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Review of *Women Writers of the Beat Era: Autobiography and Intertextuality* by

Mary Paniccia Carden, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2018, 248 pp. ISBN 9780813941219

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Mary Paniccia Carden's timely study begins with the following autobiographical disclosure, 'Not long ago, a colleague asked what I was working on. "Beat women writers," I said. She said, "I didn't know there were any."' ' It is precisely this shocking popular canonical invisibility which Carden's volume aims, not only to correct, but also to interrogate and contextualise. Indeed, this study would be a valuable asset to undergraduate and postgraduate teachers and their students (full disclosure; I have just set the text as required reading for my own final year American Countercultures course). Such invisibility is one of the many intertextual lenses through which these *Women Writers of the Beat Era* (Diane Di Prima, Bonnie Bremser/Brenda Fraser, Ruth Weiss, Joanne Kyger, Joyce Johnson and Hettie Jones in particular) came to read and write about their own lives as both 'Beat' and 'woman.' The Beat movement, such as it was, as Carden argues, rejected 'Cold War politics' and 'conformist social values,' which spectacularly failed to embrace challenges to mid-century American gender politics. Rather than fighting for equality for their beat sisters, Beat men, typified by the big three literary giants of the movement – Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg and William Burroughs - espoused what Barbara Ehrenreich in *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (1983) calls a practice of 'defiant masculinity' expressed via 'the rejection of women and their demands for responsibility'.

Thus, while on the one hand beats refused to participate in 'status quo lifestyles' as Carden observes, they nevertheless 'tended to reproduce the gender role expectations' of mainstream America in their ostensibly bohemian communities. 'As a result', Carden argues, 'social and familial arrangements' within these communities were 'often rooted in assumptions that Beat women would by default perform essentially the same service and caretaking functions as their more respectable sisters.' Carden's examination of Joanne Kyger's journals and poetry, for instance, offers a stunning anecdote of such Beat male hierarchies at work. Kyger records an exchange with the poet Gary Snyder whom she had joined while he was living in Japan. She asked Snyder 'what if I was involved in doing something & didn't want to do the dishes for say a few days' because she wanted to 'feel the freedom of acting that way should the possibility arise.' Snyder 'would not grant me that, he said.' The argument, Kyger recalls, then turned heated and physical as Snyder 'grabbed me around the knees' and Kyger fell, striking her head. Such an account of Beat life not only challenges the Dharma Bum image of the Pulitzer Prize-winning environmental activist and Buddhist Gary Snyder, but also points to the restrictive historical and social contexts in which a female poet like Kyger had to forge both her life and her writing.

As Carden observes, histories of 'the Beat Generation' have 'long divided Beat communities along gender lines,' in which female writers were 'relegated' to the position of what writer and one-time lover of Jack Kerouac, Joyce Johnson, calls 'minor characters' in her memoir of that name. The label of 'Beat woman,' positioned 'women as trespassers on male ground,' thereby belittling their individual contributions to both the movement and wider social changes in which they were often at the forefront. Carden's study cleverly focusses therefore on the self-representations of these women writers in autobiographical texts. It identifies and highlights the textual strategies and negotiations used in these works to define and redefine not only the term 'Beat woman' as an iterative,

developmental and highly ambivalent identity, and 'Beat-ness' as a site of contention and 'inquiry and challenge', but also, interrogates definitions of truth, female agency and creativity circulating within 'pre-scripted cultural boundaries' of their textual lives.

In addition to Kyger's 'victim' narrative of Snyder's oppression, for example, Kyger's journals also tell of her resistance and defiance in the face of gender hierarchy. 'Shortly after arriving in Japan,' Kyger notes, 'Gary asked me "Don't you want to study Zen and lose your ego?"' to which Kyger responded "What! After all this struggle to attain one?"' Likewise, while Joyce Johnson paints Beat women in *Minor Characters* (1983) as, on the one hand, downtrodden and often unwelcome in what Carden terms 'male focused Beat contexts'. Elsewhere, Johnson highlights the creative empowerment of being precisely that kind of outsider. She thinks with satisfaction about the freedom and excitement of the life she created for herself in New York in contrast to Jack Kerouac's 'suffocating life with his mother'.

Through Carden's examinations of both the early and late work of certain female Beat writers, the author assesses what she terms the 'constitutive intertextuality' of these 'recursive' autobiographical narratives. In so far as they engage and quote directly from the works of other (often male) Beat writers, acknowledging, amplifying and/or contesting those accounts of Beat culture and offering counternarratives of their own. These writings also draw on 'intervening cultural, historical, and literary discourses to craft improvisational models of femaleness and of Beatness.' This is reflected in works such as Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969) and her later *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (1999) which trouble the boundaries between 'what the reading public thinks it wants' and the 'different Beat Truths in the lies she tells'; in Bonnie Bremser's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* (1969) and her soon to be published sequel *Beat Chronicles* under the name Brenda Frazer, with its more ambivalent relationship to Beatness, belonging and female agency; or in the sparse, intricate and rhythmically precise poetry of Ruth Weiss, unacknowledged originator of boundary-exploding jazz poetry for which the Beats became most famous. Weiss's life and work spans decades of 'rebellion against law and order' and the restrictions of her gender. The works of these women writers of the Beat Era navigate the 'various and multiple representations of their lives' and the 'Beat woman' label they carry.

This label, in all its many shifting guises, Carden argues, is at once 'pre-textual' in that it has been 'generated by prior texts' and 'pretextual' as 'constituted by stereotypes and clichés.' Carden's excellent, well-written and timely study emphasises the female creativity, agency and accomplishments that such palimpsestic writing both informs and produces. In every case, each of these very different women writers forged unique, unresolved, iterative responses to the label 'Beat women,' representations of their pretextual and pre-textual lives that portray their experiences as both 'in excess of the masculinist Beat paradigm' and 'Beat nevertheless.' By doing so, they cast Beat-ness itself as a location of 'negotiation, difference, and creativity,' challenging the dominant narratives about men and women of the Beat era.