholars and provides a framework to interrogate the language Cowen's contemporaries used to describe her. Mitchell and Snyder suggest that a person's disability functions in narratives either as a "stock feature of characterization" or "an opportunistic metaphorical device" (205). Beat men recall Cowen's mental illness functions as her defining factor. They often even romanticize her mental illness, especially her detachment from reality. In a culture steeped in hyper-masculinity; Beat men quickly categorized women artists around them by their superficial attributes, making them caricatures and seeing them as disposable. In Ginsberg's essay on writing "Kaddish" he doesn't even name Cowen as his typist; he calls her "the girl I knew for many years and had fitful love relations with" (Trigilio 120). It's relevant to note that men of the Beat generation had huge mental health struggles as well. In fact, Ginsberg bonded with Cowen over having spent time in the same mental institution. Yet, because he's a male poet his defining characteristics are his style and poetic voice and not his illness (Knight 149). Cowen's characterization by Beat men reflects a degree of deliberate exclusion. It's easy to look back and see misogyny operating on a subconscious level, that women simply didn't have the means to keep up with the male writers. I'm here to say that Beat men had a choice and failed to support most women writers at the dawn of the movement. Lucien Carr even started calling Cowen both "eclipse" and "ellipse," because of Cowen's reclusive tendencies (Trigilio 121). Trigilio writes that this nickname makes concrete "the marginal status bestowed upon her work after her death" damning Cowen to the periphery of movement she already felt isolated from because of the Beat's hyper masculinity (121). In a time

when Beat men had the ability to give voice to Beat women this nickname reflects that Beat men didn't take women's presence in the movement seriously. They viewed women as almost novelties to be amused by.

This brings me to how men discuss Cowen's suicide. Beat men paint Cowen's mental illness as a sort of glorious rebellion, comparing to "Alice in Wonderland"; beautifully disconnected from the harsh, cruel, and capitalist world. Cowen is even called "Beat Alice" in the collection *Women of the Beat Generation* which, Knight brings to the forefront of her character Cowen's disconnection from reality (Knight 141). This sensationalist narrative falls perfectly into line with Beat men's violent and masculine rejection of all things "mainstream." Leo Skir writes that Cowen was "reaching for an invisible microphone" and Herbert Hunke wrote that she "must have been reaching for something, but not a prosaic as a microphone" (Trigilio xv). This repeated element of "reaching" depicts Cowen as striving for some new level of existence free from the constraints of cold war conformity, perhaps trying to speak and dying in the process. While madness and women's rebellion have often been paired together (everyone's read *The Yellow Wallpaper*, yes?) many feminist and disability scholars have further examined the implications of pairing rebellion with insanity. One theorist, Donaldson explores this intersection in *The Corpus of the Madwoman*. He writes, "Using madness to represent women's rebellion has undesirable effects" such as "diminishing the value of mentally ill women's struggles" (Donaldson 100). This characterization of Cowen is most detrimental to reading her work because of how it diminishes the elements of struggle and resistance in her poetry. Al Alvarez explores literary suicides in his book *The Savage God*, introducing the work with an examination of Sylvia Plath's suicide. Alvarez reflects "Her suicide becomes the whole point on the story" and I think this starkly parallels how scholars have constructed Cowen (40). I

tie these two women poet's suicides together because the narratives surrounding them illustrate agency being taken away from not just the women but also how their work is read. The rebellion is not in their deaths; it's boldly and brilliantly in their writing. Many Modernist women who likewise struggled with mental illness, some dying of suicide as well. But, because of the way Modernist women's work has been more canonized and balanced with biography, these women's works are less likely to be diminished to their struggles. Millay struggled with mental <sup>2</sup>illness and this is never predominant in any of her biographies. Even lesser known Modernist women like Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven died by suicide and this was only a paragraph or so at the end of her collection *Body Sweats*.

I have found even feminist scholars will use Cowen's life and her suicide to exemplify the dire situation of women during the 1950s. While somewhat true that Cowen's death can be partially attributed to lack of resources and support for mentally ill women I also think that using her in this way only turns her into a "metaphorical device" rather than a human (Mitchell and Snyder 205). While important to discuss how oppression played a role her life struggles, it's also an over-simplification that serves the purpose of promoting an agenda rather than exploring Cowen as a complex individual. Therefore, I think Elise Cowen and other women of the Beat generation who would die by suicide shouldn't just be used as examples of "causalities" of the era. Accounts of her life always illustrate her descending into madness and then death. In Leo Skir's piece "Elise Cowen: A Brief Memoir of the Fifties" he uses her death as a framing for the "story" where he talks about his relationship to Cowen. Even the title of the piece "A Brief Memoir of the Fifties" conveys Cowen's role as a metaphor to represent the entirety of an era.

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<sup>2</sup> While not explicit in her letters Millay does account suffering from a fatigue and a "small nervous breakdown" as she gained fame around 1920. (Poetry Foundation).

He begins by picking up the phone and hearing “she jumped out the window. From her parent’ apartment. The seventh story” and ends again repeating the exact same line in italics as the beginning (Skir). This repetition traps Cowen in a cycle so that her death is replayed repeatedly. I’m not suggesting we ignore that she was mentally ill; I’m suggesting that struggle not be used as a metaphor for the fate of rebellious women. If we truly want to embrace Beat women’s genius we need to look at Cowen’s unpublished work as part of the voice of the Beats era.

In “Strange Lives, Chosen Lives: The Beat Art of Joyce Johnson” Beat scholar, Ann Douglas, attests that Joyce Johnson doesn’t have the same “go-for-broke desperation of her friend, the poet Elise Cowen” (xiii). This is just one example of how Cowen is used as a metaphor or antithesis even by women scholars and Beat women. Johnson, because of her success and “level-headed” nature is held up as “the good” woman artist: the “sane” woman. Douglas goes on to say women like Cowen and Joan Burroughs “didn’t survive in part because they internalized their male Beat models too intimately” (xvi). This analysis is not only a form of victim blaming but also adds to the “eclipsing” of Beat women’s autonomy and plays into the notion that Beat women just wanted to be imitate Beat men.

While many Beat women have written about Cowen, I want to analyze Joyce Johnson’s characterization because of how Johnson situates as her own antithesis in *Minor Characters*. The image Johnson paints of Cowen doesn’t delve into Cowen’s nuanced character, but rather reduces her to a counterpoint of Johnson’s own story. Cowen is even depicted visually as the opposite to Johnson. Johnson introduces Cowen with “dark hair” “ungraciously scraped back with a rubber band” and with “acne” that “flared under the ragged bangs on her forehead” (51). These are oddly severe words to describe Cowen’s appearance. Words like “flared” and “ragged” both actively assert Cowen’s discombobulation and lack of adherence to female standards of



beauty. Johnson did not have to choose language that depicts Cowen's state this drastically negative. This is Johnson's tone through the entire novel when depicting Cowen, constantly painting Cowen as "dark" (55). Johnson confesses that Cowen thought of herself "as ugly" (55). I think these characterizations not only reflect a degree of internalized misogyny but also the extent to which Cowen's mental illness is an entity that possesses her, eclipsing her own personality, leaving Cowen in the "darkness." There are, of course, moments in *Minor Characters* where Johnson touches on Cowen's humanity, but the sustained tragic depiction is damning. One moment when Johnson sees Cowen's apartment is crucial because Johnson conveys her own contrasting emotions. At first Johnson reflects a feeling of "sordidness" and "disgust" about Cowen's apartment, but then explains, "I envied the courage it [the room] represented" (63). Cowen had achieved, precarious as it was, her own space.

I want to briefly reflect how this instance is related to Virginia's Wolf's famous essay "A Room of One's Own" especially because of how much Beat women struggled to have physical space. Virginia Woolf suggests that being able to have a space (a room) to write and economic security could give women conditions to be able to pursue artistic expression. Johnson follows her previous comments about Cowen's apartment, saying, "nineteen-year-old girls did not leave home except for dormitories or marriage"(63). Johnson is attesting to the lack of access to individual space for Beat women. Space for women was more limited not only by economic and physical constraints, but, also because cold-war era misogyny that promoted men taking up more space in the public sphere, including radical artistic and activist spaces. Cowen was wildly brave for attempting to make it on her own but the ability to have a real "room of one's own" is more complicated for her another Beat women than just having an apartment. Drawing back on our Modernist women, many of them had their own houses even. Neith Boyce, even while married,

had her own place separate from her husband (Eby 135). While this wasn't the norm in the 1910s, autonomy for women was certainly valued. When Gertrude Stein's addressed a women's college in Baltimore when she boasts "it is here that for the first time that one is thrown wholly on themselves" (Stein 11). In that era, there was a celebration of independent women "space owning" women, where in the 1950s being on your own is the source of great fear, struggle, and agony. For Cowen, she struggled with social isolation while also not wanting to live with her parents who want to control her and more specifically her body and sexuality. In her journals fragments of letters she never sent to her mother are often alongside poetry that confronts conflicting concepts of motherhood, illuminating some of the topics Cowen struggled to address with her mother. After a brief letter where Cowen tells her mother "Third day of spring & the snow is falling" and then goes on to detail the weather she then crosses out the letter and writes "Oh Sweet Lavender Petal Crocus Mother" in which she explores the relationship between sexuality, the sacred, and motherhood. (Trigilio 124-125). This moment of recognition of the value of space from *Minor Characters* is so pivotal because Johnson doesn't take much space to recognize Cowen's bravery to reject societal expectations. Rather than focusing on Cowen's inability to maintain living on her own because of her mental health, it's important to acknowledge her resilience that is highlighted in this moment, as she moves out of her parent's home at nineteen to be a writer. Her seldom noted tenacity is highlighted best in her poetry. Cowen's refusal to hide her mental struggles in her writing rejects the stigma against mentally ill people and the pressure for them to conform to neurotypical standards.

### Mimicry & Mental Illness

While in the last decades poets have begun writing more freely about mental illness, in the 1950s when Cowen was writing, mental illness was a huge societal taboo. Her writing about depression and suicide is not just part of her own catharsis—it’s daring and exists as an act of rebellion and bravery. The 1950s was a time before activism for mentally ill people existed, let alone humane treatment for mentally ill people. Mental institutions operated in many instances similarly to prisons and “shock treatments” for everything from “homosexuality” to “depression” were the norm. (Lewis 342). A sociological study from the 1950s, Phelan et. al concluded, “fearful and rejecting attitudes toward people with mental illnesses were common” (188). Organizations for “Mad Rights” activism like the “Insane Liberation Front” would not gain momentum until the 1970s (Lewis 342-3). The intersection of disability and womanhood creates a situation of extremely compromised autonomy. Both disabled people and women are infantilized and dehumanized, and, therefore, these identities compound to strip disabled women of their voices and personhood.

Cowen’s piece “I Want to Dress and Go Out” exhibits Cowen’s bold honesty about her mental health struggles and was published posthumously in the *City Lights Journal* 2 in 1964 because of the efforts of her friend Leo Skir. In “I Want to Dress and Go Out” Cowen articulates the layers of her psychological struggles, giving a snap shot of what living with mental illness feels like. Cowen also contemplates her emotions in the context of Buddhist spirituality to feel peace despite tumultuous thoughts:

I want to dress and go out and board a bus pick up a check & file an  
 Unemployment claim.  
 Body, why that funny feeling—dread  
 Of what—  
 Death? Death so often desired?  
 “Death of mind”—peace—not the dissolution into the top soil. (Cowen 9).

Cowen compiles conjunctions in the first two lines to create the effect of the constant movement and rush of the city. Juxtaposing the first lines fast pace with the latter lines fragmentation and pauses, Cowen conveys the dissonance between the pace of the world vs. her internal self. The speaker wants “to dress” which illustrates her desire to perform normalcy to enter the public. Cowen depicts how mental disability can impact one’s ability to support themselves, as she struggles to “board a bus” and “file an/unemployment claim.” Cowen’s speaker is dealing with the internal conflict of what McRuer calls “compulsory able-bodiedness” which compels individuals to hide their disabilities, especially sometimes “invisible” disabilities like mental illness (303). By articulating the sensation of the body which holds her back, the speaker refuses “compulsory able-bodiedness” despite grappling with wanting to be able to navigate the city with the ease of a neurotypical person. McRuer further explains the implications of “compulsory able-bodiedness” and notes how the compulsion creates the “appearance of choice” to overcome mental health obstacles, in “a system in which there is actually no choice” (McRuer).

Cowen refutes the idea that there is a choice involved in grappling with mental illness by slowing down the poem’s pace as the speaker expresses conflicting emotions and explores the connection between herself and her body. The third line begins with a pause on the word “Body,” causing the reader to halt and recognize the speaker addressing her own body. After the first two lines the remaining portion of the poem fragments speech to reflect the scattered process of attempting to articulate experiencing depression. Instead of attempting to conform her body to tasks of the day or hiding her disability, the speaker seeks to understand her body. Cowen’s stylistic choice again refutes the idea that mentally ill people need to push to “overcome” barriers in the same way a neurotypical person would. McRuer notes that able-bodied culture tends to ask, “In the end wouldn’t you rather be more like me?” (304). The act of

recognizing and allowing herself to feel the emotions that accompany depression as she asks, “why that funny feeling—dread” is an act of rebellion against that compulsion. Able-bodied society sees disability as “a problem in need of solution” and Cowen evades that pressure and allows the speaker to pursue an understanding of herself (Mitchell and Snyder 205). The speaker ponders her suicidal ideation through the lens of popular Buddhist ideology to find deeper meaning in her contemplations of death.

Instead of hiding her thoughts about suicide in metaphors, Cowen’s speaker confronts those feelings directly. During 1950s suicide was still illegal and even today suicide “is forbidden” and seen as a selfish choice (Szasz 14). Cowen challenges even modern scholarship about suicide by focusing on the emotional and bodily experience rather than the desire to execute the act. Szasz writes in his critic of suicide prevention strategies, “Neither the act of killing oneself nor the inclination to commit the deed is a disease” (14). The speaker asks, “Death?” as if to question the desires of her own body (Cowen 9). To be questioning one’s self is powerful because the speaker acknowledges a disconnect between different aspects of herself. This can also relate back to the 1950s construction of femininity and that fragmentation of identity. The speaker refuses conformity by articulating that uncertainty of her own body and life. The speaker continues by reflecting on the cyclical nature of suicidal thoughts asking, “Death so often desired?” (9). In the final line of the poem Cowen refers to “Death of the mind,” which is an allusion to Buddhist practice derived from the writings of Mazu. This concept from Mazu has been translated multiple ways but Mazu contemplates “death of the mind” as well as “birth of the mind” as working in tandem, liberating the internal self (Mazu). By making this tie to “peace” and clarifying that the speaker is not thinking of morbid details like “the dissolution into the top soil” the speaker gets at the root of her feelings of dread, and rests on her desire to have peace in

a world moving so fast (9). Her exploration of mental illness is nuanced and incorporates both the impact of the pressures of the outside world as well as the physical/personal components of mental illness.

Confessional poetry isn't the only format Cowen uses to critique mainstream culture and more specifically how medicine and psychiatry addressed mental illness in the 1950s. Cowen's speakers in "Dream" and "I Took the Skins of Corpses" both adopt drastically different tones from her more confessional style poetry to critique of systems of oppression for women and mentally ill people's bodies. In these pieces, Cowen employs "mimicry" as a technique of subversion (Irigaray 795). While Irigaray described "mimicry" as a "assuming the feminine role deliberately" I extend this to Cowen assuming the role of the mentally ill person or the "neurotic" deliberately (795) (Cowen 4). Donaldson also explains that often psychiatry "pathologizes women" and society sees "symbolic failure of the self-determined individual" (100, 113). Cowen draws attention to the pathology of the feminine as well as refuting mental illness as a failure of self-determination. Cowen's "Dream" emphasizes the patient and doctor imbalance of power as well as the commanding role of the parents. Historically, patients were given little say at all in their own treatment. Cowen's speaker begins "Dream" by relinquishing authority saying "Can't remember all of it," which parody's society's mistrust of mentally ill people's narratives (4). The speaker then "infantilizes herself" by calling her parents "Mommy & Daddy" who take the speaker "to the doctor" (Cowen 4). The speaker mimics the infantilization of women and mentally ill people to illustrate the extreme powerlessness individuals felt within the patriarchal realm of medical authority. The presence of the speaker's parents can also represent social stigmas and impact mental illness had on families as the speakers says her parents are "disgusted" with her and "tired" (4). The action to go to the doctor

as initiated by the speaker's parents, and, therefore is also emblematic of the drive to find solutions to "fix" individuals who are disabled rather than help those individuals learn coping mechanisms.

The speaker's interaction with the doctor extremely unnerving, as the doctor "sits on a bed & strips a bandage from his long leg showing/ a drying gash" (Cowen 4). I disagree slightly with how Tony Trigilio interprets the patient doctor interaction as Trigilio comments "sharing this wound in the poem is a welcome surprise to the speaker" (128). I think the shift from the focus being directed at the patient to the doctor revealing a wound is meant to shock the reader. Trigilio doesn't touch on the drastic difference Cowen illustrates between the visible suffering of a "wound" and the mental suffering of the "neurotic" patient. While he notes the gash becomes the "standard to which the female patient's sickness is measured," I think the wound is more than a standard—it's a direct invalidation of her suffering (Trigilio 129). The doctor also shows his gash "After talking" to the speaker's parents who are "disgusted" with her (Cowen 4). This connection is important because I interpret the wound as a phallogocentric illustration of real suffering, shoved in the face of the speaker. I can't see the patient and doctor as sharing the wound because of the lack of agency the speaker is forced to look at this gash. The reveal of the wound itself is an act of violence because of the gory nature of the "drying" wound (4). Cowen uses morbid imagery, like the doctor's wound, to draw attention to instances of structural violence against women and mentally ill people.

### Constructing The Beat Woman

Her longer poem “I Took the Skin of Corpses” explores multiple intersections of structural entrapment for a disabled woman trying to piece herself together as an autonomous writer. In “I Took the Skin of Corpses” Cowen employs a more formal structure of loosely rhyming (ABCB) quatrains to create a sing-song tone, dissonant with the grotesque imagery of corpses. The poem features a repetition at the first line of every stanza as the speaker returns to the bodies of corpses to take something else. I will include the whole poem here because of how important the complete work is for analysis and because of how under represented Cowen’s work has been as a part for the Beat generation:

I took the skins of corpses  
 And dyed them blue for dreams  
 Oh, I can wear these everywhere  
 I sat home in my jeans.  
 I cut the hair of corpses  
 And wove myself a sheath  
 Finer than silk or wool I thought  
 And shivered underneath.

I cut the ears of corpses  
 To make myself a hood—  
 Warmer than forget-me-nots—  
 I paid for that in blood.

I robbed the eyes of corpses  
 So I could face the sun  
 But all the days had cloudy syies  
 And I had lost my own.

From the sex of corpses  
 I sewed a union suit  
 Esther, Solomon, God himself  
 Were humbler than my cuch.

I took the thoughts of corpses  
 To by my daily needs  
 But all the good in all the stores  
 Were neatly labeled Me.



I borrowed heads of corpses  
 To do my reading by  
 I found my name on every page  
 And every word a lie.

A machine from bones of corpses  
 Would play upon my human love  
 The only sound the keys would make  
 Were the hissings of a dove.

I dug among the endless graves  
 I thought my time well-filled  
 The mirror giggles when I look  
 I'm bald and blind and quilled.

I thought the corpses vital  
 That the risk involved ensured  
 The stuff that I had taken  
 Be precious marble pure.

But when tempted by a heart  
 (Replacing it with small jewels)  
 I found it bloodied as a mind  
 And mine became a ghouls.

Now when I meet the spirits  
 In whose trappings I am jailed  
 They buy me wine or read a book  
 No one can make my bail.

When I become a spirit  
 (I'll have to wait for life)  
 I'll sell *my* deadly body  
 To the student doctor's knife. (Cowen 33-35)

After taking from the corpses and the speaker then modifies the material for her own benefits.

This image can be a metaphor for many aspects of Beat woman having to piece together their

livelihood and identities. In relation to Beat women's lack of role models, I think the harvesting of parts from these corpses can symbolize the speaker's desperation to piece together a

"Frankenstein" sort of existence—looking to the "endless graves" of dead men in a search of the

masculine power they possessed which the speaker will never be able to wield in the same way. While the corpses are not directly gendered male, they are used to allude to patriarchal structures like medical institutions and western religion, thus are connected to a tradition of patriarchal power.

The speaker's attempts to harvest from dead "maleness" are used to both exemplify women's fragmentation and need to use maleness to gain validity. The figures she chooses are important; "Solomon" and "God" being emblems of patriarchy enacted through religion. Esther here is the exception because she is a heroine of the Hebrew bible, having stood up to King Haman in defense of the Jews (Sasson 335-6). Sasson notes how iterations of the story of Esther focus on her charm and explains that her mannerisms depart from the traditional roles of women. This feminine assertiveness might be why Cowen invokes the image of Esther rather than another male figure from the bible. In addition, Sasson describes that in Esther's iterations with the king there are "erotic implications because of the submissive tone she adopts" which would directly relate to Cowen's themes of having to perform for men (341). Because the speaker views the bible as a patriarchal structure she would therefore also view women of the bible as also constructed by the male gaze. Esther is probably one of the most predominant women of the Hebrew bible for her autonomy and therefore she exists on a similar plain of "humbleness" as God and Solomon. With these "corpses" she raises up her own "sex." A "union suit" is an undergarment and therefore the speaker suggests is constructing a sex to hide behind or to put on top of her "real" body which she doesn't reveal. This moment illustrates the vulnerability Beat women's physical bodies because of how closely their bodies were tethered to their work as artists.

“I Took the Skins of Corpses” directly relates to the situation of the female Beat poet and her lineage with the previous wave of Modernist women. As I discussed in my previous chapter; a lot of the success of the Modernist women can be traced to their ability to appropriate and tactfully alter masculine forms, specifically drawing on the Romantics. Modernists careful subversion of male forms helped them disseminate their messages. The Beat woman is different because she desires to rupture structures of masculine writing entirely and yet she still must go to these corpses to “borrow” and “rob” them for power. The “corpse” while representing patriarchal tradition simultaneously illustrates the decay of that tradition. Therefore, while exploring her own entrapment the speaker also insinuates a future in which women artists would not have to turn to these “corpses.” One specific stanza evokes the core of the speaker’s struggle to articulate a voice which is free of oppression when she describes borrowing the “heads of corpses.” The speaker clearly ties the corpses to the masculine writing tradition with the line “to do my reading by.” Not only that, the speaker vocalizes how the “heads of corpses” have misrepresented her experience as a woman in the lines “I found my name on every page/ And every word a lie.” By attesting to this “lie” the speaker take power in rewriting the script the corpses/men have written for her body. She takes control over the narrative of her body through the act of writing, mimicry, and finally by the end of the poem she depicts the speaker’s liberation from a body.

Mimicking the expectations of women and the mentally ill, Cowen writes lines like “The mirror giggles when I look/ I’m bald and blind and quilled.” The word choice of “quilled” seems to invert the more majestic comparisons of women to birds by using a more grotesque or ugly word. The mirror “giggles” at the speaker’s ugliness which symbolizes the gaze of the outside world at a woman who isn’t perfectly attractive by mainstream standards. By vocalizing the mirror moment, the speaker regains some agency over her own “ugliness.” Later, she reflects on

her heart “became a ghoul’s” because of how much of herself she replaced with the parts of corpses, further exemplifying the inability for women to be adequate even when appropriating masculine power. Women still become “ghouls” or “monsters” as Gilbert and Gubar would phrase that female archetype of a woman who lacks conventional beauty and asserts autonomy (812). Referring to her body as “deadly” in the final stanza further illustrates the speaker’s understanding of the threat of autonomous women.

### **Marxist Feminist Themes**

Cowen’s criticisms of capitalism, exemplified in “I Took the Skins of Corpses,” are much more effective than the devices used by male Beat poets. Cowen illustrates the link between industrialization and the oppression of the female body. Male Beats refute capitalism because they view consumerism as emasculating. For instance, Allen Ginsberg attests his generation (the Beat generation) has “burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism” (Ginsberg 4). The burning of the arms illustrating a masculine tolerance for pain, calling capitalism a “haze” instead of attesting to the violence of capitalism. Male Beats see capitalism as something that obscures finding true knowledge and true self, thus why Ginsberg calls capitalism a “haze.” A “haze” is not even malicious; a “haze” is an irritation which is how white Beat men view structures of oppression because they have a completely different relationship with oppression than women or people of color. A poet like Cowen doesn’t even invoke the words capitalism or communism, but, sustains a more nuanced and thoughtful critique of the system by illustrating the mechanization of bodies.

“I Took the Skins of Corpses” critiques industrial factory production by centering individual creation. Within a capitalist system, the speaker is attempting to regain a control of her “labor power” by constructing herself body. (Marx 659). Still, she needs to use these

patriarchal structures and symbols to articulate herself, causing her to feel a loss of identity. She describes this loss in the line “I found my name of every page/ And every word a lie.” Both the speaker and the proletariat experience a disconnection between their labor and their product through which they themselves become a “commodity” (Marx 660). While the speaker is not a laborer; she uses this parallel to note how capitalism incorporates women’s bodies like those of the working class, as parts of the “machine” of production. The first direct reference to labor force in the poem is the “union suit” because of the union’ suite’s historical relation to lower class workers. (“Reforming Fashion”). Cowen draws more attention to the mechanical imagery by starting the eighth stanza with “A machine from bones of corpses” thus breaking the repetition of “I” beginning the previous stanzas. This shift signals the speaker’s realization of her lack of agency over her physical body because of these modifications. The choice of the word “machine” of corpses to designate the poem’s shift in tone reinforces the direct relationship between industrialization and gender oppression.

The speaker eventually must leave her body to find freedom, thus commenting how the female body is unable to escape discipline because of the artistic restrictions on it and the punishment/structural violence towards the body when women tried to reject gender norms. Cowen illustrates this punishment by having her speaker’s heart turn into a “ghoul’s” and her being “jailed” by spirits. In the final stanza, even as the speaker breaks out of her body she notes “I’ll sell my deadly body/ To the student doctor’s knife” (Cowen 35). The italic “my” implies a sarcasm to the idea of the speaker having ever own her own body, seeing as she spends her life constructing it from the parts of corpses. The “student doctor” is likely about the medical schools in the city which collected donated bodies for practice. The act of selling is also ironic because of how much she has had to “sell” her body throughout her life. The act of selling reinforces the

theme of the commodification of women's bodies. Cowen has the speaker sell her body to the "student doctor's knife" as a reference to the powerlessness and objectification felt by women in their experiences within the 1950s-medical/psychiatric system as I discussed in "Dream." The speaker's body will therefore be inspected and used to learn on because of their transaction. This action symbolizes to how society prods and inspects women's bodies, inspecting the speaker even after she dies which further solidifies the speaker's lack of bodily autonomy. Sadly, Cowen's own life is emblematic of lack of bodily agency after death as her suicide scene has been written repeatedly for various purposes. In the final stanza, Cowen has tied together both her Marxist criticism and examination of how women's work is tied to their bodies.

### **Suffrage Lineage**

Something I find alluring about Cowen's poetry is how she's able weave her poems as a matrix of mimicry, honesty, and obscurity; she juggles that combination throughout her different speakers. Cowen weaves mimicry throughout her poem "Oh Sweet Lavender Petal Crocus—Mother" while also celebrating the power of femininity. Cowen's sporadic free-verse in "Oh Sweet Lavender Petal Crocus—Mother" suites her endeavor to dissect and empower femininity. The drastically different line lengths and shifts in rhythm disorient the reader to illustrate the disorienting and conflicting concepts of femininity especially in the 1950s. Cowen's subject matter reflects Beat women's desires to construct a bridge back to their Modernist lineage. As with many of Cowen's poems, she also subtly interweaves a supporting theme of queerness as another factor influencing her search for a "mother" woman artist to emulate. Again, I include the full poem because of especially because of the importance of Cowen's use of enjambment and indents:

Oh sweet lavender petal crocus—mother  
How could you know when I grew in you

All veins & nerves, red in face  
 I'm looking at a crocus—lavender & white  
     one petal cupped, four petals raised  
 I see "Grant me"  
 What would a a crocus want –water  
 Earth around its roots  
 Air & light around its petals  
 Petal guarding its yellow sex  
 And green white striped pointed leaves—  
 26 & never yet in love with a man, with  
     a woman but  
 How many gods  
 --Fee Fie Foe Fum  
 I smell the blood of a . . .  
 Virgin, whore, mother, wife,  
 None of these  
 Maculate deception  
 Fearing Judgement  
 Loving fear  
 --Abstractions, Time  
 Mouthless grin, headless shake of "won't tell"  
     gleaming from flowerpot to flowerpot  
 Fully clawed & hungering for bleat,  
 Suffered such silly cartoons

Vague vagrant  
 Combing my skull  
 In mirrors of  
 Grey Kansas shack lopsided in the midst of windmills  
 And salt flats  
 And pickled bats  
 And Bullet St.  
 Again and again it was again  
     & again & again it will be  
 Again & again & again  
     O God i you sit in the seventh heaven  
         guarded by jewels & angels high  
         on a throne of borne  
         by chariot of prophets  
     Your lap is empty  
 Believe in me  
 Created in your image  
     Jealous  
 I AM THAT I AM  
 Money changer  
 Lucky changer

Token changer—Pause—  
 Bereft silently, early each second in Nepal  
 Oh let there be, let there be Love (Cowen 18-20)

Cowen strives to empower women's roles. She begins almost like a prayer to the crocus through her reverent "Oh sweet" address. As motherhood was thought of as an expectation in the 1950s to elevate motherhood asserts the value and power of the feminine. By describing the process of growing "all veins & nerves, red in face" the speaker celebrates the physical intimacy of motherhood and birth in a way that is still taboo in society even today. This physical connection is important because it celebrates not the societal role, but, the direct connection between bodies as feminine. While this is in some ways essentialist, it is important to see that what Cowen is centering is foremost the feminine connection between bodies through touch. Using the flower, Cowen holds the image of motherhood in the symbolic realm so that she could be talking about carrying a baby or other forms of motherhood such as even how she waters a flower. Cowen's flower and color choice decidedly departs from any colors or flowers associated with the virgin Mary. Mary is typically associated with blue and often with roses, therefore Cowen constructs a type of femininity separate from traditionally valued Christian symbolism and instead links her imagery to suffrage and the work of Modernist women in the 1910s.

Cowen also reconstructs womanhood and femininity through symbolism that harkens back to the suffrage movement and Modernism, specifically through color symbolism and usage of flowers. The three colors of the suffrage campaign were purple, white and gold; the white and purple being emphasized in Cowen's poem. Still, Cowen does still sew in some gold image with the "yellow sex" of the flower through the more religious imagery near the end of the poem. These colors were sometimes used all together but often different suffrage groups would emphasize the color with which they identified most. The National Women's Party textile



archives displays all sorts of costumes and banners created for marches and demonstrations all of which display these colors. The costume that struck me most was one cape, all lavender with yellow on the inside. (LaCroix). The cape resembles a flower; a great purple flower like the crocus that begins Cowen's poem. The imagery of the textiles for suffrage protests was extremely important because these often-silent demonstrations were a way through which women could display themselves, and, more importantly their ideas, in the public sphere. To help establish the sheer magnitude of these costumes, Allison LaCroix, an intern at the National Women's Party Collection, detailed the collection, saying:

The completed inventory includes 300 large tricolor banners, nearly 100 tricolor sashes, approximately 75 purple and white caps and 60 tricolor capes, and hundreds of costume and fabric pieces, 120 of which were purple and gold gauze tunics.

The amount is important because it illustrates how widely disseminated suffrage symbolism was and how Cowen herself would be aware of that imagery. While Cowen likely was not directly engaged with suffrage history in his studies at Columbia, still, her knowledge of Modernists would have also provided her with a glimpse into suffrage "vernacular." Cowen describes the flower "guarding its yellow sex" as these "petals" were used to guard the sex of women's rights protestors during the movement in the 1900s-1910s. While the daffodil and the jonquil were, the traditional flowers associated with the suffrage movement, flower symbolism in general was a predominate image of the campaign. Flowers imagery, like the crocus, helped soften the image of women who were fighting for their right to a voice.

The speaker's interaction with the crocus also indicates the connection to the lineage of women's rights and sisterhood among women. She observes the posture of the crocus to be "one petal cupped, four petals raised" as if the flower is a spectacle of protest. Listening to the body of the flower the speaker "see's the flower saying "Grand me" thus the speaker acknowledges the

body's articulation of desire for "water" and "Earth around its roots." Here I read the speaker's interaction with the flower as a symbol for womanhood and the desire 1950s women had for a place to "take root." I think it's also important that the speaker does not "hear" the flower ask for its needs, she "see"s the flower asking, thus, again, connecting the flower to ways in which women have to "throw their voice" and mask their gender in order to plead for their needs. Suffrage essayist and poet, Mary Alden Hopkins wrote a description of a suffrage march in 1912 in which she highlights some of the key connections I draw between the movement and Cowen's distant relationship to the previous era's women activists. Hopkins calls the marchers in New York a "spring time hyacinth bloom," thus establishing the importance of flower imagery for the protest. (193). Hopkins asks, "have you ever seen a crocus bed five women wide and two hours long?" and goes on to describe the "yellow sunshine," "green leaves," and "liliaceous colors." (193). Her direct reference to crocuses as a "bed" is crucial because the image notes the interconnectedness of women at this demonstration. Hopkins is presenting a time when both "men and women" came together for the rights of women and thus symbolizing a free plot of flowers growing together. (193). While this image does not reflect some of the struggles and tensions of the suffrage movements; it does reflect the overall more supportive structures for women of the 1910s as opposed to the 1950s. Later in the piece Hopkins even details all the different types of women who came together for the march describing a "flock of high school girls" along with "college graduates" (195). Cowen's depictions of solitary crocuses in "Oh Sweet Lavender Crocus—Mother" contrast the way Hopkins showcases flowers intermingling.

Cowen's flowers do not thrive like those associated with suffrage movement literature and instead her flowers plead; they desire more. Cowen illustrates flowers "gleaming from flowerpot to flowerpot" and "hungering." This image shift reflects how stricter gender norms

separated and divided women of the 1950s with greater importance being placed on women's roles in the domestic sphere. The choice to depict a crocus is also significant because "the language of flowers" was a popular vernacular for women at the turn of the century. Suffragists were even known to create suffrage gardens; one comic strip from 1917 by Nina Allender depicts a suffragist planting jonquils while President Wilson looking down at her from the sun. This comic highlights the degree of visibility suffragists achieved even in how they arranged their flowers; an image directly contrasted by Cowen's speaker looking at potted flowers in her home. A popular book on flower symbolism, *The Language of Flowers*, by T Nelson & Sons was printed in America and the United Kingdom for decades (first published in 1857) and cites crocuses as having two separate meanings depending on the season. Crocuses can mean "abuse not" or spring crocuses mean "youth and gladness" (*The Language* 10). This split in meaning seems to directly relate to how Cowen employs the crocus image; The spring being the gladness and youth of women's voices flourishing during the previous generation and then contrasting that sentiment with the state of gender norms she experienced where women plead to not be "abused" by systems of oppression. I want to come back to the image of motherhood as associated with the crocus because that also relates to the speaker's attempts to create an image of women hood to emulate, thus, the crocus "mother" is emblematic of an unattainable lineage to more liberated women's voices. Likewise, the speaker's relationship conveys a desire to connect and uplift other women despite feeling separated from them.

### **Fragmented Womanhood and Sacred Symbols**

Beat women forged connections with other women through their writing in a time when in person connections were strained. Memoirs like Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters* (probably the most detailed account of Elise Cowen) convey how even relationships between fellow

women artists were strained because of the competitiveness fostered by hyper-masculine Beat culture. Still, in Beat women's writing that they form a sort of silent connection and solidarity between other women which transcends the Beat era. Especially their personal writings are crucial acts of rebellion against a patriarchal culture that divided women in the 1950s and still pervades in culture today. Cowen and even most "predominant" Beat women never published in the "Beat" era, but, they still wrote during that period and therefore are voices which form the Beat era. They wrote not just to end oppression they personally faced but they wrote towards a liberation of all women. There is a fundamental ideological difference between predominant Beat women and Beat men: Beat men portrayed themselves as elite and exiled for being "different" or "counter-culture" while Beat women rebel for a type of liberation beyond the individual. Bringing this back to Cowen's use of flower imagery, as she departs from the image of the solitary crocus, she critiques the rigidity and confinement of 1950s womanhood by again mimicking expectations and then refuting them.

Cowen relays the hardships and fragmentation of 1950s womanhood through a drastic shift in tone away from the pleading crocus. Using the line from the English fairy tale "Jack and the Beanstalk" Cowen has the intrusion of societal expectations stomp into the poem like a giant saying, "—Fee Fie Foe Fumble." This is a slight turn of phrase to the traditional "Fee Fie Foe Fum" and her substitution of "Fumble" reinforces women "fumbling" to appease unattainable expectation of womanhood. (Jacobs 131). Cowen continues the line from the fairy tale "I smell the blood of an..." which is significant because the mention of blood showcases the vulnerability of women when trying to uphold these standards and the giant therefore signifies a sort of panoptical surveillance of women. The traditional fairytale's stanza ends continues "Be he alive, or be he dead/ I'll grind his bones to make my bread" which further reinforces the predatory

symbolism of the giant's entrance into the poem. (Jacobs 131). The speaker continues, "Virgin, whore, mother, wife" as she mimics the assigned "boxes" of femininity which she sees presented to her. Like in the fairytale as Jack hides from the giant, the speaker illustrates women hiding each other's truths as the flower pots "won't tell" each other's secrets. Cowen also illustrates the stress of constantly trying to present acceptable womanhood as she writes the flowers are "fearing judgment" and "loving fear." I want to come back to that line from "Jack in the Beanstalk" the "I'll grind his bones to make my bread," because I think Cowen wanted to show how Beat women's "bones" were used to make the "bread" of men's achievements. (Jacobs 131). Cowen illustrates the repeated structural violence of having to adhere to constant surveillance by noting different locations like "Grey Kansas" and "salt flats" before going into a string of repeated "again & again"s to solidify the spiral of entrapment and oppression being repeated by different structures in women's lives. The speaker regains her voice, though, after this spiral, and comes out to proclaim her individuality before God.

Ending the poem by confronting an image of the Judeo-Christian God symbolizes the speaker's stubbornness refusal to adhere to expected gender roles, even if it means she can only refute these structures within this silent moment between herself and God. Cowen paints an image of God far away in the "seventh heaven" "guarded by jewels" to illustrate the distance she feels from him and to reinforce him as a symbol of patriarchal oppression. The speaker calls on God himself to "Believe in me/ Created in your image" which mimics lines from Genesis to illustrate her deliberate transgression. She asserts, "I AM THAT I AM" as if to reconstruct herself, remaking herself new and free of the mold set for herself. (Cowen 19). The final line she ends with peace after this confrontation saying, "let there be Love," also alluding to Genesis in which God says, "Let there be light" (Cowen 20). (*New American Bible*, Genesis. 1.3). This

functions as a call for women to uplift each other and the capitalization of the word “Love” as a new God to replace the one sitting high in the seventh heaven. (Cowen 20). While not being able to directly reach out to all women the poem functions as a sort of prayer to womanhood. The other theme present in the poem I hadn’t touched on yet is her bisexuality and this will lead me into my discussion of queerness in more of Cowen’s poetry.

### **Queerness & Bisexuality**

“Oh Sweet Lavender Crocus—Mother” can be read as a “coming out” poem—a declaration of queerness and further act of rebellion against not only gender constraints but also “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 632). The theme of queerness does not so much detract from the themes I previously established, but more her expression of queerness adds to the speaker’s critique and refusal to conform to the systems of oppression of both “naturalized binary of heterosexual and homosexual” (Callis 214). Cowen was a dynamic poet and she loads each of her poems with multi-faceted meanings and I think she chooses the “lavender” crocus because of the association of lavender with homosexuality in the cold war era. The link between seeing homosexuality as linked to communism is actually referred to as “The Lavender Scare. (Toops 91). At the same time this image continues to draw a line of lineage to the suffrage movement and to Modernist writers. While the term “homosexuality” only emerged around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Modernist women and suffragists have a history of romantic relationships with other women. In fact, they faced less stigmas because of the experimental nature of the 1910s Village and the lack of public knowledge of homosexuality. It was also easy to cloak “lesbianism” in the 1910s because two women living together would not be improper. Inversely, during the 1950s journalists instigated fear of homosexuality. Specifically, two tabloid journalists published a New York Times best seller called *Washington Confidential* in which

they essentially suggested feminism and homosexuality were infiltrating the government with communism. (Storrs 118). This book not only linked homosexuality to communism but also homosexuality to promiscuity and “sexual depravity” (Storrs 118). Invoking the color lavender while at the same time challenging the systems of oppression, it’s clear that Cowen was equally celebrating gender and sexual non-conformity. To even suggest queerness in the 1950s was dangerous, as denounced by both the psychological community and laws and municipalities. Police frequently targeted gay and lesbian clubs and hang outs and many men and women there were assaulted and raped for their gender and sexuality transgression. (Feinberg 58). Therefore, Cowen’s brave assertion of attraction to both genders is as much an act of self-reclamation as it is a political statement. Cowen’s full body of work was eventually burned by her parents, in part due to the homosexual content, which highlights the shame and fear of homosexuality in the cold war era.

Cowen’s speaker boldly declares her bisexuality which is a radical subject even for queer studies, let alone 1950s conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. Queer studies often focus heavily on the gay and lesbian experiences, erasing bisexual identities. Celebrating bisexuality, the speaker finds power in ambiguity and a rejection of duality. Using parallel structure the speaker says, “26 & never yet in love with a man, with/ a woman, but” to position the possibility for love with a man or a woman on the same plane. The enjambment and indent when she writes “a woman” is important because it illustrates a desire to both draw attention to the suggestion of same-sex attraction. The enjambment of the line suggests of attraction to a woman occur almost as a whisper, keeping that love closer to herself (Cowen 18). Because “love between female friends was to be expected” Cowen’s choice to parallel love for a woman with love for a man also asserts that the love she is talking about is romantic (Toops 92). Writing is one of the only

places where bisexuality can be visualized. April Callis writes, “bisexuality is hard to see; a bisexual in a monogamous relationship will read as heterosexual or homosexual” (218). With this insight, we can see how Cowen inscribing the bisexual experience creates a type of visibility if internal attractions and desires. For context, it’s also important to look at Freud’s writing on bisexuality because of his prevalence in popular culture in the 1950s. Freud believed all human had a “bisexual potential” and that they grew into being homosexual or heterosexual. (Callis 224). Freud viewed homosexuality as a developmental failure, thus leading homosexuality to be medicalized (Callis 225). Callis points out “medicalization of “homosexual acts” forbids the creation of a bisexual person” because any same-sex attraction would “labeled as homosexual” (Callis 225). I think it’s important to see that Cowen is not just arguing for the validity of bisexuality, but, more unveiling and exploring its beauty. Her speaker goes as far as to pronounce her queer self before God despite “fearing judgement.”

Cowen chooses to “come out” to God to further assert her bisexuality and highlight how bisexuality is an identity that can never full “come out” of the closet. In Eve Sedgwick’s “Epistemology of the Closet” she probes the formation of the labels “heterosexual/homosexual” as replicating other “binary oppositions” (913). A proclamation of bisexuality posits the speaker in the “borderlands” between binaries, which also works to deconstruct some of the issues of epistemology within the queer community as being historically exclusionary to bisexuals. Therefore, to proclaim, “I AM THAT I AM” the speaker is denouncing stereotypes against bisexuals about needing to “pick” a gender to be attracted to. On top of that to attest this before the Judeo-Christian God can be read as an act refusing to see same-sex love or bisexual love as a sin. In the final line as she says, “let there be Love” this “Love” can refer to an acceptance of individuals being free to love as they please; the capitalization thus yielding the divine power of



attraction over to “Love” (Cowen 20). The divinity of queer love and the bisexual experience resurface again and again in Cowen’s poetry; Through her poetry she “performs” bisexuality.

In “Someone I Could Kiss” the speaker again parallels masculine and feminine pronouns illustrate her desires for men and women. Different than her celebration of bisexual identity in “Oh Lavender Crocus Mother,” here she centers the intimate possibility of bisexual attraction:

Someone I could kiss  
Has left his, her  
          tracks  
A memory  
Heavy as winter breathing  
In the snow  
And with weight & heat  
          of human body (Cowen 59).

Here Cowen focuses more on the actual experience of bisexuality in the form wanting and thinking about love. Because the focus is on emotional and romantic lived experience, rather than identity, she places “his, her” on the same line. (Cowen 59). This position illustrates the ever-present element of equal possibility of falling in love with a man or woman. This element of possibility is invoked by first line as Cowen describes this as being a people about “Someone I could kiss.” By directly pronouncing the physical act of a “kiss” she makes clear she is talking about intimate sexual and romantic love in contrast to poetry from the 1910s where poets use more ambiguous when speaking about intimacy between women. For example, even Mae V. Cowdery, who I discussed briefly in the previous chapter and who identified as a lesbian woman does not directly state romantic intention as Cowen does. I previously discussed Cowdery’s poem “Insatiate” which is a bold love poem about loving a woman, describing the woman’s “lips” and “eyes” in a sexual way, but when it comes to connecting herself as a speaker to the action of intimacy with this woman Cowdery turns to metaphor such as “I must have a finer table spread” and “I forever be a willing prisoner” (Cowdery 56-7). I’m not seeking to diminish the

boldness of Cowdery's work; she wrote in a time where there was little language to even articulate queer intimacy or identity, but, I use her language to highlight how Cowen pronounces her bisexuality dangerously uncloaked. Through that element of possibility, she can both assert her desires for both gender and perform the an otherwise un-readable identity.

The element of possibility in "Someone I Could Kiss" refutes bisexuality as indecisiveness or as a state between settling into homosexuality or heterosexuality. Callis asks "how does one read bisexuality? If there are no bisexual acts, but rather, only heterosexual and homosexual ones, then how can bisexuality ever be performed?" (228). Cowen's work responds to the struggle Callis's explores as to how one could perform bisexuality; Cowen makes bisexuality something you can in fact "read." The imagery through the rest of the poem further places intimacy and love to the forefront. Her focus on this intimacy illustrates the possible lover's gender is not important to the emotion. Her use of the word "tracks" specifically conveys the imprint of love's possibility on the speaker. "Tracks" don't go away just because there might be new tracks, thus, symbolizing how even when the speaker might be with one man or one woman that there is still ever present the attraction to the other. The final two lines draw the possible lover in close to the speaker, illustrating the comfort and intimacy between these possible lovers through the "weight & heat/ of human body" (Cowen 59). Ending with the gender-neutral term, "human body," reinforces a refusal to define the intimacy by gender—thus asserting the possible lover's humanity above their gender.

### **Genital Imagery**

Cowen asserts her bisexuality in many of her romantic poems, but in reflections about herself she also explores gender, specifically through imagery of genitals. Cowen's work is visceral. She takes on the body in a more blunt and often macabre way compared to other more

sensual or erotic poets like Diane di Prima. Cowen centers many of her bodily explorations around genitals. She weaves imagery of all types of genitals in her poems as she plays with gender and its connection to assigned sex. Cowen includes “cunts” and “cocks” in poems of a wide variety of subject matter (those seem to be her favorite terms). “Purple” explores Cowen’s relationship with Modernist poets as well as incorporating sexual and genital imagery to convey a loss of innocence:

Sloughing death all over each other in slat baskets  
 Plum on plum  
       Stopped  
 Cock flesh  
 Innocent yen shee babies  
 Marianne Moores  
 Italian plums, the dears  
 Oh, the breaking of their tender, tender, skins (Cowen 45).

Cowen likes to pack a lot of evocative images in a small poem so I want to break down the stanza’s structure first. The first and last lines frame the poem with the concrete image of the basket of plums Cowen is interpreting: their longer lengths removing them from the more metaphorical fragments in the center lines. I think it’s important to note the title “Purple” also in relation to the colors of suffrage. While purple is not mentioned in the poem; the title works to assert that suffrage imagery in the skin of the plums. Cowen’s oscillation from concrete to metaphorical conveys the layers of symbolism and history beneath everyday interactions. Not only are the plums purple, but the speaker also directly references the Modernist “Marianne Moore” to further illustrate the plums being a symbol for the previous generation of women artists and women’s rights activists.

Cowen symbolizes these women as overripe plums jostling on top of each other to illustrate the unraveling of innocence in the 1950s era of gender oppression. The plums are “sloughing death all over each other” in the basket, thus, leading to each other’s demise. I don’t

think Cowen seeks to blame suffrage women for the retrograde movement she lived in, but, I do think she's searching back to find where those freedoms were lost or dissolved. Cowen hints at a slightly sexual undertone to the "plum on plum" jostling on top of each other but that is directly interrupted by the indented declaration, "Stop." This "stop" is important because it further asserts to violence of the "cock flesh" alone on its own line. The "cock flesh" then conveys a sort of rape of innocence. Cowen uses the term "cock" to further illustrate the negative and penetrative presence of the image. She chooses the genitals to draw direct attention and a visceral sensation to the loss of female innocence as a sort of rape; by bringing in a part of the male body she also conveys the connection to the female bodies which she depicts as fragile and dying.

She calls the plums "innocent yen shee babies" and "Marianne Moores" as symbols to illustrate the naïve hope of the Progressive generation. "Yen-shee" was a slang used to talk about someone who does opium, not actually Chinese but meant to insensitively mimic the language (Green). This clearly harkens to 1910s Greenwich Village when opium was the popular drug, thus, "Yen-shee babies" can be interpreted as these early Bohemians. Cowen thus infantilizes them calling them "innocent" "babies" because they were blind to the oppressive forces which the speaker faces now more heavily in the 1950s. The reference to opium also conveys that these people had an escape from reality through the hallucinogenic drug. I think her usage of a specific Modernist woman, Marianne Moore, is extremely interesting because Cowen writes about all these Bohemian women as "Marianne Moores"; "Moores" as plural as if to lump all Modernists together. Moore never in fact identified as a feminist but feminism in her writing evolves from "the facts and habits of everyday life" (Brownstein 323). Moore wrote a lot about domestic dynamics and loved the connection between "art and life." Her work dreams of a paradise of "ideal unions" and "perfectible sympathies" (Brownstein 331). These values are far from the

desires of a Beat woman life. Cowen was explicitly not interested in domesticity or the Modernists idealistic explorations of art and life, thus, Cowen uses Moore as a symbol to express the disconnect she feels between these generations. After the “cock” intrudes into the poem the skins of these plums break. The ruptured plum flesh can convey a break with the Progressive era—caused by this intrusive and seemingly unrelated “cock flesh.” The “cock” in Cowen’s work almost always has this intrusive quality. In another poem, “Enough of this Flabby Cock,” she compares an inability to speak to a “flabby cock” (Cowen 48). This again connects the “cock” to internalized oppression; as a symbol of the woman as being constantly penetrated by male dominance even when the “cock” is “flabby.” While the word “cunt” has a similarly derogatory connotation; Cowen uses “cunt” as an unapologetic depiction of female sexuality.

Like “cock” Cowen chooses the words “cunt” or “cooch” to refer to female genitals in her poems. In “The Time Clock” she begins “Stamps 9:00 on the finger that stroked a cunt last night” (Cowen 70). Without the same intrusive connotation as the “cock,” we can see she still chooses the word “cunt” because of its blunt and crass. While being reclaimed by Cowen word “cunt” carries the weight of a misogynistic derogatory use and thus her use of “cunt” is effective in drawing attention to the presence of the vagina. Because Cowen is cisgender she relates to female sexuality in relationship to the vagina. Therefore, the word “cunt” is an expression of the speaker’s own fraught connection to sexuality. As a woman in the 1950s, her sexual expression carries a similar weight that the word “cunt” does. Cowen’s usage of “cunt” to start the first line of “The Time Clock” detaches the “cunt” from the owner of that body part. This conveys the detachment the speaker feels from her own sexuality because throughout the rest of the poem the speaker uses the words “your” to convey actions she observes, but, here with the “cunt” “the finger” has no owner. The speaker is searching to own her “cunt” and the aggressiveness of that

word evokes the frustration and fraught nature of female sexuality. In “I Wanted a Cunt of Golden Pleasure” Cowen further articulates this desire to grasp female sexuality and more specifically ownership of her own genitals.

### **Making Sexuality Sacred**

In “I Wanted a Cunt of Golden Pleasure” Cowen’s speaker reimagines her relationship with female sexuality. The presence of the word “cunt” functions as a constant reminder of the societal taboo around vaginas, even when the speaker tries to articulate her desires the “cunt” reminds the reader that female sexuality is tethered to a 1950s-cultural fabric of misogyny and sexual repression:

I wanted a cunt of golden pleasure  
                   purer than heroin  
 To honor you in  
 A heart big enough to take off  
                   your shoes & stretch out  
 Love’s Anatomy  
                   O that I was a  
                   cunt of golden pleasure more pure  
                   than heroin or heaven  
 To honor you in  
                   Double bed heart like a  
                   meadow in Yosemite  
 To take your ease in  
                   Imagination clear & active as  
                   sunny tidepools  
 To serve up good talk with dinner  
                   Soul like your face before you  
                   were born  
 To glory you in  
                   breasts, hair, fingers  
                   my whole city of body  
 In your arms all night (Cowen 89).

Cowen’s uses repetition to mimic the style of a prayer. By pairing this prayer-like tone with purposefully radical and sexual subject matter, she revolts against Judeo-Christian sexual repression, especially of women. Re-appropriating Christian imagery, she employs those

symbols to both depict the speaker grasping at her fragmented sexuality, and to illustrate the permeating influence of religious tradition on 1950s sexuality. Trigilio notes that “discourses of desire and religion” “were criminalized in the cold war 1950s and 1960s” which adds to the subversive quality of her writing. (123). Cowen initiates the tie to sacred imagery by using “golden” to describe pleasure, gold being associated with God especially in a church setting (example: gold chalice, golden halos on saints). “Golden” describing her desired “cunt” conveys a desire to make sacred that body part which has been relegated to a derogatory term like “cunt.” The repeated use of the word “cunt” conveys the fragmentation of her body. It’s not so much that the speaker desires for her connection to her vagina to be approved of by sacred channels; it’s more that she is piecing together a language to articulate her desire to reclaim her vagina as part of her and not some detached region. The repetition of “golden” also contributes to incantational voice.

Cowen also parallels the sacred “golden” image to the white imagery of “heroin.” While heroin itself is obviously not sacred, Cowen plays with the color imagery using white or “purer” heroin. She also repeats the phrase “purer than heroin” again reinforcing the prayer-like repetition and dissonant coupling of sacred language with drug-use. Cowen could very well be referencing the famous line from Karl Marx that “religion is the opium of the people” (4). Marx was extremely popular in Beat circles and the connection in “I Wanted a Cunt of Golden Pleasure” is clear because the speaker asks for a “cunt” “purer than heroin,” thus, she desires a connection to her body above these structures that divert reality like religion and drug-use. While the speaker strives for this connection it’s important to note the past tense of her accounted desire, the speaker “wanted” “a cunt of golden pleasure” thus this poem is about desire lost or

abandoned. While striving for a sacred body the speaker still desires this “cunt” to perform for her lover above herself.

Cowen’s use of prayer-like phrases position the lover as a god to reject the authority of religion over her body. At the same time this praise of the lover and of “Loves Anatomy” still subjugates the speaker and prevents her from being able to find a connection between her body and her sexual desire. The speaker repeats the goals of her body are “To honor you in.” She uses parallel structure, listing infinitives of how she will use her body to provide for the “you” of the poem. While she says, she wanted a cunt of “pleasure” the repetition illustrates that the pleasure is linked to pleasing the lover rather than herself. “I Wanted a cunt of Golden Pleasure” can be read in, Audre Lorde’s terms, as a consciously failed attempt to access the erotic. At the same time this poem is not pornographic rather it exists in a limbo between knowing what the speaker desires and not being able to fully articulate those desires. Lorde says, “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” and the speaker cannot grasp her sense of self because her sexuality is so tied up in performance for the lover. (54). While still failing to find total connection to her body, half-way through the poem there is a notable shift in imagery away from the sacred and towards the natural.

The shift from Christian imagery to natural imagery conveys the speaker’s desire to escape societal structures that limit her sexual expression. She draws influence from the Romantics’ pagan-inspired worship appreciation for the natural world. In the second half of the poem the speaker notes a desire to have a cunt like a “meadow in Yosemite” and one that would “take your ease in/ Imagination clear & active as/ sunny tide pools” (Cowen 89). These pristine natural locations illustrate the speaker’s search to find a place where she could find wholeness in herself and pure connection to her body, while sharing intimacy with her lover. “Yosemite” is a



national park and therefore symbolisms a protected land that can't be destroyed by industrial development. The "sunny tide pools" are also important because tide pools are microcosms of biodiversity and therefore their image reflects the speaker's desire to inspire proliferation of creativity and desire in her lover. Tide pools are a non-traditional emblem of life and fertility and therefore convey the speaker's want to achieve a different type of life-brining with her "cunt." These few lines of natural imagery are the closest she comes to reinventing her relationship to her genitals. Her escape into natural is still as idealistic as it was for the Romantics. "Yosemite" and "sunny tide pools" are not part of the realities of living in New York City Greenwich Village. They might as well be imaginary places. The natural world doesn't help her reclaim her body; it's just something she reaches towards. Unlike the Romantics, who find a solace in nature, the speaker goes to that realm and comes back without having found the connection she set out for. In the final stanza, she returns from this imagined space of her desires.

The ending of "I Wanted a Cunt of Pure Golden Pleasure" depicts the speaker's emotional limbo. The speaker neither feels completely in tune with her body, nor does she feel completely severed from her sexuality. The speaker describes being on the brink of sexual/physical revelation. Women like Cowen existed at a cross roads of discourses tugging their bodies in different "directions." The speaker takes inventory of her different pieces; her "breasts, hair, fingers" each parts of a body "to glory" her lover in. Again, this conveys her lack of ownership of her body because through each of these pieces she seeks to glory her lover, not reflecting on her own intimate desires. What is beautiful and somewhat hopeful, though, is how she stands back to observe her parts and calls her body "my whole city of body" thus indicating that despite feeling fragmented; she can still observe her body as her own like the vastness of the city she sleeps in. The final phrase "In your arms all night" is both intimate and somber because

it illustrates her gravitation to another person to hold her together; each of their pieces gathered up in her lover's "arms." This is a great portrait of the Beat woman experience because the poem conveys the different levels of pressures each influencing the Beat woman body. Historians often judge Beat women for promiscuity or for their fraught romantic relationships but Cowen puts forth the speaker's desire to find wholeness in another person, partially because of this inflicted fragmentation of identity which was result of the unique period of the 1950s and early 1960s. Unlike Modernist women whose autonomy was part of public discourse, the Beat woman had her autonomy in question from both conservative mainstream discourse and the objectification of the male-centric Beat movement. While Modernist women certainly struggled with autonomy their poetry especially conveys a greater accessibility to the erotic. In Lorde's essay, she not only talks about the erotic as sexual but also as pleasure in one's creative endeavors and that understanding of the erotic also applies to the difference between the situation of Beat women and their Modernist forerunners. While Modernist women worked to reinvent what was considered a "woman" through the celebration of the "New Woman," Beat women struggled to construct what they wanted a women to be; caught between strict conservative culture and their desires to break free and have autonomy.

### **The Gendered Self**

In "Self" Cowen confronts Beat women's uncertainty and struggle to grasp identity and more specifically gender identity:

Self  
 You paper rose  
 I saw the secret shaft  
     where spring snow fell  
 Tonight soggy paper rancid cottage cheese  
     sour  
 And that imagined tomorrow?  
 A woman maybe (Cowen 96).

By positioning the “self” as if it is another person separate from the speaker; Cowen begins by establishing for the reader a first level of contradiction and fragmentation. The first line in which she calls out “Self” conveys a certain type of pause of self-reflection; a call to dissect her own herself as separate factions of a body. Addressing her “self” then as “You paper rose” functions as a multi-faceted symbol. The “paper” rose reflects the fragility of the self and the quality of fabrication because a “paper” rose is made and does not grow naturally. Because the paper rose is made and not grown the symbol conveys how women’s sense of self is distorted by having to create a perfect “rose” like image to present to the world. Cowen seldom invokes rose symbolism (she usually uses jonquils or crocuses). In *The Language of Flowers*, which I used when discussing the crocus, there is actually a whole two pages from page 14-15 addressing the different meanings for different specific roses. This illustrates how fraught the rose is as a symbol. Yes, today we usually read it as a symbol of desire, but especially earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when flower imagery was more common knowledge—the rose is an agent for more meanings. Cowen doesn’t specify anything about the paper rose other than that it is in fact a rose and therefore here the rose conveys the sense of versatility and uncertainty of meaning of the body which the speaker observes. Her own body. Roses were also used in relationship to suffrage efforts. When the vote was won for women suffrage celebrations often included “raining yellow roses” from roof tops (Smothers). In contrast, anti-suffragists used red roses as an emblem. Again, the rose in Cowen’s poem is purposefully unmarked to convey the tug Beat women felt as bridges between two larger eras of women’s rights movements (suffrage and then more in the late 1960s-70s). Cowen continues this theme of the Beat woman body in limbo historically and as she tried to define a sense of self.

The speaker first observes a “secret shaft” (which likely refers to the “air shaft” she could see from her desk in her room at her parent’s house). (Trigilio). The use of the word “secret” symbolizes her grasping at an internal quality she feels but cannot reach. She can observe an air shaft but not actually follow where it leads just like she feels this emotion but cannot trace its origins within herself. The image of the “spring snow” falling through this “shaft” alludes to the historical situation of the Beat woman existing in a retrograde era for women’s rights. “Spring” symbolizing the 1950s as a time where life is supposed to be better for women and that nature supposed to be growing and booming, supposed to be “warmer” and “easier.” Instead the snow conveys the coldness of this “spring”; the stagnation of progress as if the seasons refuse to change. She calls the night “soggy paper rancid cottage cheese/ sour” each adjective denoting a type of decline or deterioration to illustrate the struggles of a woman feeling her time is passing away; herself and her work rotting. In a sense the work of Beat has faced this fate in the last decades of scholarship; it has in a sense “rotted”—out of vogue with little work to reclaim women’s voices of the movement. She questions “And that imagined tomorrow?” conveying Beat women’s liminal position, unable to see or envision what a “tomorrow” would look like for women. For Cowen, she would never live to see what the future of women’s liberation movements would bring and so her reflections are haunted by her permanent liminality as a poet. I wanted to end with this particular poem because of how much that last line struck me as incredibly telling of not only Beat women’s experience but also the majority of women of the 1950s. The final line does not include a question mark like the previous line; she states, “A woman maybe.” This amplifies the same sentiment expressed by fellow Beat poet Joyce Johnson when she wonders to herself, upon hearing of the death of Elise Cowen, if she had in fact “become a woman.” The hesitation in this final line conveys the deep struggle of Beat women to

know how to define themselves as they navigated between Beat culture and family/societal expectations. What it meant to be a Beat man was clear; it was preached and printed. The idea of a woman separate from strict gender roles causes “gender trouble” for women on the margins because they find it hard to grasp what a woman could be outside of the strict “role” society had painted for them. And yet at the same time they wrote, Beat women wrote themselves and through writing they left us with a body of work that articulates their radical conceptualization of their bodies and their identities. While Elise Cowen probably couldn’t imagine the full scope of the Beat movement and its mark on American literary history; her writing is much more than just “Beat”—her writing embodies a cite of historical conflictions and radically explores femininity. Maybe she would scoff that hipster college kids still read “Howl” in their common rooms. While this is a type of reclamation work, I feel like that word is too clinical for the kind of intimate analysis Cowen’s work provokes. Her work must be shared not only to accurately represent the full scope of the Beat movement, but also illuminated the voices of Beat women so often confined to leather-bound journals by their beds.

### Chapter 3: A Bedroom of One's Own

You step out of the bus station onto the rushing city street corner—Port authority a hive of footsteps—car horns flourishing in the foreground. Maybe it's 1912 and you clutch a hat to your head—brief case in your arm. You've come to find The Village you've read so much about—about the colony of freethinkers breaking into the “New” consciousness. You're twenty-one and men passing by whistle and some raise their eye-brows at you—a young girl on a street corner—you left your husband in Europe and your hands shake slightly as you light a cigarette before locating the subway station. Or maybe it's 1957 and you've taken the bus to Christopher street where there's a man with long hair playing guitar. You wear black tights and a short skirt—you feel like a display—your heart throbbing as you feel the collective of eyes on. You feel the anxious pulse of stop light after stop light after stop light—maybe you carry a notebook. Our assigned genders directly influence how we interact with space and are crucial when seeking to understand the lives of women artists and writers. Interactions between space and gender hold extreme significance to my analysis of Modernist and Beat women writers especially because the artistic movements they were part of were so centered in Greenwich Village. In his chapter “Flexible Sexism” from Doreen Massey's collection, *Space, Place, and Gender*, Milton Keynes reflects, “The spaces of modernism which are mostly celebrated are the public spaces of the city,” adding “The public city which is celebrated in the enthusiastic descriptions of the dawn of modernism was a city for men” (233). Keynes's specific word choice conveys that the city and Modernism were inherently linked but also that they were “celebrated” with enthusiasm as the source of new consciousness. This fever and enthusiasm conveys cultural valuing of the public space—a space more accessible or as Keynes puts it “for men” than for women. The connotation of the word “Village” as in “Greenwich Village” is much different than the broader masculine

connotation of “city”—almost deceptively so. The feminine is generally associated with the more tight-knit and local spaces and yet from the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century movements of “social peace and justice” have continued to center around public city-life and a blurring of intimate spaces and public spaces. (Heller and Rudnick 1).

In both eras of counter culture that I am examining on Greenwich Village (1910s and 1950s-60s) women artists are keenly aware of the spaces they navigate and how those are influenced by their gender. Their gender shapes their autonomy to move about spaces. The interactions of space and gender also shape their access to the erotic in their art and in their romantic/sexual lives. I have already talked about how the suffrage movement tactfully negotiated women activist’s need to present themselves the public space through their use of theatrical displays and print culture to detach their feminine bodies from their voice, but I want to delve into what other ways the masculine artistic space of the city shaped the way the bodies of women artists were permitted to move about space. In my analysis, I will focus on Mina Loy and Diane di Prima because of how both embrace very bold depictions of the sexual erotic in their poetry. Di Prima and Loy also make excellent points of analysis because they were both well known for their unique artistic personas and tactics for presenting themselves at public readings and/or gatherings.

### **Snap-Shots**

Two images: one of Mina Loy from Greenwich Village 1909 Bohemia and one of Diane di Prima, 1959. I want to use these images as a point of entry into understanding how women artists between these two eras navigated and occupied space in the heavily masculine city-scape and Village artistic community. John Berger’s *Way’s of Seeing* can provide further insight into how the presence of women has been constructed and objectified through the male gaze. Berger

specifically writes about “the nude” and how these paintings reflect “criteria and conventions by which women have been seen and judged as sights” (Berger 47). Loy and di Prima are not passive “sights” though. They illustrate an awareness of what Berger describes the notion that “men act and women appear” in how they manipulate the gaze of the camera (Berger 47). While in the nudes that Berger discusses the subject’s “nakedness is not an expression of her own feelings,” snap shots of these women artists reveal a tactful calculation of how the spectator will receive their “image” (Berger 52). Furthermore, these images also allude to space’s relationship to erotic power.



(Haweis)

Loy often modeled for photographers but not passively so; her writing conveys her awareness of “male gaze” (Kinnahan 28). Even her poses illustrate a consciousness performance of hidden female sensuality. The first thing you will note when surveying portraits of Loy is her relaxed body and her open movement in space. Here in this portrait Loy closes her eyes to further convey the level of ease and comfort. Her body language evokes a sense of freedom and movement. Massey reflects that “Freedom is the absence of determination” while also noting that space itself is the “very form of determination” (253). While certainly in Loy’s life she had to navigate heavily masculine spaces I think that her portraits convey a sense of spatial freedom especially because of their “dislocation” (Massey 253). Existing nowhere in particular, and she embodies



the entirety of the photograph. Kinnahan writes Loy had a “visually oriented career” based around the continued reenactment of herself as the “avant-garde” subject; a walking testament to modernism. (1). This translates to the images cultivated by other modernist women which I discussed in my first chapter, but, specifically here the visual aspect of their careers heavily influenced their ability to enter and find room for themselves in space. At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women were gaining more spatial autonomy; from attending colleges and universities miles and miles away from parents to owning their own apartments, women’s agency over their own space was, in many ways, growing.

While she does portray free movement and relaxation, images of Loy, especially by photographer Stephen Haweis, convey Modernist women’s call to perform for a male audience in a masculine city scape. I read her diverted gaze as desiring escape from the masculine structures through which she critiques and challenges gender roles. The diverted gaze is a feminine quality because it abandons any claim, submits to the viewer of the photograph. Loy and other Modernist were positioned in a liminal space for gender equality and that is reflected not only in their depictions of space in writing but also their physical depictions such as this series of photographs. This feeling of existing in a liminal space or threshold results partially from the “ambiguous promises” of the suffrage campaign for women’s rights beyond the vote. (Rudnick 215). These Modernist women were directly confronted with how the vote did not bring the kind of material equality which it had symbolized. Images of Loy emblemize the image of the New Woman and all her drive to carve out agency in a still heavily masculine artistic community. Like Mina Loy, images of Diane di Prima often connote boldness and audacity. Yet, Di Prima’s representations in photography reveal shifting interacts between gender and space within the 1950s-60s Village artistic scene.

The spatial implications of “The Bird That Flew Backwards” go far beyond the logical deduction that the Village spaces were more “strictly” gendered for women in the 1950-1960s. Di Prima is probably the closest comparison to Mina Loy from the Beat era (as a woman who was often the subject of photography, writing, and film). Yet, even while modeling like Loy, di Prima seldom takes up space in an image in the same way Loy does.



(McDarrah).

Here, in 1959, di Prima reads from her first book of poetry, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*. Even reading she’s depicted as peripheral. This image symbolizes the position of the Beat woman—the “girl in black” leaning up against the back wall of dingy café, always on the fringes. Joyce Johnson even writes in the Foreword of *Minor Characters* that for a Gap ad she had been “cropped out” of an old photograph of her next to Jack Kerouac (xxx). While di Prima is in the midst of the crowd and even raised above guests of Gas Light café crowd, still, her piano “stage” further portrays her as an aspect of the scenery or furniture rather than a center of attention. Her place on top of the piano is precarious and not sturdy which only adds another metaphorical level to the image. This image represents both the precarious situation Beat women

put themselves in to be artists and share their work as well as Beat culture's demands to be experimental and live hazardously.

Even more so than Beat men, though, Beat women often felt dislocated from any a concrete sense of "home," lacking a particular specific location of true safety or self. Many were torn between living with parents and trying to afford their own apartments, neither place offering a true stable location. Bachelard writes the home is the place we "take root" and the "house" is that which allows us to "dream in peace" (6). While certainly Beat woman carved out their "corners of the world," their struggle to find a place also complicated their ability to interact in artistic spaces like underground style cafes and studios (Bachelard 4). While, unlike the image of Loy, this image of di Prima is a candid shot, it is still relevant to see how grounded in place the image is. There are few images of di Prima not set in groups of other people or heavily based in a setting (whether it's a part of her own bedroom): whether she's modeling for an artist or just being photographed by friends. This theme of heavily grounding individuals in time and setting conveys the degree of vulnerability Beat women had to face when entering artistic space, especially because their bodies as women were so directly connected to their art and their sexuality. Without a private home space or "landing" place Beat women floated from café to bedroom to train station; their only home being their own bodies. Like Modernist women, Beat women also seem to be positioned at a threshold; a different type of threshold, a window rather than a doorway. They existed in a space also influenced by the past of the 1910s-suffrage movement, but, farther removed. Beat women could look back to previous women Modernists free movement in space but because of the vastly different economic and social scape of The Village; this same free movement was not exercisable. This window into the past spurred Beat

women to craft their own homes, take root with each other, and look to the erotic as a place for spatial autonomy.

### **The Cost of a Room of One's Own**

Before plunging into themes of space and mobility in Loy and di Prima's poetry, it's important to set some of the historical context of what it took to live in New York City as a woman in 1910 compared to the 1950s. In conjunction with a historical overview, I will also examine the mapping of Loy and di Prima's travels throughout their lives as a touch point for understanding mobility and influences in Village culture. While the gendering of spaces in the Village certainly influenced women poets, economics and availability of space in New York City general also shaped women ability to make it on their own there. Many Modernist women ability to procure a sort of New Woman "bachelor flat" (Goldsmith 51). What's interesting is, looking at the price of apartments reveal that between the 1910s and 1950s, there was little change in the cost of an apartment in the city. (Miller). The average price of an apartment in Manhattan in 1910 was forty dollars a month (approximately six-hundred dollars in 2017) and sixty dollars a month in the 1950s (approximately nine-hundred dollars in 2017). (Miller). These prices illustrate that the issue of women owning an apartment was not entirely the actual economics of apartment pricing in the city, but also was related to broader economic opportunities for women as well as the affluence of the artistic community. It is important to note that by the 1960s the pricing of apartments in the city drastically increased from around sixty dollars to two-hundred dollars a month (about two-thousand dollars in 2017). (Miller). This put even more financial stress on Beat women who had already struggled in the 1950s when the New York artistic scene was less mainstream.

Even married New Women like Neith Boyce and Mabel Dodge often had their own homes separate from their husbands. (Eby 137) (Trimberger 98). New woman rebranded the single woman as “The Bachelor Woman” (which was the title of a column in *Vogue* in 1898) instead of a “spinster,” as well as being linked to the affluent backgrounds of many New Women (Eby 135). The reimagining of the single woman as a “Bachelor” signals a greater degree of the spatial and romantic freedom for women through the masculine connotation of the word. “Bachelor” also specifically entails the sexual freedom of single men and thus conveys and expansion of women’s sexual liberation. At the same time, I want to address how these Modernist schemes of women’s liberation are linked to the idea of a masculinized woman and not towards uplifting of the feminine. New Woman ground their spatial autonomy firmly in masculine occupations of space such as home (or apartment) ownership, working in traditionally masculine spaces from publishing to involvement in politics (whether it was needed to support one’s self or not), and back to the term “bachelor” which also evoking women’s sexual equality and liberation. While the ideology of the “bachelor woman” in control of her own space and life’s trajectory permeated 1910s New York City culture; the ideology didn’t necessarily translate into lived experience when it came to romance and the erotic.

Mina Loy didn’t have the same wealthy Victorian parents as many other New Women like Dodge or Boyce. Despite not having financial security when she immigrated to New York, Loy found stability from the support of other Villagers. She left her husband, Stephen Haweis, in London, moving to Florence practically penniless (Barnet 16-7). Yet, she was scooped up by Dodge and another leading Village figures Carl Van Vetchen who worked to publish some of her poetry before she even got to New York (Barnet 28). They acted as patrons and in several letters Dodge sent Loy hundreds of dollars to help her support herself. While artists supported each

other in the 1950s-60s, there wasn't the same degree of economic abundance within the artistic community or the same culture of patronage. The Moderns floated in the realm of "high art" and despite being concerned with issues of race, class, and gender, Modernists for the most part remained "safe" in a sphere of affluence. The theme of Progressivism promoted supporting artists and writers a fundamental part of a functioning society and thus single woman artist, Mina Loy, could, in fact, procure a divorce, leave for a new life in New York City, and establish herself there on her own with in the course of a few months (between 1916 to 1917).

The Beat woman found herself in a predicament of having no affluent ties as well as occupying a space that did not support the idea of "bachelor" women, or any "masculine" traits on a woman for that matter. Beat women, in similar aims as Modernist women, also sought to live on their own. They faced steeper economic barriers for finding a place to live and stricter gendered constraints on the spaces women of the 1950s could "respectfully" occupy. The result was creating Beat women who were shape-shifters, adjusting their conduct based of whatever space they were entering. To be a Beat woman in the city was to be fluid. Joyce Johnson, Elise Cowen, and Diane di Prima each account struggling to separate themselves from their parent's homes or apartments while also feeling a familial and domestic attraction to them. This speaks to the unraveling of identity Beat women faced as they negotiated themselves and their identities moving through the city. Economic need for stability from their families made that pull even more material unlike Modernist women who either found work that could sustain themselves or had old money from their families. Women's jobs in the 1950s were more devalued than at the dawn of the 1900s where the New Woman; the working woman ideal flourished. The new game of courtship was "dating" and as "dating" culture developed the age of "going steady" and settling down dropped drastically "after the war" (Stone and McKee 52, 54). This instilled the

idea that women would go from parent's home to the equally stable home of the husband, thus demolishing the previous eras valuing of women's freedom to explore her own space in college or apartment. In this respect 1950s women were not only not allowed to occupy space, but also expected to become part of someone else's (their parents and then husbands).

Both Johnson and di Prima's feel tethered to parent's homes because of social and economic constraints. Johnson surveys her childhood room, remarking that even the furniture there made her feel an "uneasy captivity" (14). Isolated by her different desires and worldviews, Johnson wrote that the home itself bred "a kind of cultural loneliness" (20). In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard explores the symbolic meaning of spaces in our day to day lives. For Bachelard, the home has walls which function as "illusions of protection" (5). The 1950s strict gender roles and worship of the nuclear family amplified the symbolism of the parental home for Beat women. The house for these families became the site of safety against a world still healing from World War II and seething with the foreign threats of communism and Russia. Young women like Johnson and other Beat women went to great lengths to sever themselves from their parents controlling and often restrictive environments. Johnson and her friend took a "double decker bus" to the Village where they would talk to "strange men" at the "Arts Center" (30). Johnson writes about how this life she in the Village felt like the "Real Life" that she couldn't have at home while forced to take on a normative daughterly role (30). Johnson says, "Real Life was sexual" thus directly connecting parental control to an attempt which parents made to preserve their daughters' virginity and pass them on into the space of their husbands "unscathed" (30).

In di Prima's novel *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, she describes being in between jobs and having to live "precariously at home" (14). If home is meant to be a place of comfort and

sturdiness then the parental homes of Beat woman's parents existed as the antithesis of home; a symbolic oxymoron. The word "precarious" gets at the core of what it meant to be a Beat woman, not having a space where one's sexual agency was truly permitted. Di Prima also writes that her and her friend sought "refuge at night from irate parents" in cafes and dive-bars. (14). She goes as far as to say that the bar "The Swing" was a haven for her. True, this place allowed her to present and explore sexuality as she flirted with men, but, still, it does not offer anywhere close to the necessities of a location to call it "home." Her fervent belief in her own liberation as she navigates sleeping in men's apartments and finding home in nooks and crannies of the Village conveys the drastic restriction on women's sexuality in the 1950s that she would find those spaces liberating when they too were populated and controlled by men. While she finds pleasure in sexuality she is unable to pursue the erotic in a space of her own, thus forcing her to live in this "precarious" state. Lying in bed next to Ivan, she thinks to herself "The game is Cool," which reveals her presence in this space is a sort of performance or a "game" (di Prima 15). She doesn't focus on occupying this space comfortably but rather how her occupation of space influences Ivan's perception of her as "cool." There is no place of comfort; no consistent "home" for female sexuality in the Village scene of the 1950s. Despite the supposedly "liberated" Beatnik crowd in the Village there is little space owned and cultivated by women. These two accounts of Johnson and di Prima elaborate on the influence of 1950s gender roles in shaping women's artistic and erotic exploration. What about women poet's ability to physically explore the city and beyond? A brief survey of the differences between Mina Loy and Diane di Prima's travels throughout their lives reveals more about the mobility of women artists between the 1910s and 1950s eras.

### **Travels**



Using timelines from *Pieces of a Song* by Diane di Prima and *Mina Loy: Myth of the Modern Woman* by Sandeep Parmar I mapped the travels of these two women throughout their artistic careers. I also referenced a recent digital humanities project funded by the Endowment for the Humanities called *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant Garde*. Using StoryMap, I recorded the trajectory of their travels. Comparing the two women's paths reveals a similar degree of "flight." Both Loy and di Prima travel rather frequently, though it's important to see how Loy began her travels much earlier than di Prima. Loy hopped between countries, between language barriers, between cultures for her younger years in Europe as she moved to pursue her visual art. Within the span of a decade she had lived in five countries and visited many more (I only paid attention to place where she was recorded as living/ owning an apartment or home of some sort). (Parmar). Most notable of her journeys was probably the launch across the ocean to New York to start her new life. She was only twenty-eight and already known throughout artistic circles in Europe and in American Bohemia. She traveled immense distances in the next leg of her life between 1916 and 1926; from Mexico to Paris; Loy's movement conveys a lack of sturdy home but also a degree of privilege she had to be able to uproot herself time and time again. It's significant that some of her travels were influenced by her desire to find her lost lover she met in Mexico; this chase of sorts conveys that despite some more agency Modernist women had in space, that they were still often shaped by their ties to men. Loy's journey continues to circle back to the Village and she even would return there in her old age to perform readings.

Di Prima, lived her career similarly "uprooted" as Mina Loy, but di Prima doesn't toggle between Europe and the United States (or Mexico for that matter). (Parmar). Observing the specifics of when and where Loy and di Prima traveled can reveal their values as well as their access to travel. Diane di Prima doesn't make her first trip to Europe till she's well into her

career as a poet (presenting at the Rotterdam Poetry festival in the Netherlands). Before then di Prima mostly moved around New York, sometimes going upstate and of course to Swarthmore where she briefly attended college before dropping out. It's easy to see the common theme of transience in her and Loy's travels, but, I think it's not enough to just notice that they both traveled frequently. Di Prima's travels are all incredibly easier to execute; the locations in New York and even the cities on the West Coast would have been accessible by buses and other easily navigated public transport systems. Di Prima's network is also somewhat limited to these to "Beat" poles of New York and San Francisco until she's a well-established poet while Loy's network involves more aristocracy like Mabel Dodge who would help set her up in different cities. (Rudnick). Loy's travels also convey more freedom and ability to change on whim. Loy moves to pursue sporadic new interests like when she started a lampshade business in Paris in 1923 or when she took a trip to Mexico.

In comparison, di Prima travels less for her own inspiration and more to sustain herself and her autonomy. For the most part, di Prima travels to teach at universities and only in her older age could she establish a business or organization of her own in San Francisco with the Institute of Magical and Healing Arts. While di Prima spent more of her early Beat career located in New York City; her movement in the city conveys a homelessness at home. Doreen Massey writes in *Space, Place, and Gender* about the complicated implications of how gender influences our sense of location and space. Massey she makes a point about the cultural "importance of the spatial separation of home and workplace" for women and men that I think is important to explore when analyzing these women's travels (179). Massey notes women who break this spatial dichotomy generate "dismay in certain quarters at women becoming 'economically active.'" (Massey 179). By working for this economic independence Beat women

could generate a degree of freedom within space but not without the social consequence that Massey notes as causing “dismay.” When women’s economic independence wasn’t as demonized in the Modernist era this not only translated to more women going to college, but also resulted in more diverse jobs opportunities for women and therefore women’s ability to create and establish themselves in their homes as well as in the workplace, therefore having the ability to exist on both sides of the imposed binary of “work” for men and “home.” Inversely, the reestablishment of binaries made the working woman of the 1950s prevented Beat women from being able to carve out concrete spaces of work and home, often leading them to a sense precarious dislocation, in a constant state of working to support themselves and finding no place of rest. By turning to Loy and di Prima’s poetry we can further understand women artists own conceptualizations of gender and space as well as the morphing constructions of home, city, and, furthermore, erotic spaces for Modernist and Beatnik women.

### **Location-less Bodies**

Mina Loy’s most famous collection *The Lost Luna Baedeker* begins with a call for the reader to dislodge themselves from space:

There is no Life or Death  
 Only activity  
 And in the absolute  
 Is no declivity.  
 There is no Love or Lust  
 Only propensity  
 Who would possess  
 Is a nonentity.  
 There is no First or Last  
 Only equality  
 And who would rule  
 Joins the majority.  
 There is no Space or Time  
 Only intensity,  
 And tame things  
 Have no immensity. (Loy 3).

Through this invocation, Loy locates the reader in oscillation between binaries. She takes an assertive tone, concreating her own metaphorical space to bring her poetry into. Throughout the poem she denounces these polarizations such as “Life or Death” and uses capitalization of binaries to further convey the societal weight they possess, as one would capitalize “God.” Loy suggests “activity” in place of “Life or Death” which praises being untethering yourself from these poles of existence. One scholar, Conover, who has written many introductions to Loy’s collection, explains that Loy “withheld traditional meter, rhyme, and syntax” (xv). This conveys her deliberate goals of dislocating her work and using form to support that deconstruction of absolutes. In this imagined location where “There is not Space or Time” it is possible to imagine there could also be no constraints based on gender; I see the space Loy writes as one that flees from location as an attempt to speak more freely and theorize the unimaginable embodiment of a world without gender constraints. Massey comments on the stakes of gender and space saying, “The limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination” (179). While Loy’s motion to exist between and outside of binaries doesn’t translate quite so practically as a way for women to navigate physical space in the real world, the action of her writing does place value on women’s writing and the deconstruction and inversion of masculine poetic traditions. Like suffragists art of “throwing voice” in their print culture; Loy’s act of destroying location in her Futurist writing is also an act that seeks to un-gender her voice to gain authority (Chapman 5). What’s interesting is that Loy seems to like to control when and how she invokes her gendered perspective. Again, through dislocating her voice from time with Futurist themes, Loy can then assert control over her feminist critiques by distancing her writing from the location of her physical body and time. Massey also explains “spatial control” is a type violence and is a “fundamental element in the

constitution of gender hierarchy” (180). Therefore, Loy’s move functions assert her voice as well as to protect her body as a woman artist from the strict sanctions on a female body that does not conform to patriarchal spatial limitations.

This same attempt at dislocation and destruction of location is central to Loy’s Feminist Manifesto, illustrating Loy’s opinions on how to shape spaces for gender equality. Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” (like her poetry) not only calls women to take up space to advance feminism but also employs the physical space on the page to further convey her ideology. Loy begins “The feminist movement as at present instituted is/ **Inadequate**” and she prints “**Inadequate**” in a much bigger font than the first line. (Loy 153). I will use bold to indicate which lines Loy places in larger print. While, clearly, she wanted to draw attention to the inadequacy of present feminism, this spatial manipulation through print further displays her intent to rupture written conventions. To take control of masculine written tradition, especially with the more militant connotations of a “manifesto” is an act of agency and declaration of her ownership and control of the page. Loy denounces “scratching on the surface of the rubbish heap of tradition” and asserts “the only method is/ **Absolute Demolition**” (Loy 153). This demolition asserts the same idea present in the previous piece; the idea of demolishing pre-existing locations and striving to create a “new.” I see some of this critique as possibly in response to some of the more conservative tactics employed by suffragists to gain enough widespread support to succeed. Suffrage efforts were calculated, graceful, and for the most part not “loud.” Loy’s bold letterings and enlarging of words conveys a sort of “loudness” lost from the latter years of the suffrage movement.

Later in the manifesto she even says “cease your confidence in economic legislation” and says “You’re glossing over/ **Reality**” (Loy 153). While Loy doesn’t mean this to be ironic, I find

it ironic that she critiques feminisms aims at influencing legislature as not acknowledging “reality” seeing as political action often can translate to reality (especially with the effectiveness of the suffrage movement to win the vote). Still, Loy’s critique speaks to women the suffrage movement left out by centering the voices of upper-middle class white women. For instance, the suffrage movement of alienated working class women and women of color whose day to problems were more physical like needs for adequate working conditions or just earning enough to stay fed. Loy centers her vision for feminism on unrestricted spatial mobility and freedom as she calls for women to have “**no restrictions**” and to be “**debarred**” from forced “maternity” (Loy 154-55). Even more radically in the final paragraphs Loy asserts “there is nothing impure in sex” extending her demands for women’s autonomy in space to the bedroom (156). Loy, like many Modernist women, sees this sexual liberation as inherently linked to how women can occupy all spaces. While she doesn’t articulate this, I think this extends to the importance of women’s ability to find and grasp their erotic power. Despite Loy’s boisterous and radical aims to “demolish” gendered space and launch feminism into this “new” sexually liberated womanhood, her ideology is hard to actually impose on real locations and real instances in women’s lives. She speaks in the utopian theoretical and feels empowered there, but, back down in the Village, the ideology itself is not enough to achieve for women the same spatial autonomy as men. Loy’s poetry illustrates her continued efforts to navigate and continually construct her identity in space.

### **In the Doorway**

Loy’s poetic explorations of home and domestic space convey Modernist women’s struggles to exert control over their own spaces. Loy’s “At the Door of the House” even just in the title conveys this liminality of Modernist women’s spatial situation. Through the poem, Loy

uses images of tarot cards paired with the home and the household to further establish the theme of uncertain futures and thresholds. She describes the cards as “color-picture maps of destiny,” illustrating the speaker’s search for a location in the abstract (Loy 33). At the same time, Loy describes the tarot card reading as occurring “in the corner/ of an inconductive bed-room” (Loy 33). Locating divination in the bedroom conveys the speaker’s desire to not be tethered to the physical space, possibly feeling trapped in her own intimate spaces. The choice of the word “inconductive” is unique in that “inconductive” is one of Loy “created” words and thus again assert control over language structures. She uses “inconductive” to emphasize the numbness of this living space. Using Massey can help further explore what Loy is doing with these different layers of spatial themes. Massey explains, “place can be used in the constitution of the identity of an individual” but Loy uses this dislocation from one’s core place, the home, to convey a lack of firm identification with one’s “own” place (Massey 167). Loy goes on to further illustrate this dissatisfaction with home by describing the scene as “impassioned” and “doubly impassioned/ sad” (Loy 33). In the cards the speaker reads “You are going to make a journey,” which again reinforces the Modernist women’s location at a threshold (Loy 33). Loy’s unique use of spacing between “You” and “are going...” further displays the existence of this chasm between total gender equality and lived experiences of Modernist women. Loy invokes the image of the door of the house to show that the protective qualities of the home as well as Modernist women’s conflicts between love with men and spatial autonomy of their own locations.

Like Loy’s poetry, Modernist women’s plays produced at the Provincetown Playhouse centered women’s experiences and conflicts with threshold spaces, specifically entrances and doorways. This theme being illustrated across genres conveys a degree of shared experience among Modernist women—a conflict between their private and public lives. Loy repeats the

image of a lover “at the door of your house” and illustrates the influence of that presence over both the inside and outside world of the speaker:

At the door of your house  
 There is a letter about an affair  
 And a bed and a table  
 And this ace of spades turned upside down  
 ‘With respect’  
 Mean that some man  
 Has well you know  
 Intention little honorable (Loy 33-4).

A similar image of a lover at the door was acted out in one of the first plays to be produced at the iconic Provincetown Playhouse; “Constancy” by Neith Boyce (based on a love affair between John Reed and Mabel Dodge) (Kennedy). Boyce’s play also locates a conversation between lovers at a threshold (entrance or doorway). The play begins with the man “under the balcony” entreating entrance “at the door” of “Moira’s” home (Boyce 274). In both narratives (poem and play) the New Woman attempts to conduct agency by way of controlling the threshold space (permitting him to enter at the start of the play or closing him out in the poem).

The “letter about an affair” being at the door of the house conveys the level to which women’s sexuality is made public; while she has her house she cannot prevent this presence of the affair from lingering at her home’s door. Loy employs more fragmentation in the final lines—“a bed” “a table” and then large spaces between fragments as the speaker attempts to parse out the intentions of the man who returns to her door. Moments lingering on fixed images like “bed” and “table” reflect a desire to find ownership and grounding while grappling with the dislocating effects of gender in space. These chasms reflect that consistent fragmenting effect of gender and space especially when Modernist women navigated romantic relationships, finding their semblance of spatial autonomy brought into question. At the same time anxiety about controlling one’s personal space does illuminate the allegiance to location the Modernist women



had which in many ways differentiates them from Beat women's associations to their homes.

This New Woman anxiety about controlling the entrance of the home arises because of also how much care and work was put into crafting these women's home. An idealistic depiction of home would be a home that could be called a "nest," which parallels Modernist women's depictions of home especially because of the notion of their space as a place they "come back to." (Bachelard 97, 99). The "return" marking a "place of an infinite number of day dreams" thus making Modernist women's apartment an emblem of her life of independence as well as "rhythm" (Bachelard 99).

The doorway can also represent indecision and hesitance to make one's own decisions about space and home. When analyzing the conceptualization of outside and inside, Bachelard explains that the categories of "inside" and "outside" represent the "sharpness of yes and no, which decides everything" (211). This doorway threshold appears as if it is a manifestation of decisions that can be made. At the doorway, the door's "owner" can permit entrance or deny it, right? Loy's depiction of the doorway suggests different and seems to convey a degree of false agency the doorway promises. Loy writes "It will not be long before you see him/ For there he is at the door of the house" (Loy 34). Loy conveys the feeling of waiting and the felt presence of a man entreating entrance. Loy's fixation on the door way image conveys the lack of agency she actually has in space—in her own space even. The anxiety of the threshold illuminates the instability of her boundaries. The repeated image of the man looming at the door illustrates her recognition that she has no control over his desires and his passions, thus, losing spatial freedom even just by knowing that he is waiting outside.

For Loy, the symbol of the door also illuminates the anxiety of the illusions of inside/outside and "illusions of protection" of the house (Bachelard 5). In "The Effectual

Marriage” Loy begins “The door was an absurd thing” (Loy 36). This line locates a dialog on marriage and gender roles in the doorway, further demonstrating the door as crucial image for understanding Modernist women’s struggles in gendered space. The door is “absurd” because of the promise to outside exploration and adventure. Loy later establishes that even as the couple attempt an equal relationship that their navigation of their own household areas are influenced by gender. For instance, the wife looks out the “kitchen” window while the husband looks at the window of the “library” (Loy 36). Their gendered boundaries in their own home reinforce the idea of gender-limited mobility as also effected by the gender of other people with whom one shares a space. If there’s not a man present the space can belong to the woman, or, effectively become “ungendered.” The man’s presence at the door brings to light that even that agency at home is compromised, gender being inflicted by the man. The image of the door manifests that, despite Modernist women’s attempts to dislocate their writing and artistic self from gender, that, inevitably in the intimacy the home that gendering inevitably resurfaces when she is no longer alone. In the end of “At the Door to the House” Loy’s speaker does not permit the man’s entrance and thus she writes this as “the little love tale/ That never came true/ At the door to the house” which also conveys spaces direct influence in women’s intimate relationships as they both desired love and clung dearly to the semblance of spatial autonomy they tried to craft. (Loy 35). I read this ending as a decision between love and preservation of the safety of home.

### **Location**

As we see the infiltration of gender even into Modernist women’s private spaces it is also relevant to look at how gender influenced navigating “outside” and city life. Despite considering Greenwich Village and New York City a center of her poetic career, Mina Loy seldom writes about city life compared to some of her peers like Edna Saint Vincent Millay. In fact, most Loy’s

writing located in hypothetical natural spaces or romanticized European destinations. I think her choice of locations directly relates to Loy's ideology of feminism and space, this ideology of pushing one's self into the "new." It appears she writes about distant and almost imaginary locations aiming to un-gender the speaker or at least remove them from the societal perceptions written onto them when writing from a familiar city vantage point.

Loy's lack of writing on city life is important because it illuminates a conflict or lack of identification with that location possibly because of her more limited agency. Loy faced criticism because she failed to ascribe to the acceptable parameters of women artists in the city as she put on elaborate and eccentric personas and wrote openly about sex. Conover explains a woman could "express herself as a solitary genius" but Loy respected "no such boundaries" (xvi). She lives the erotic, "as an assertion of the life force of women" by focusing on locations in which she could explore her own innermost pleasure and desire (55). While she didn't "pay attention" to critiques; it would be absurd to suggest she didn't listen or think about the heavy masculine criticism she got even from people like her first husband, Stephen Haweis, who said her mannerisms and writing would cause her to "lose her good name" (Conover xvi). Massey writes "the city belonged to men," art was made in "spaces of men" and even comments that the "modern gaze was that of men" (234). To assert her own voice in a male dominated artistic culture Loy's poetry strategically removes her speakers from the context of the city to construct locations where a woman could access a similar kind of agency as men had in New York city.

### **Nature Imagery**

Loy constructs pagan-like relationships to nature, drawing on the Romantics. In doing so Loy creates nature as a place of self-exploration and spatial freedom. In these natural terrains she can tap into her own erotic self because of the detachment from oppressive city structures. In

“The Mediterranean Sea” Loy refers to the sea as “her,” thus both personifying the sea as female and drawing on pagan representation of water as feminine. The Mediterranean Sea is not a space that a human speaker can truly occupy and thus the creation of this space aligns with Loy’s overall aims to construct imagined locations to house feminine freedom. I want to pay close attention to the language she uses to describe the motions of the sea and the objects adorning her body. The sea “sighs,” “lies,” and “drift”s. She “draws idle tides/ over volcanic privacies/ frilled with the rouse and hush of drowsing foam” (Loy 101). Each of these actions conveys peacefulness (Loy 101). While this lack of deliberate movements could be read as a women’s stereotype of submissiveness, I think that Loy rather desires to illustrate the female divine as lounging, unhindered by the pressures of gendered space. Loy’s sea is regal. She does not have to be deliberate because in the space she occupies she’s permitted to expand; her space is without the influence of masculine dominance or boundaries.

Using Audre Lorde’s theory of the erotic further conveys this link between nature and feminine empowerment. Lorde explains the erotic as, “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” and as far back as the Romantics these personifications of nature display a connection to human’s inner most beautiful and chaotic selves (54). Furthermore, Loy adds to the royal imagery with depictions of the ocean’s adornments as “The monstrous sapphire” and “jeweled Adriatic arm” to convey her power over vast distances. The sea’s body touches “Venice” to convey her quiet influence over masculine spaces. This influence comes from her location in the imagined mythical feminine space and thus the sea remains empowered even when encountering the metropolitan. Loy even incorporates another allusion to the Romantics in the lines “to drift imperceptibly/ with the lost sob of Shelley” (Loy 101). Her allusion to Percy Shelley conveys that she is aware of the tradition she’s

invoking and innovating as a tool to construct the female divine as a location. From *Space, Place, and Gender*, Doreen Massey comments on how depictions of the feminine in art are so often “women seen through the eyes of men” and therefore “The Mediterranean Sea” can also be a way of constructing the female divine in a location free of the male gaze (185). To an American readership her depictions of the Mediterranean would also have an exotic and foreign quality. While seldom mentioning American cities or locations, Loy uses European locations to concrete the idea of autonomy through movement and travel.

### **Moments of Gender Epiphany**

Loy’s poem “Three Moments in Paris” emphasizes the speaker as passing through this location, highlighting the instability and fleeting nature of romantic space. Loy uses passing “moments” to examine the relationship between space, time, and location to love and the erotic. Loy begins “Though you had never possessed me/ I had belonged to you since the beginning of time” (Loy 15). She purposefully starts off in a knot of spatial and temporal contradictions. The first segment is called “One O’Clock at Night” and in the following first line she immediately departs from the idea of a fixed time by claiming to belong to her lover “since the beginning of time” (Loy 15). Within the time and space contradictions she also underscores the conflict women felt between love and autonomy by asserting he “never possessed” her but also “belonged” to him. The choice of the word “belonged” is significant because it pronounces the objectification of women, to “belong” to a man akin to traditional marriages. Loy uses the phrase since “the beginning of time” to convey the inevitability of feeling owned when in a romantic relationship with a man. Claire Eby, in her examination of marriage in the Progressive era *Till Choice Do Us Part*, comments that the Modernists had a “repeated compulsion to textualize marriage” in both “treaties” and “creative writing” (xix). This “bookish enterprise” of reforming

marriage placed value on gender equality in romantic relationships while at the same time failing to consider how to stage this equality in a physical space (Eby xix). This gap between ideological goals and methods of practice those goals left especially New Women with these feelings of contradiction as they navigated both artistic and intimate spaces. “Three Moments in Paris” displays the unavailability of gender as well as New Women’s desires to be free from it.

While, initially Loy’s speaker embraces the quiet moment with her lover, the influence of gender dynamics penetrates the scene. These moments of masculine performance highlight how gender roles act as barriers for the speaker to access to erotic pleasure in her romantic life and sexuality:

And your careless arm across my back      gesticulated  
 As your indisputable male voice      roared  
 Through my brain and body  
 Arguing dynamic decomposition  
 Of which I was understanding nothing. (Loy 15).

The word “Indisputable” draws attention to the speaker’s inability to divorce the act of speaking from gendering; the implications of a “male” voice in space evoking feelings of dominance and loudness. While the speaker attempts to rest beside her lover, this moment of realization, precipitating from the gendering of his voice, impacts the entire setting around her. This “roar” of a “male voice” causes her to pay more attention to her own gender’s position in the space she occupies with him. Loy’s use of “brain” and “body” is important because she conveys the influence of gender on the physical terrain of “body,” influencing how she moves in reaction to his gender and what she knows as her own gender. She explains his voice “Deafening      woke me,” further drawing attention to the effect of the male voice on her physical body.

I think Bachelard’s theories on “home” can be helpful for understanding the body as another type of “home.” For Bachelard, home is where we can dream in peace, and therefore this

act of waking the speaker can be examined further as an illustration of New Women's struggles to craft a location to dream in. The speaker attempts to rest romantically "leaning" against her lover's "shoulder" but is inevitably disrupted by the impact of his gender. (Loy 15). What's even more intriguing is that Loy then goes on to say that in waking up the speaker "ceased to be a woman" (Loy 15). By "ceasing" I don't think Loy that her speaker actually no longer believes herself to be a woman, but rather, that the imposition of his masculinity alters her conception of being a "woman." On the surface this might seem oppositional sexist (the idea that men and women are innately opposite) but I think this moment provide a more intricate exploration of gender. By saying she ceases to be a woman, the speaker illuminates the nuance to both one's personal gender identity as well as the gender roles written onto her body.

In the latter half of "One O'clock at Night" from "Three Moments in Paris" Loy dreams of being a woman free from awareness of gender oppression. Often Loy's works employ "Futurism" to dangle the speakers in imagined or entirely "location-less" spaces of contemplation or memory like this reflection on womanhood. By creating imagined spaces Loy therefore establishes locations in which her erotic-self can flourish free from strict gender roles. She reflects:

Beautiful half-hour of being a mere woman  
The animal woman  
Understanding nothing of man (Loy 15).

The short time frame of a "half-hour" conveys the fleeting nature of spaces in which a woman writer like herself could access the erotic sense of self. The phrase "mere woman" is used to display the speaker as looking back with a present knowledge of women's subordination in society. At the same time, she examines this space of unknowing as a "beautiful" period because it was one in which she believed herself to have spatial autonomy. Describing herself as an

“animal woman” is just another way in which she conveys this kind of natural and uninhibited mobility she once felt when not aware men’s domination in space. The futurism manifests in the phrase “Understanding nothing of man,” as if she may have existed in a moment completely free of the presence of male domination at all; a sort of make dream realm of only womanhood free of men’s argumentative nature which she describes in the poem as “cerebral gymnastics” (Loy 15).

I want to come back to the idea of ceasing to be a woman; I think that reflection is crucial to the conflicts of gender and space for New Woman which I want to bring forth from Loy’s poetry. This sentiment of “ceasing” I think is more directly linked to “ceasing” access to the erotic, the pleasures of joys of womanhood seeing as the speaker “ceases” being a woman in response to men’s imposition into her peaceful space; her space being made violent by their presence. Even the name “New” women evokes the idea of being “Not” women, of “ceasing.” While New Woman could use tactics like the avant-garde and print culture to throw their voice into the public sphere these actions did not actually permit women freedom to their own spaces but rather provided women with ways to smuggle their voices and their art into the company of male Modernists.

While Modernist men also traveled frequently, Loy’s poetry and life travels convey movement as central to her identity; a movement I would call “fleeing” from the gender dynamics spaces she occupied. I relate her travel to Loy’s other “persona-making” tactics such as crafting herself into a legend in the Village and putting on disguises and costumes. (Conover). Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, writes “publicity in women is detestable” and therefore “anonymity runs in their blood” (1344). In a way, Loy smuggled her evocative erotic poetry into masculine artistic spaces through her art of anonymity. The heavy masculinity of both the city



and the Modern art movement prevented her from negotiating herself in these spaces without her different eccentric tactics and performance.

### **Changes to City Life**

Life became more financially precarious in post-war Greenwich Village and owning physical spaces became more and more difficult which. Inevitably, these economic changes influenced dynamics of gender in spacewomen's avenues for constructing their own erotic spaces. Like Loy, Diane di Prima is also known for themes of the erotic in her poetry. Di Prima's poetry, likewise, examines gender and space in relationship her access to the erotic.

While Loy has consistently "missed" being adopted into the Modernist canon, Diane di Prima is the only Beat woman who has really been recognized as part of the broader Beat movement. I think Loy's lack of canonization is related to her movement. You can't really pin Loy down. Massey writes, "reference to place can be used in the constitution of the identity of an individual," and without such reference to place it has proved nearly impossible to categorize Loy. (167). Is she an American poet? A European poet? French? German? Is she a love poet or a political poet? Loy's purposeful elusiveness and dislocation perplexes scholars and in her attempts to allude gender constraints she has also, inadvertently, alluded proper scholarly attention. Di Prima exhibits a similar degree of restless movement, but, at the same time, her story is more "local." An Italian immigrant growing up in New York City is a narrative scholars and readers easily grasp onto. This causes a different problem with scholarship on di Prima in that her work is seldom examined beyond it's clearly transgressive qualities. The parallels between di Prima and Loy are easily noted: these women poets address themes of dislocation, emphasis on fleeting moments, and depictions of threshold spaces. Turning to close reading

reveals in what nuanced ways these themes are approached and explored in Loy and di Prima's poetry.

While Loy doesn't engage much with American city spaces in her work, di Prima's poetry and prose seems to live almost exclusively in the thrum of New York City life. For one, despite rejecting traditional forms, Loy and other Modernists did draw on the Romantic's tradition of valuing the natural and critiquing industrialization. While there is a girth of Modernist literature written about the city, the tone of those depictions tends to be upbeat and draws an image of New York City as a free/liberated space. While exploring space and the Modernism movement, Massey writes women Modernist writers were more likely to exult the "energy and vitality" of the city. (258). One example would be Edna Saint Vincent Millay's "Recuerdo." In "Recuerdo" the repeated line "WE were very tired, we were very merry/ We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry," gives the city a sing-song and light hearted tone. (Loy 10). The poem also stresses the "apples" and "pears" the speaker shares with their friends which are elements of the natural within the city. (10). Even a possible depiction of a poorer or older person in the poem is greeted with joy by the speaker who says, "We hailed, "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head" (10). I use this poem because of how emblematic Millay was as a New Woman and furthermore to contrast di Prima's drastically more gritty depictions of her interactions in the city.

Observing their different approaches towards city life illuminates how these authors negotiate the inside/inside or private/public binary. When discussing public vs. private in terms of gender, Massey writes "women present a threat" in the city was created "to pertain to men"

(258). Loy and di Prima differ in how they negotiate themselves as a “threat.” Massey elaborates that the vastness of the city enhanced women’s ability “to escape the rigidity of patriarchal social controls,” thus heightening them as a “threat” and representation of “disorder” and “chaos”

(258). Loy explores the chaos of womanhood through her deconstructive style but doesn’t confront the “threat” of her sex head-on. This tactic relates back feminist tactics for Modernist women and Suffragists as a whole, finding ways to become unthreatening to achieve their aims at greater equality within existing social structures like marriage and the right to vote.

Decades later, woman like di Prima no longer found tactics of “throwing voice” to be as effective in the normative social-political climate of the 1950s. Inversely to the performance art style of the Moderns, Beat culture valued total unapologetic self-exposure. Di Prima embraces her body in the city as representing “feeling, sexuality and even chaos,” thus channeling her erotic power. (258). This understanding also provides us with insight into how many Beat women felt torn between parental homes and trying to make it on their own, staying at home symbolizing not being part of the “chaos” of city-women’s sexual liberation and a semblance of stability. By dissecting interactions between home and city and the erotic, we can better understand not only the aspects of di Prima’s work that resist societal expectations, but, furthermore, we can also examine the struggles and conflicts women Beat poets faced when trying to negotiate their bodies in masculine city space.

### **Torn Between Home and City**

Because di Prima is showcased by Beat scholars as the Beat woman who “made it” we seldom look at the tensions apparent in her constructions of home and where to locate artistic identity. While Loy clearly depicts her own spatial borders through imagery of her own rooms and doorways, di Prima’s work illustrates a blurring of borders between body, home, and city

culture. In “On Sitting Down to Write I Decide Instead to go to Fred Herko’s Concert” di Prima conveys the city’s ability to obscure and manipulate boundaries. Di Prima being with melodious natural imagery:

As water, silk  
 The quiver of fish  
 Or the long cry of goose  
     Or some such bird  
     I never heard  
 your orange tie  
 sock in the eye  
     as Duncan  
     might forcibly note (di Prima 45).

This natural imagery quickly dissipates in the first few lines as her language unfurls into images of clothing and people she’s thinking of. The spacing of the lines meanders to visually convey the unraveling of her focus on her own writing to that of what is happening around her. Even the image of her work as “water” or “The quiver of fish” clearly draws attention to the fluidity and transience of location. At least for di Prima, I think this thrust against the “home,” or even bachelor-woman space like Modernist women had, is related to a resistance to “The construction of 'home' as a woman's place” (Massey 179). Di Prima resists the idea of women as fixed or local by valuing fluidity of space.

The penetration of the city into her “private” space conveys a slippage of agency. While trying to write the speaker is compelled to wander into thoughts about what else is going on in the city around her. She asks, “are you sitting under the irregular drums/ of Brooklyn Joe Jones,” and “have you scurried already/ hurried already” (di Prima 45). These fragmented ponderings convey a degree of anxiety the speaker feels about what she could be missing while being alone, conveying how Beat culture deeply devalued solitary creative work. The rhyme and parallel structure of “have you scurried already/ hurried already,” draws attention to the fast-pace of

change in the city and inability to pin-down what the biggest “happening” was on any specific night.

The speaker leaves her desk and goes out to “the dark caves of obligation” as she feels involuntarily compelled to be part of the “cool” scene (45). Highlighting her speaker’s lack of agency, she goes “downstairs & into a coat” instead of “putting on a coat” The phrase “into a coat” removes the speaker’s agency even in dressing herself (45). She also calls this obligation to go out and join other Beats a “petulant vacuum” (45). Di Prima concludes the poem saying:

Hello  
I came here  
after all. (45).

I choose to show the spacing because of how much spacing influences meaning in this conclusion. The drastic indent of “Hello” indicates a hesitation and following that with “I came here” left aligned shows her adhering to this sense of obligation to be at the center of what’s going on. The last indent for “after all” reestablishes that hesitation, possibly a desire to go back to where she had been alone and exploring her creativity. While social interaction in artistic communities is certainly beneficial for women artists, this poem really reflects on how that obligation erodes the boundaries of the creative/dreaming space of the home, a space once held sacred by the New Woman. In “Magick In Theory & Practice” di Prima also depicts a Village arts scene and she reflects “oh home/ I may never see again” (75). Reiterating the Beat movement’s stress on living in the “now.” The longing tone conveys the Beat’s devaluing of private space and worship of detachment. While for men private space might not hold the same value, for artistic women the private might be the one space she had agency and control.

### **Dark Alleyways**

Di Prima also further delves into the city's dark and ominous qualities. Her poetry conveys tensions between self and the dominance of the city and explores a loss of self she felt while immersed in vastness. "The Jungle" moves in five parts and explores the city encroaching again on the private while also provoking a sense of wildness and wonder from the speaker. Bachelard also theorizes the home within the city space and explains "the cellar as the dark entity of the house" and furthermore that if the house is in a city that "the dream is one of dominating in depth of surrounding cellars" (18, 20). I think the image of "surrounding cellars" parallels how Di Prima views the city, especially because the "cellar" evokes the sensation of "falling" or "tripping" into complete darkness. This darkness not only reflects promiscuity but also idea of being alone in a crowd, that, despite the multitudes of people there is a sense of loneliness and isolation created by not only being in a large city but also being a woman in a large city. Di Prima introduces the city "and this is NY nothing but sleet & fog horns/ we'd have to answer the door again someday you know" (26). Sleet specifically symbolizes the muddling and blurring effects of the city. "Fog horns" likewise highlights not only a sense of aimlessness but also that notion loneliness and longing.

"The Jungle" centers themes of identity and loss of parameters between self and the "jungle"/wild of the city. While Mina Loy attempts to assert control over her threshold spaces such as of doorways and entrances to her home, di Prima does not make the same claim to thresholds. Thresholds are not the only point of entrance into the private space for di Prima. For example, in the above lines the phrase "have to" with the action of opening the door conveys that thresholds lack defined meaning or significance as barriers. If the owner of a door has no decision on whether it opens, is that really a door? Or, to rephrase the questions, is that really a source of protection between the home and "surrounding cellars." Similarly, the speaker of "The

Jungle” asks “where’s the cellar where you never wet yr feet?/ whose sound is it?” (26). Her questioning the location of the cellar conveys the proliferations of “cellars” within the context of the city; the phrase “where you never wet yr feet” is used to convey that the cellar she is talking about is not necessarily the actual physical location in the house, but a metaphorical “cellar” such as the one theorized by Bachelard.

The question “whose sound is it?” explores the commotion of the city as an entity of its own; no one person creates the surrounding sounds and thus adding to the disorienting and dislocating effects of the city. The speaker goes on to describe “a foot came through the ceiling,” thus drawing attention again to the insignificance of the threshold space when all aspects of the private space have the potential to become a threshold; to be penetrated by other people. In the context of gendered space penetration is masculine and has the effect of obliterating “nooks” and “crannies” of “solitude” where artistic women could ground themselves and hypothetically corner off locations free from the masculine dominance of city space (Bachelard 14). The small and secret places where femininity must locate itself are, inversely then, yonic. An important threshold space to also analyze for Beat woman is the “window,” especially in contrast to the doorway as a repeated image for Modernist women and this concept of unprotected living.

### **The Window**

I will use several of di Prima’s poems to analyze the different ways in which the window image is employed to convey the fraught relationship between privacy and publicity for Beat women. Continuing with “The Jungle,” di Prima describes the sleet outside as “kissing the window like a goldfish/ like a sick goldfish” (26). The action of “kissing” a window insinuates an attempted intrusion and at the same time, unlike the door, the window represents a further lack of agency. While in Loy’s poetry there is a consistent theme of men approaching the door

and entreating entrance, di Prima's windows convey that despite there being a physical boundary that the outside can still look and penetrate in a way that a doorway would not permit. Later in "The Jungle" di Prima writes:

while my door gets death blows.  
                   how my window's bruised  
 blue fleshmarks on the glass  
 the wind ignores me, glances off my cunt  
                   my knuckles  
                   & the corners of my mouth. (27).

If the previous images didn't illustrate the violence of the outside attempting entrance, these lines certainly do. The idea of a window being "bruised" draws attention to the pain of being battered by the outside city without control over its intrusion. The speaker's sexual imagery such as when she refers to the wind off her "cunt," relates the threshold between indoors and weather to sex and gender. The door also "gets death blows" reinforcing the lack of protection which the home provides in the "wild" "jungle" of the city. Di Prima also calls the door "cancerous" to convey the infectious quality of the outside into the private space (27).

In "The Window" di Prima again imagines the window as a site of violence and penetration when she writes, "this kind of bird flies backwards/ and this love/ breaks on a windowpane" (18). Bachelard's also explores the house as a "nest" and I see this image of the "nest" in relationship to the "bird flying backwards" as signifying women's attempt to return to a kind of home space. The action of "flying" also conveys that there is no location for the "bird" to return, therefore no "nest" left for the speaker to find safety and comfort in. Love "breaking" against glass further displays the window as a thin and ineffective barrier, unable to provide true privacy. Bachelard writes "[in a city] On every side intimate living flees" and this lack of intimacy is especially felt by women because lack of agency in public and private space. (27). Love "breaks" at this barrier between the public and the private to illustrate the fragility to Beat



women's autonomy, especially when falling in love. Love, specifically with Beat men, eroding all semblance of spatial agency.

### Women's Spaces

"The Window" also conveys sentiments of isolation and loneliness at this threshold space. Di Prima writes describes this window as being "where no light talks," which further conveys the conflicts Beat women faced by depicting the private as a dark space without voice. (di Prima 18). Both lacking light and conversation displays the degree of loneliness in one's own space, as Beat women even more so than Modernist women had less networks with each other and often lived secluded lives as artists. While Diane di Prima was certainly an exception, performing her poetry frequently with some of the most well-known male poets, that doesn't mean that she didn't also struggle with feelings of isolation. It didn't help that Beat culture valued experiences and living "in the now" over solitary work, but Beat women's isolation is directly related to their relationship to the threshold space and gender norms of the 1950s. While there was a culture of the "boy gang" for Beat men, Beat women seldom found the same kind of groups of comradery. In Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*, Johnson frequently goes out to lunch with Elise Cowen and travels to the Village with a friend in her teens, but there is never an organized gathering of more than a few girls. This would change as consciousness raising groups would emerge in the beginning of the 1960s, giving more radical women a place to share insights about everyday gender oppression. (Women's Collective). For emerging Beat women in the late 1950s, organization and community of this type did not exist.

Modernist women were very much organized and frequently met to directly address women's issues beyond suffrage (which of course was widely successful for organizing women).

One group, called “Heterodoxy” met in Greenwich Village between 1912 and 1940. (Schwarz 107). The group openly welcomed lesbian and bisexual women, women of different races and ethnicities, and women of different political views all together to discuss politics over luncheons. (Crocco 193-4). The weekly nature of these meetings made them a haven for Modernist women to come back to, a generation of feminine space and therefore agency and support. Wrede writes that while space can be a form of control it can also become “a site of women’s actualization” (10). Whether a Beat woman knew about Heterodoxy specifically or not, she would have likely been aware of previous community around the women’s rights movements at the turn of the century, thus, her position at the window also symbolizes a “window” into a past. Seeing the success of the past; the glass symbolizing the shifts in gender politics and cultural climate preventing her from generating equivalent feminine spaces. The pervasive masculinization of Beat women’s spaces (public and private) deeply influenced their formation of the erotic and explorations of sexuality.

With a lack of identification with home and a lack of feminine spaces, Beat women’s search for the erotic is fraught with the overtones of Beat men’s hyper-sexuality and the inverse conservatism of broader American culture. Di Prima’s own ideology is clearly an example of these two conflicting discourses around sex and erosion of boundaries within the city. On one hand, she transgressed gender norms in her poetry and on the other hand di Prima “represents herself as male defined,” shaped by the male figures of the beat movement. (Libby 47). Libby writes “the various boundaries di Prima wandered were drawn by men” (47). Furthermore, di Prima was “opposed to abortion” and “birth control” despite speaking out for sexual liberation. (47). Despite “finding solidarity with women” her writing, especially her writing on sexuality, illustrates that she attempts to move through space similarly to Beat men and even at times

expresses sympathy for “perpetrators of the most unambiguous violence against women” (Libby 47).

### **Sex and Gender Contradictions**

I want to use di Prima’s use of the erotic in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and “Vector” to explore how she manifests these contradictions of space and gender. I have already discussed some of the limitations of di Prima’s sex-scapades in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, such as her lack of stability and use of affairs as a type of escapism from her dislocated reality. I want to look further at how throughout the novel di Prima mimics the way Beat men occupy space and why this creates scenes of pornography rather than erotic exploration. I want to go back to a phrase I analyzed before, “The game is Cool,” (di Prima 15). Further than just illustrating her lack of genuine “self” in the moments she shares with Ivan, this also illustrates that her character mimics the kinds of sexual encounters glorified by Beat men. To view even a one-night stand as “a game” is an imitation of Beat men’s ideology around sexual encounters. She often uses the verb “playing” when describing sexual actions as well which conveys a masculine way of controlling and manipulating space. And despite the way her main character embraces her own sexuality, di Prima’s prose still often center a phallo-centric depiction of sex, revealing a lack of the erotic in her prose.

Even the chapters in which she has sex with a woman, Tomi, the prose take on a voyeuristic male-gaze which has a direct relationship to the conceptualizations of that sexual space. I want to go back to Pollock quote and note how the sex scenes depicted between Tomi and di Prima are clearly a “site of patriarchal culture” in how the scenes mimic modern porn films and are crafted for the male gaze. (85). Each chapter begins with little prologue to the

narrator's relationship to her sex partner and most of each chapter is taken up with sex acts, viewed from a camera-like angle that, despite being in the first person, that zooms back to capture the entire scene. The male gaze can be harder to conceptualize when created through writing as opposed to something more direct like a photograph or paintings. Despite di Prima's attempts to pursue sex in a "masculine manner," her female body writes the script for how those desires will be read; as existing for the gaze of men and "appearing" rather than truly acting (Berger 47).

This creates a whole mess of gender analysis in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. By assuming a "masculine sexuality" di Prima creates her protagonist into site of pornography rather than erotic power. As Lorde writes "the pornographic emphasizes sensation without feeling," and di Prima centers all her encounters in the physical functions of the body and not beyond those; her desires exist on the surface of the skin. (54). Between pages 6 and 9 di Prima focuses heavily on one partner, Ivan, and his "beautiful cock" (7). Every time she experiences pleasure it is because of what Ivan does to her "in reply" to her sexual acts and her character's entire focus is devoted to "his cock" (di Prima 8). The character explains her desire becoming "urgent," again emphasizing sensation over feeling. Berger explores the difference between nakedness and the nude and I think his discussion is applicable to di Prima's slippage into pornography. Berger writes "Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise...The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress" (54). Di Prima exhibits her female protagonist as "nude." She "puts on" this nudity in attempt to show her agency but in doing so disguises the validity of her naked body.

Reading *Memoirs of a Beatnik* along with di Prima's poetry is crucial to understanding the kind of gender entanglements Beat women navigated in attempting to locate their erotic.

Unlike her prose writing, di Prima's "Vector" reaches towards locating the erotic and a feminine sexual space while at the same time critiquing male dominance of sexual/intimate space. The term "vector" is defined as "a quantity having direction as well as magnitude, especially as determining the position of one point in space relative to another" (Merriam-Webster). This subtly alludes to her exploration of women navigating desire "relative to another" meaning the other gender, men. Di Prima beings:

this: to explode  
 the love affair with space.  
 that the void penetrate  
       make talons  
       make like fangs  
       slip in (23).

Beginning with the destruction of a love "affair with space" in such a violent and abrupt manner conveys the tension of contradictions between desiring spatial autonomy as well as desiring sex and love. She uses the image of "the void" to illustrate both the unattainability of freedom within a sexual space as well as the unspoken and "deepest and non-rational knowledge" of the erotic. (Lorde 53). The juxtaposition between "void" and "penetrate" conveys the violence in sexuality and desire, thus, further developed by the following sharps imagery of "talons" and "fangs." In the following stanza, she illustrates how gender influences day to day navigation through space, writing, "if I cd hold a skirt in one hand, wait/ while people (male) opened doors/ never dream/ of the women's jon or dancing chicks/ putting on tights" (23). She mocks the idea of men having to hold open doors through mimicry, saying the idea that she would have to "wait" to have the door opened. She uses "the women's jon" and "dancing chicks" as approximations for feminine space. Having to list a women's bathroom as a feminine space highlights the lack of existing women's spaces.

While critiquing the heavy masculinity of city space di Prima also goes on to write “this is irrelevant” and goes on to locate the erotic detached from gendered space in “the void” (23). While di Prima is well known for her explicit sex scenes, it is in her poetry where she locates the erotic and interrogates the creation of the pornographic. She writes, “the stars/ are always blackest on the other side of the void” (di Prima 23). Here the blackness represents the wells of erotic power like how Lorde writes of the erotic as existing deep within, an “internal sense of satisfaction” that women can unearth and channel for power (54). Darkness and the night is often used to represent female sexuality because of the mystery and elusiveness of it. Reaching for the “other side of the void” then conveys the speaker’s moment of grasping at her own power located outside the confines of gendered space. Wrede writes that feminist geocritics “seek ways to resist the dominant gender-space paradigm” and furthermore seek to “subvert” the patriarchal orders existing in space by discovering new ways to create space (12-13). This is essentially what both Loy and di Prima do when they move into metaphorical language to hypothesize the locations of their deepest erotic feelings. Later, in “Vector,” di Prima goes on to write:

To outsmart space  
                   to come colder  
 than the void  
                   That’s one way—  
 still enuf & you hit 0  
                   (zero)  
                   [absolute] (24)

She directly references her desires to disrupt the order of space. Using the metaphor of freezing di Prima conveys a desire to slow down in the constant motion of masculine city space. To “outsmart” physical space she imagines being as cold as “absolute” “zero” to draw attention to the extreme forces that would be needed to physically alter the reproduction of gender in space. The variance of line spacing mirrors the speaker’s aims to elude and reach beyond gendered

space. Usage of brackets and parenthesis also mirrors her attempts to find and hold onto a place of stillness and solitude, the “concentration of intimacy and refuge” which women Beats especially lacked in the city (Bachelard 37). While also imagining the distant and metaphorical location of the erotic she also examines her own body in physical space.

As di Prima continues, she further delves into her speaker’s detachment from space and how that detachment influences intimacy with others, writing “my feet haven’t felt the ground in years/ a gentle wobbling motion/ side to side” (25). Through poetry di Prima more authentically explores feels and emotions that result from the effects of gender and space. The kind performative sexuality that exists in her prose vanishes from her poetry as she channels erotic power. Through her metaphorical representations of feeling location-less, di Prima interweaves images of intimacy and touch like “an open hand on the back of my neck” and “your hand just below the shoulder blades” (di Prima 25). These snap shots of encounters convey how even the most intimate moments of her interactions are distilled through these barriers of gendered-space. She describes her speaker in bed as both being a “tap-dancer” and “the audience” to convey that same idea of the “transvestite” female onlooker adapting the male-gaze as established by Pollock (24).

My intention for comparing di Prima’s poetry so closely to her prose is both to illustrate the contradictions in Beat women writing as well as the reasons behind them. Because the Beat movement is envisioned as being “forward thinking” or “counter culture” we often forget the strict gender norms of the 1950s and what that meant for how women navigated space in their day to day lives. Little scholarship has been given to di Prima’s poetry while there is plenty of articles about her as the sexuality liberated Beat women. Even the anthology, *Women of the Beat Generation*, makes sure to include in her biography a paragraph devoted to her orgy scene in

Memoirs of a Beatnik. (Knight). If critics paid more attention to the complexity of her poetry they would be able to see that reducing di Prima to a sexual icon is objectifying and reinforces the misogyny of the Beat movement, failing to capture the full scope of Beat women's experiences with space and oppression. The interview with Anne Waldman where di Prima remarks that she believes that she was "one of the first women to break through" can come off as sounding pompous but I think it more reflects the degree of ideological distance 1950s culture had established from the prior era of flourishing Modernist women. (Knight 124).

Neither di Prima or Loy are easy to pin down. They cannot be simply read as American poets or immigrant poets though both share these fragmented and entangled identities. Furthermore, without thorough understanding of gendered space as the root of some of these poets' contradictions, di Prima or Loy might appear to be too non-cohesive for study. Thus, the traditional masculine literary criticism and creation of the canon see these women poets who write about sexuality through the male gaze, hailing them as sex symbols and failing to see the conflict and struggle represented alongside their pursuit of the erotic.

I want to answer the question as to whether Loy or di Prima could really have "a bedroom of one's own." Going back to how Bachelard theorizes home and the "bed room" as safety and "solitude," I think both Loy and di Prima clearly represent feeling the male presence even just outside their realm of "home" whether it's at the window or the door. (14). These thresholds not only convey the liminal space which women artists occupied in both times but also the persistent threat of penetration within the city. They present the female body as surface under invasion from all angles. They grasp the erotic in metaphorical and distant futures because the physical spaces they inhabit do not provide the "proofs or illusions of stability" which they theoretically should. (Bachelard 17). Being women, the illusion of protection disappears. At the



same time, Loy and di Prima were both women who were bold enough to offer their vulnerability on the page. To study them without seeing that struggle within space is a perversion of their radical act to create feminine space through their writing. By sharing their bodies, whether their reader is in 2017 or the 1970s, they create a location in which feminine space can be generated and reproduced infinitely despite the restrictions of the physical world. These written locations thus serve as a potential refuge which physical space betrays for women.

### **Conclusion: Breaking Down “Beat”**

Towards the goal of complicating scholarship and theoretical/historical conceptualization of the Beat movement, my work would not be complete without reflecting on the ways in which Beat culture hypocritically critiques mainstream whiteness while at the same time performs whiteness and appropriates black art forms. It's so ironic because Beat poetry is very much associated with social justice and yet is dominated by relatively privileged white men (Allen Ginsberg was gay but I think we overlook how much his white maleness protected him in many respects), dominating over the voices of women and people of color. Beat poetry is deeply informed by jazz and African American oral traditions and I propose that the act of naming this form “Beat” is an act of white-washing. Recently, some scholarly work on Bob Kaufman has succeeded in critiquing the hypocritical whiteness of a movement so widely informed by African American art forms but still falls short in addressing the misogyny of the Beat movement. Why is it that I can find white women who are considered Beat and black men who are considered Beat but not any black women? The only black woman recognized as a member of the specifically the Beat generation is Alene Lee, known for being one of Jack Kerouac's lovers who he wrote about in his book *The Subterraneans*. I wanted to conclude my thesis by asserting the importance of an intersectional approach towards how we study and evaluate the Beat legacy, specifically focusing in on gender and race. Without a perspective of gender and race theory working in tandem we cannot fully evaluate different levels of privilege that functioned to raise some voices while painting over more marginalized others.

I wanted to briefly touch on Bob Kaufman because he was a Beat poet who openly critiqued the performance of whiteness of other Beat poets. “Jazz dominates” Kaufman's style and how he understands Beat poetry and is also his core critique of the Beat movement as

misinterpreting and appropriating jazz and black culture. (Kohli 105). Kohli writes that Kaufman was most critical of the Beat “unwillingness to acknowledge Beat’s “cultural debt to blackness” (105). In history poetry collection *Golden Sardine* he frequently refers to white Beats as “imitators” who are “eating symbols” which they do not even fully understand the meaning of (Kaufman 57). For many Beat this appropriation of blackness functions as a device for Beat men to distance themselves from the mainstream culture with which they disagreed while at the same time fetishizing and romanticizing the minorities, especially African Americans. You need only to pursue Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” or Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* to find a slew of African Americans being used as metaphorical devices. Kerouac goes as far as to reflect, “I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned” (180). Later “wishing he were a Negro,” these reflections highlight an underlying theme that runs deep in Beat poetry which is that, in many ways, Beat poetry reaches towards other cultures in an attempt to detach from whiteness. Ironically, the Beat therefore end up doing the exact thing that they claimed to avoid which was whitewashing black art forms. It would be inaccurate to say this is true of all Beat poetry as there were African Americans and other people of color who wrote Beat poetry, but “Beat” as it is presently constructed by scholarship centers the work of white men and therefore has constructed an incomplete vision of the Beat generation, replicating the misogyny and racism of the underlying the movement. Another central African American figure to the Beat movement as well as the black power movement was Amiri Baraka. Even more so than Kaufman, he spoke out about his conflicts with Beat poets he worked around.

Baraka is an interesting fraught figure across multiple different movements of the 1960s but there is no denying his talent and central role at the heart of the Beat generation. Also, known as LeRoi Jones, my first glimpse of him was in Hettie Cohen's book in which she detailed their relationship and eventual falling out. I would say I "sided" with Cohen having read her memoir from her point of view but I think it's an important moment to take in and process the racial tension in the 1960s and the urgency to which the black power movement was fighting for the cause of civil rights and essentially their lives as black Americans. In Baraka's biography, he reflects the excitement he felt to connect with someone like "Ginsberg" and the "Black Mountain Poets," saying that he "didn't feel Beat," but that he was getting in contact with other successful poets and it was the closest thing in the mainstream that he remarked "somewhat resembled myself" (230). Still he later explained in his biography how being black made him an "outsider" in a group of supposed "outsiders" called the Beats, a kind of dissolution that would only grow inside Baraka as the Beat movement became more mainstream. These reflections bring to light some of the most unexamined aspects of the Beat movement which is its overall whiteness despite taking on theme of oppressions. And yet addressing African American men still doesn't provide for a full understanding of the intersections of gender race. I want to look at the scholarly and historical treatment of Alene Lee I hope to convey how these intersections of race and gender continue to influence how we historicize a movement like the Beats.

What is so ironic about Lee is that, while facing racism and sexism in her life, I am most struck at how these forces have impacted her role in Beat history. On her death

bed, she relayed that she was “Mardou Fox,” the love interest of Kerouac’s, but, before then she battled Kerouac biographers to not have her identity shared. (Diamante). While quotes from Kerouac himself and other Beats like Lucien Carr reflect a friendly connection, friendship, and respect for Lee because she refused to be characterized solely as Kerouac’s lover she “came to be depicted by those same biographers as a somewhat peripheral character in Kerouac’s life and in the Beat Generation” (Diamante). She is often described in photographs from the era as a “groupie,” and Ann Charters (a prominent Kerouac biographer) even refers to Lee as “that black girl” (Diamante). I think it’s important to see how, unlike white women excluded from the Beat generation, that Lee’s characterization is deeply influenced by being black and a woman. Crenshaw writes “The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women” (1245). As a woman, she is not taken seriously as a writer and artist—but more than that she has been demonized as the “angry black woman” stereotype by decades of biographers and subsequently relegated to the role of “that black girl.” This is not even touching on the fact that I have not been able to locate any of her writing, only the writing of her daughter (Christiana Diamante) who is writing her biography.

While the Beat women I have centered my thesis on faced obstacles as women in a time of strict gender norms, it is still important to see how more opportunities, even for reclamation work, they have been afforded because of their race. If literary scholars want

to do the methodical work of re-evaluating American literary history, we cannot ignore where whiteness has privileged white men and white women writers and how those advantages are repeated when reclamation work, especially of the Beat era. At the same time as the role of black art is down played in the Beat movement, Beat scholarship has devoted a large amount of attention to the ethnicities of Beat poets whether they're Italian immigrants like Diane di Prima or Jewish like Elise Cowen. These women's backgrounds illustrate the intricacy of identities and the need to explore the multiple intersections oppression at play in the 1950s-60s Village scene. At the same time, their still needs to be more room for open critic of how the movement benefited from white-privilege.

Even by comparing the Modernist and Beat women we have seen how rapidly poetry has evolved in the last century. I want to conclude my chapter by briefly talking about how popular slam poets today draw on specifically Beat women's and jazz influence. While taking on the same emblematic fever and performance style of the Beats these modern poets also actively critique gender norms and center their own vulnerability as a device for connecting to audiences like Beat women did. While I don't want to go into too much depth I think Andrea Gibson exemplifies the influence of Beat women's writing. They become an internet phenomenon when their poem "Your Life" from their book/album *Hey Galaxy*, was made into a Youtube video. They explore themes of queerness and childhood while also illustrating oppression people who don't adhere to gender norms face through personal experience and vulnerability. Like Beat poets, Gibson uses music in their work and plays with rhythm in their reading performances. Gibson said in an interview with *The Prairie Schooner* that some of their influences were

“bell hooks” and “Mary Oliver,” ironic because they illustrate a combination of the same influences as the Beat generation—bell hooks drawing heavily on African American literary tradition and Mary Oliver whose key influence was Edna Saint Vincent Millay. (Oliver). I’m not saying that modern poets are a direct result of Beat women or that any poet is a result of who they’re influenced by, but I think that drawing connections helps us better understand the ways in which women and people of color are systematically excluded from their foundational roles in literary history—especially in times where retrograde movements, like the 1950s, not only restrict women’s lives but also their artistic and creative pursuits.

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