Merely Being There Is Not Enough
Women's Roles in Autobiographical Texts by Female Beat Writers

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1 Introduction

Are there not some private matters which should better be left private? And what about the innocent victims who find themselves dragged into somebody else’s life writing, being presented in a way that is by no means flattering? “As the power of the voice alone has dwindled, a mass culture has emerged, on a plane unparalleled in history, urging Everywoman and Everyman to tell The Story of My Life,” Vivian Gornick criticizes the contemporary boom of self-revelation (Pinsker: 2003: 313). Some critics go as far as to call the explosion of intimate, highly confessional women’s memoirs an intellectual fraud, symbolizing our cultural decline, as many female memoirists belong to the “poor me school” of the battered, abused, and infuriated victims. Even feminist critic Carolyn Heilbrun wishes the masses of intimate publications would stop. Fifteen years after her groundbreaking Writing a Woman’s Life (1988), she avows: “Pushed to the wall with a gun to my head, I would have to admit that I wish the flood [of women’s memoirs] would abate. Women, so long silenced, now seemingly speak in chorus” (312).

Yet, does memoir really give narcissism a bad name, as many literary critics suggest? How, then, can I convince the reader of this dissertation that the Beat memoirs of Diane di Prima, Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones, and Brenda Frazer are not just sentimental, confessional ‘memoir bizz’? “The trick is to embrace history, not oneself,” Sidonie Smith discloses the secret (1998: 33). Yet, what is wrong with embracing oneself? Diane di Prima, Joyce Johnson, Hettie Jones, and Brenda Frazer are four female Beat writers of America’s rigid 1950s and 1960s who manage to skillfully embrace both, their personal stories and history. In di Prima’s Memoirs of a Beatnik (1969), Johnson’s Minor Characters (1983), Jones’ How I Became Hettie Jones (1990), and Frazer’s For Love of Ray (1971), all four women of the Beat Generation present themselves as autonomous female writers who dare to write about themselves in the first place. Yet, alluding to Smith, all four female writers of the Beat Generation also participate in an important form of collective memorialization. Their memoirs provide building blocks to a more fully shared national narrative. The memoir boom we are facing nowadays should therefore not only be understood as a proliferation of self-serving representations of individualistic memory, but as a stimulus to keep cultural memory alive.

While literary criticism has so far generated masses of publications on the works of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and other male Beats, studies of women Beat writers are infrequent. Until recently, the few bibliographies of works by female Beat writers have been incomplete or inaccurate. Beat scholar Ann Charters was the first critic who included some of the most well-known texts by female Beats into her 1992 Beat anthology The Portable Beat Reader. The only two anthologies assembling women Beats’ biographies and extracts from their works are Brenda Knight’s Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution (1996) and Richard Peabody’s A Different Beat: Writings by Women of
the Beat Generation (1997). Even though some articles about Beat women have been published during the last years, most of them focus on women’s biographical roles as wives and lovers of the male icons. Detailed textual analyses of their works, however, are rare. More recent works of feminist literary criticism include Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace’s *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (2002), and Larissa Bendel’s *The Requirements of our Life is the Form of our Art: Autobiographik von Frauen der Beat Generation* (2005).

Acknowledging female Beats is significant for various reasons: Female writers of the Beat Generation have often found themselves positioned as women, but not read as writers. Indeed, the Beat movement of the 1950s is notable for a considerable number of women writers who were part of the scene but have been dismissed or overlooked, even as they wrote both privately and publicly. Even though female Beats produced a larger and more coherent body of work than apparent, many texts are out of print and have disappeared from the literary scene. Prominent examples for this unavailability are Joyce Johnson’s *Come and Join the Dance* (1962), or Brenda Frazer’s *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* (1969). Other works, like Edie Parker Kerouac’s memoir *You’ll be Okay* (1986) have not yet been published. Beat’s masculinist insistence on individual truth paradoxically included feminism in its reach, inconsistently nurturing female dissidents and artists who were mostly invisible exemplars of the Beat movement. In the literary canon, however, women Beats have been omitted and excluded. By including the many disavowed Beat texts into literary criticism, female Beats and their oeuvre step out of the shadow of male dependency.

This dissertation assesses female Beats’ use of the memoir genre to invent themselves as beat subjects, focusing on the way everyday life effected their writing. The paper theorizes the memoirs of di Prima, Johnson, Jones and Frazer, and their contributions to the Beat movement, addressing their refusal to be silenced by assumptions about their fitness as subjects and authors of Beat writing, and about their literary strategies; it explores how all four broke the ‘Code of Cool’ that confined their sex to the status of the silent bohemian ‘chick’. Furthermore, *Memoirs of a Beatnik, Minor Characters, How I Became Hettie Jones*, and *For Love of Ray* will be analyzed according to various autobiographical subcategories.

To make women Beat writers visible and to categorize their memoirs, this study engages in the paradoxical task of defining a category of Beat writing when, in a fundamental way, it is the nature of Beat writing and its rebellious aesthetics to refuse labels. Many women of the Beat movement engaged in other schools or writing scenes, such as the New York School, Black Mountain, or San Francisco Renaissance, simultaneous to their participation in the Beat movement. Several female Beat writers have rejected the Beat category or resist the label of Beat writers. Their diffidence about a movement whose male adherents often ignored women’s writing and excluded them as viable literary innovators on the basis of their sex is understandable. Moreover, it is “uncool” for female Beats to show loyalty: It is quintessentially beat to refuse identification with the movement and generation. Nevertheless, it is the function of literary critics to make sense of literature’s evolutions and developments by
recognizing and defining schools, movements, and writers’ aesthetic tendencies. Particularly concerning the recovery of overlooked and negated writers, grouping the Beat movement’s female memoirists respects their visibility as artists and makes their literary expressions legible. Women Beats unsettle the categories of Beat writing and culture. Thus, a revision and reexamination of Beat history is required to understand the movement’s literary expression. The four Beat memoirs at hand portray realities which are not evident in the works of their male contemporaries. They give an enormous insight into American culture of the 1950s and 1960s, a culture which tends to forget about these women, mistakenly painting them as mere helpmates and muses to the men bringing a new literary world into being. Having been dismissed for so long, this work contributes to make the prolific literary productions of female Beat writers visible.
2 Historical Background

2.1 Economic Boom and Social Repression

It is generally accepted that the late 1940s and 1950s were a time of both spreading consumerism as well as social and political repression in the United States. “Rarely has a society experienced such rapid or dramatic change as that which occurred in America after 1945,” historian William Chafe points out (1986: 111). Despite illusory assumptions of stability and calm, the 1950s were “more a time of transition than of stolidity” (144). The Cold War, McCarthyism, and an incredible postwar economic boom marked this era which was probably the most oppressive in modern U.S. history. The fifties are characterized by changes from production to consumption, from saving to spending, from city to suburb, from blue to white-collar jobs, and from an adult to a youth culture. Advertising and the mass media, militarism, information technology, automobiles, education, and mobility are appreciated as central elements of American society nowadays. In the 1950s, however, “Radio had been replaced by television with its potential to condition us all into more efficient and insatiable consumers”; and after the Second World War, “seven million men had returned to make babies and build supermarkets, malls and four-lane highways all over the country,” as John Tytell points out (1986: 47). In the postwar years, the shift from entrepreneurial to bureaucratic organizations was obvious, and consumerism based on affluence rather than lack had outrun the established social and cultural order. Middle class nuclear families were in confusion about how to raise their children now that consumerism and the decline of conservative religious thoughts were obvious in all parts of society.

During this time, the buzz word for American culture quickly became ‘family’. Family life became the ultimate symbol of security for Americans tired of depression and war. During the 1950s, men and women were able to realize their 1940s dreams, namely to live a life of luxury. The first step was to move from the cramped neighborhoods of the city, where families often roomed together in close proximity to each other, into suburbs. Homes were sold to eager buyers with the emphasis that “the most important room in any home is the family room” (Ehrenhalt: 1995: 194). Suburbia soon became a synonym for “togetherness,” where men, women, and children shared common experiences and grew together as a secure family. Once achieved, this was important for further attainments of the postwar 1940s dream. For those U.S. citizens who bought houses outside the city centers, namely the white middle class, suburbia offered the economic security of owning a home, the emotional security of marriage, and long-lasting security of raising children. Possessing a house was something this generation’s parents were not likely to have had. Suburban life was finally made complete by establishing the breadwinner/homemaker roles for men and women. As the quality of life continued to increase constantly, U.S. culture sent a message to the world: Never before in history had so many people been so affluent.
While some public critics were suspicious of the ongoing changes, most Americans were proud that the U.S. were the most prosperous and successful country in the world, a nation where every citizen could live a wealthy life. This new wealth included having a beautiful house in the city’s suburbia, one or two flashy cars, a good white-collar job for the males, and domesticated full-time wives and mothers who sacrificially loved their families. Consumer goods and free time activities played a crucial role. However, being white was the precondition to reach these goals. One report written at the end of the 1950s expressed the fifties-lifestyle this way:

In one brief 10-year period, America’s face was remade. Vast suburban areas sprang up to receive millions of Americans pressing out from the cities. Ribbons of superhighways were laid across the country. A huge expansion of air facilities helped tie the nation into a compact unity [...]. Whole regions changed their complexion. Deserts were turned into boom areas. Power was harnessed on a stupendous scale to ease the burden of work. Nearly 30 million added people were provided for, and on a steadily rising standard of living. A car was put in every garage, two in many. TV sets came into almost every home. There was chicken, packaged and frozen, for every pot, with more to spare. (Satin. The 1950s: 16)

Despite the exaggeration of Satin’s position, America’s affluence was based on the immense increase in economic investments that had been triggered by the Second World War. Statistics from the postwar years on homes, household appliances, automobiles, TV sets, highways, and shopping centers, or on teenage spending on entertainment, cosmetics, and clothes clearly show America’s economic growth. The gross national product climbed by 250 percent between 1945 and 1960; between 1947 and 1960, the average real income for American workers increased as much as it had from 1900 to 1950. At the end of the 1950s, 60 percent of all U.S. citizens were house owners, 75 percent of families had a car, 87 percent a TV set, and 75 percent owned a washing machine (cf. Breines 1992: 3f.).

Suburbia was made perfect by new household appliances that facilitated being a housewife. The dependence upon new fridges, washing machines, or stoves, as well as the social pressure to resemble other suburbanites, was a major factor in the increase of American consumerism. Consumerism led to a double effect in the lives of suburbanites: Families spent more time and money shopping, which brought newer and better products on the market. Therefore, larger houses to store the family’s purchases in were required. Due to the fact that “Americans became far more mobile than ever before” (Satin: 1960: 19), cars became the most important investment next to homes. With the invention and purchase of new household appliances, the image of the housewife was strongly improved. Washing machines, sewing machines, improved stoves, and refrigerators were considered “labor saving appliances that made it possible for housewives to be leisured and glamorous, not household drudges” (May: 1994: 73). How well a woman kept her household became a criterion for her success as a wife and mother and the “career” it represented.

After World War II, the G.I. bill for veterans made low interest loans possible for millions of soldiers coming home from the frontline. This also promoted the building boom, as the demand for home...
ownership skyrocketed. The bill also provided educational assistance for college attendance and other trainings. In the postwar years, millions of ex-soldiers went to college (cf. Eisler 1986: 15f.). In 1956, the number of white-collar jobs outnumbered blue-collar jobs for the first time in U.S. history, and America officially became a postindustrial or service economy with a new managerial class. For millions of working class people, however, like the millions of colored people who had migrated from the south to the urban north and west in search of better lives, this shift to a service economy was not yet obvious.\footnote{For a closer analysis of the working class in this period, see W. Chafe, \textit{The Unfinished Journey}, 111-117, M. Jezer, \textit{The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960}, Chapter 5, and G. Lipsitz, \textit{Class and Culture in Cold War America}.} Despite the Holocaust, the threat of the atomic bomb, and McCarthyism, it seemed that Americans felt safe and happy. For most of them, Auschwitz and Hiroshima did not foreshadow the end of Western hegemony. However, the war, Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki fostered people’s nihilistic and alienated attitudes, which were manifested in existentialism and the Theater of the Absurd. In 1959, Norman Mailer stated that Americans would probably never be able to fully comprehend the “psychic” destruction the concentration camps and atomic bomb had caused, subjecting them to the “intolerable anxiety” that life and death are meaningless. In Mailer’s view, the results are cruel: “We might be doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted, and our hair would be saved, but our death itself would be unknown, unhonored, and unremarked” (1959: 242).

The fear of the bomb and the anti-communist propaganda made people nervous. School air-raid drills, hiding under the school desk, name tags in case of incineration, and fallout shelters were on the agenda in the 1950s. Sociologist Wini Breines writes about the public controversy to deny a neighbor access into one’s shelter or not in case of an emergency. Some American males pointed out that “it would be just to defend their nuclear families with guns, forbidding others to enter, presumably because supplies and/or air were not endless” (1992: 7).

American popular culture after the Second World War was deeply conservative. While Europe and Japan disappeared as enemies, a new hostility towards Russia emerged, and preventing communist activity was the primary national aim during the gloomiest years of the Cold War, from the late 1940s until the mid-1950s. The U.S. government mobilized alliances all over the world to fight both the real and imagined USSR expansionism. At home, politicians competed with each other to show their dedication to the cause of the “Free World”. These years are often referred to as “McCarthyism” to describe the political situation of the era, but these containment policies were far more than a phenomenon associated with Joseph McCarthy, Junior Senator from Wisconsin.

The official culture that emerged in the 1950s was deeply conservative, and American politicians powerfully declared that the U.S. would continue their economic boom. America had been the only Western nation whose infrastructure remained intact during the war. Popular culture and the media, in general, consequently emphasized the enemy within, conveying the feeling that people had to watch out. The cultural attack on communism had a deep impact on American society, beyond political
results. The repression of American culture finally resulted in increasing intolerance and the pressure to conform.

### 2.2 Truman, McCarthy, and the Cold War

After the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the construction of an ‘iron curtain’ between Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe and Western Europe, the Cold War between the capitalist and communist countries escalated. American policy makers agreed that the Soviet Union was frantically trying to support and establish communist regimes all around the world. In a speech to Congress in 1947, President Truman demanded funds to combat communist uprisings in Turkey and Greece, where the communists had triggered a civil war. This announcement became generally known as the ‘Truman Doctrine’ and can be seen as the beginning of the Cold War. Truman’s policy of containment aimed to prevent communist expansion anywhere in the world. The U.S. feared that one state after another would fall under Soviet influence in a domino effect. This led to America’s direct participation in conflicts and wars all over the world (cf. Mauk 2002: 162f.). The Truman administration followed a strict anti-Soviet policy, launched the Marshall plan to rebuild a capitalist society in Western Europe, and secured economic and political control in Latin America. As a result, from 1945 until 1973 the income of an average American family was doubled because of the flourishing economy during the time of the Cold War. The Truman Doctrine was the basis for an incredible economic boom that was followed by a huge increase in U.S. productions and exports. In March 1945, Undersecretary of State William C. Clayton had reported to Congress “We’ve got to export three times as much as we exported just before the war if we want to keep our industry running at somewhere near capacity” (Wittner: 1974: 7). More intense than the Roosevelt administration and the policy of the ‘New Deal,’ Truman focused on economic expansionism. He was aware that America’s affluence was depending on the nation’s hegemony in connection with worldwide markets. His policies fostered the capitalist “free enterprise,” which stood in stark contrast to the communist “planned economy”.

Truman’s containment politics became the cornerstone of American foreign policy throughout the Cold War. America’s strict anti-Soviet policy, the Marshall Plan to rebuild and stabilize capitalism in western Europe, and investments in Latin America and the Middle East lead to prosperity and increased consumerism. However, the postwar years were also characterized by a return to conservative social and political codes and to strictly enforced gender roles. While America’s consumer culture blossomed, political repression rose as “the FBI used illegal wire taps and created the Security Index, a list of millions of citizens who might require detention in the event of a national emergency” (Fordham: 1998: 60). As Arnold A. Offner points out, “the 1950s were mean, Cold War and conformist; the promotion of the American Way […] was an endless flood of propaganda via black-and-white television and Time and Life magazines” (2002: 51). The National Security Act of
1947 centralized control over all parts of the military in a new Department of Defense and at the same time created the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Council (NSC). The Act gave increased power to the President, facilitating invading countries without declaring war. The United States were in a state of permanent military preparedness.

The imminent fear of communism, which finally led to increased political repression during the 1940s and 1950s, is generally known as McCarthyism, the era of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Even though McCarthy gained notoriety at the height of the anti-communist aggression of the time, his career lasted only four years, from 1950 to 1954. The fight against left-wing tendencies began as early as 1946 (or even 1939) and extended into the 1960s. The most spectacular incidents of these years – the Hollywood blacklists\(^2\), the Hiss and Rosenberg cases\(^3\), FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s anti-communist obsessions – are important to explain the special role of American ideology during that time.

McCarthy intended to demonize and scapegoat alleged communists, but also homosexuals. His strategy was effective, and consequently, avowed communists were harassed, insulted, and their careers destroyed. Due to the time’s anti-communist and homophobic rhetoric, a whole nation was intimidated and terrorized.

Joseph McCarthy, who was the icon of this era, was a skilled demagogue whose wildly irresponsible affronts against communists brought him the public attention he wanted. Thousands of alleged communists lost their jobs, were put on the FBI watchlist, were denied their passports, and oppressed by sanctions during that period. A whole nation was alert because of concerns about domestic communism. The violation of civil liberties that occurred during McCarthyism could not have been carried out, however, without the support of the nation’s political and social elites. Since the end of the war, the U.S. administration saw the Soviet Union as a colonialist enemy committed to an agenda of worldwide expansion which could only be stopped by America. The Greek Civil War in 1947, the communist coup in Czechoslovakia, the blockade of Berlin in 1948, the communist takeover in China, the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949, and finally the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 – these were all indicators that Stalin intended to gradually spread communism all over the world.

What changed the fear of communism into a national mania was not the likelihood of an attack, but the anti-communist propaganda of the U.S. government. After all, communist parties were far more successful all over Europe, and here, they were free of accusation and repression. The United States as a nation would probably not have declared the containment of communism the main priority had Washington not led the way. What followed were grave violations of civil liberties that characterized the McCarthy era. Newspapers, magazines, TV, or the radio were the government’s allies, largely because they willingly accepted messages that came from Washington (cf. Schrecker 1994: 6f.).

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\(^2\) In Hollywood, but also in all national TV channels, people who were dismissed by one network or studio were also banned by others. The same was the case for actors.

\(^3\) Alger Hiss, a New Deal government official, was convicted by a Federal Court in 1950 of having given classified documents to the Soviets. Rosenberg was electrocuted in 1953, mainly because he would not confess that he was a Soviet spy. Until today, it remains unclear whether he was a Soviet agent or not.
Historical Background

From one day to the other, Americans who turned against the government were considered criminal. The Anti-Communist Loyalty security program for government employees was initiated in March 1947. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and his associates were keenly prosecuting “non-patriots”. Since declaring one’s political views could arouse suspicion, many people avoided to lay open their attitudes in public. Instead, to the despair of intellectuals, middle-class Americans found it was safer to conform to the norm. Both students and professors tried not to attract attention or trigger any controversies.

In some respects, the rebel subculture of the 1950s, whether beatniks or hipsters, were the symptoms of this cultural crisis in America. McCarthyism successfully destroyed the American Left and traditional working-class communities. Some of the disaffiliated young people, alienated from conservative postwar culture, reacted to consumerism and political repression by enjoying exhibitionist and promiscuous lifestyles. Disillusioned by Tennessee Williams, Elvis Presley, and I love Lucy, the Beats escaped into an urban subculture that permitted anonymity and companionship as well as several alternatives to the nuclear family. In his investigations about the 1960s Greenwich Village Beats, sociologist Ned Polsky found out that the typical male beatnik, unlike the ordinary working man/husband/father, avoids work as a “matter of conviction,” being convinced that “voluntary poverty is an intellectual gain” (1967: 159). For most Beats, poverty was something completely new, insofar as two thirds of them came from middle or upper class families, as Polski suggests: “They totally ‘resign’ from society in so far this is possible, not at least from its politics, and reject extreme political sects with no less vigor than they reject major parties” (162). In contrast to the normative white middle class American man, the beatnik sees himself as a victim of society and popular culture, or as John Clellon Holmes puts it: “To be beat is to be at the bottom of your personality, looking up” (1967: 123).
3 Women in the 1950s

3.1 Enforcement of Gender Roles

Until recently, feminist critics and historians, in general, have paid less attention to the years from 1945 to 1960 than they did to the years before and after. Women of the postwar era, it seems, were less fascinating than women workers during World War II, or second wave activists of the late 1960s. Many people still see the postwar years as a romantic, allegedly simpler, happier, and more prosperous time, representing family togetherness, domestic life, and white middle-class housewives who stayed at home to rear children and clean the house. This stereotype has been nurtured until today in reruns of situation comedies, in popular movies, and in TV series.

Many critics of the postwar years have stated that this “placid” time was particularly restricting for women. It is generally agreed that during the 1950s and early 1960s, image makers, politicians, and public figures supported shared dreams of servile wives, making homes for their husbands and children. Men, in contrast, were told to represent strength and masculinity. Freed from depression and war, they were supposed to live out their individualism at women’s expense. The new moral codes for women were arbitrary and abnormal, not caused by tradition. While soldiers coming home from the war started new civilian lives under peacetime economy, the media, church, media experts, psychiatrists, and others made clear that real American women were dependent and docile. Being economically, intellectually, or sexually independent was often considered as deviant and abnormal.

In the two decades following the Second World War, women were ordered to accept the cultural emphasis on domesticity and femininity as a woman’s proper role. Marriage and motherhood presented the most important aims in the late 1940s and 1950s. Women had to cope with the same oppressive forces inflicted on the society at large. Gender roles became more narrowly defined and, in fact, even more repressive than before and during the war. Michael Davidson points out the nature of this repression with “its subordination of women to housekeeping and childrearing roles, when, only a few years earlier, they had entered the marketplace in unprecedented numbers as part of the war effort” (1989: 176).

In the postwar years, men had returned from overseas to discover their wives, mothers, and sisters had effectively taken over their jobs and thus, their place at home. The message conveyed to women was that “they would best serve the needs of the returning soldiers by becoming their wives and mothers of their children, rather than by competing with them for jobs and training programs” (May: 1994: 60). It is crucial to remember that these men returning from war were determined to lead different lives than their fathers did. For U.S. women, the end of the war brought nearly as many changes as war time itself. As men returned to their jobs, or to college by way of the G.I. Bill, women returned to their domestic roles at home. During the war, the nation had praised female workers for their support, and
they were called, in the words of a contemporary, “noble, impeccable, shining” (Banner: 1984: 212). But within half a year, many opinion makers let these women down, criticizing them for having worked during the war and thus having destroyed the American nuclear family. The criticism was devastating and resembled the anti-suffrage rhetoric early in the century. The antifeminist stance of the 1920s and 1930s had been widespread, but the antifeminism of the postwar 1940s and 1950s was much stronger: Women were accused of being bad mothers and wives, because they had left home for work.

Like many other “experts” of the time, Agnes Meyer strongly argued against women in the workforce. She wrote: “What modern woman has to recapture is the wisdom that just being a woman is her central task and greatest honor […]. Women must boldly announce that no job is more exciting, more necessary, or more rewarding than that of housewife and mother” (May: 1994: 54.) However, despite the containment of women, some were unwilling to quit their working careers to return home. Those who continued their jobs had to face a number of obstacles, like lack of childcare and problems in maintaining a home, children, and a husband. These were all responsibilities of a woman, even if she worked the same number of hours as her husband. The media was influential to propagate women’s return to their suburban homes until “their primary childrearing duties were over” (56).

After the war, the phrase ‘Nuclear Family’ turned up as one of the keywords of the time. In U.S. popular culture, the new focus on normative gender roles could be seen in all parts of daily life. In newspapers and magazines, on the radio and billboards, Rosie the Riveter was replaced by the homemaker as the national feminine model. Most fictional texts in women’s magazines were about heroic housewives, whereas non-fiction articles almost exclusively dealt with housework, preparing meals, and child care. Emphasizing the general position that women are most successful as beautiful wives or sirens, female film stars of the 1950s were either sweet, innocent, and characterless, like Doris Day, or, like Marilyn Monroe, innocent and sexually aggressive. By the mid-1950s, television was beginning to indoctrinate innumerous American homes. On TV, women were either presented as sex objects or happy housewives. The focus on containment and domesticity was also shown in popular shows like I love Lucy and Father knows best (cf. Harvey 1993: 89ff.). Fashion conveyed the same female images. During the war, women’s dress style was masculine: skirts were narrow; suits were popular; padded shoulders were in vogue. In 1947, however, French designer Christian Dior presented the “new look” on the catwalks, and instead of masculinity, femininity was now the buzzword. His models wore long, full skirts and had wasp waists. In the early 1950s, the new “baby doll” look became the ideal for many women. Not since the Victorian era had women’s fashion been so confining.

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4 Rosie the Riveter is a fictional character who was created in order to encourage women to join the workforce when factories urgently needed workers during World War II. Before, women mostly fulfilled roles as housewives or held low paid jobs. When many U.S. men went off to war, they left jobs in production, factories, and many other positions that needed to be filled. Women often seized the opportunity to gain independence and took over men’s jobs.
Public opinion makers named marriage and having a secure family life as the major aims for young people in the 1950s. Even many college-educated women left their colleges to found a family. Betty Friedan estimates that by the mid-1950s, 60 percent of female undergraduates were dropping out of college to marry. Women were influenced by movies, TV, and popular magazines, which glorified romantic love and marriage. For many young people, early marriage meant escaping from restraints imposed on them by parents and the establishment (cf. Friedan 1970: 45f.).

The wish to marry and create a stable life around a romanticized image of family life was reinforced by other factors. The fear that the birth of fewer children would weaken the U.S. prompted scientists to propagate large families. The superficially tranquil postwar decade had its own tensions and pressures. The United States were involved in a number of worldwide wars and aimed to defeat communism. Recurring cycles of inflation and depression cast a shadow over the new wealth. Home was therefore welcome as a safe refuge.

Despite the rising marriage numbers, the 1950s were a time of sexual repression, and any public talk about sex was taboo. John Tytell points out that this was an era “when masturbation was seen as a cause of insanity and premarital sex was immoral, when half of American women were married by the age of nineteen, oral sex was considered sheer perversion, and adultery and homosexuality were regarded as criminal acts” (1999: 53). In the conservative and sinister 1950s, there were, however, thousands of teenagers who turned against these sexual restrictions. Yet, even males could not publicly write about sexual matters without being persecuted. In those years, novels by Henry Miller or the uncensored Lady Chatterley’s Lover had to be smuggled into the country illegally. Even though Jack Kerouac had tried to publish On the Road in 1950, no editor had dared to publish the work until 1957.

Sex other than marital was shameful. Angrily, many women remember the stiff sexual moral of the 1950s. Teenage girls were in constant fear of “going all the way,” or worse, appearing to have, as public opinion was obsessed with female virginity until marriage. Nowadays, critics see a connection between the 1950s fear of the atomic bomb and the anxiety about sexual chaos. Together with female sexuality and communism, homosexuality also posed a threat to U.S. society, leading to a policy of containment for all three scares. Sexual deviation was presented as a major threat for the nuclear family. Due to the fact that women had to conform to society, career choices were limited. Elaine Tyler May, who analyzed U.S. family life during the Cold War, links the containment of communism to the containment of women in the postwar domestic ideal. In the middle of Cold War anxiety, “the family seemed to offer a psychological fortress” (1988: 113) against both internal and external dangers.

Yet, not every American woman adapted herself to the prescribed gender roles of the time. In the years following the war, many American women were not white, middle class, married, and suburban as illustrated in the media; and many white, middle class, married females were neither wholly domesticated nor servile. In the postwar years, not every woman embraced the prevalent cultural focus on family life, femininity, marriage, and motherhood as her primary tasks. As a reaction to the
predominant conservative views, a barely visible cultural subculture formed by some white, middle-
class women emerged in American cities. Dismissing the dominant mindsets, they chose to imitate
male versions showing their discontent.

3.2 Bad Girls

Even though many 1950s women conformed to the “placid 1950s”5, not all fit the prevailing female
stereotype. In 1956, Paul Goodman published Growing Up Absurd: The Problems of Youth in the
Organized Society, a study on youth culture in the 1950s. At the beginning of his work, he depicts the
difficulties teenagers have to face: “We see groups of boys and young men disaffected from the
dominant society. The young men are angry and Beat. The boys are Juvenile Delinquents” (1960: 11).
To be angry, a beatnik, and a juvenile delinquent were major social categorizations after the
emergence of the new hipster subculture. Goodman states that mostly young males suffer from
disaffection and disillusionment. Youth problems “belong primarily, in our society, to the boys: how
to be useful and make something of oneself. A girl does not have to, she is not expected to ‘make
something’ of herself”. Moreover, “her career does not have to be self-justifying, for she will have
children, which is absolutely self-justifying, like any other natural or creative act […] our ‘youth
troubles’ are boys’ troubles” (13). “Deviants” like beatniks, hipsters, juvenile delinquents,
homosexuals, and even communists were seldom female according to public opinion: Females did not
necessarily have to make something of them due to the fact that they would soon be good mothers and
wives.

Some young women in the 1950s, however, embraced a bohemian lifestyle and found inspiration by
provoking sexual mores. It could be argued that these maladjusted women laid the groundwork for the
women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Often, they were protofeminists or
forerunners of the social movements of the 1960s, positioning themselves as civil rights workers,
campus activists, and women’s rights feminists.

Due to the fact that the Beat subculture was predominantly male, mostly working class, and overly
masculine, sexist, and chauvinist, the process of many Beat girls’ identification was very complex.
White, mostly middle-class girls who rejected dominant values of the time had few options, and
therefore often copied and adapted typically male behavior patterns of revolt and discontent (cf.
Breines 1992: 45ff.). Many young girls were attracted to “cool” beatniks and movie stars like James
Dean and Marlon Brando in roles of alienation and disrespect for the establishment. Some of them
tried to avoid what was expected of them – a life in a city’s suburb as a wife and mother – and
rejecting these life plans was often connected with an ambivalent attitude about their mothers. Very
often, the life plan for young women was unacceptable for them, because societal expectations and

5 Joseph Satin titled his 1960 book The 1950s: America’s Placid Decade. He alludes to the general perception
of the 1950s as a time of harmony, family togetherness, and wealth.
those of their parents did not match with their own aspirations. Together with their male counterparts, they rebelled against the bourgeois mindset which included narrow domestic gender expectations. Girls were yearning to be as free as male Beats, leaving behind domestic strains and the women they were supposed to become. Frequently, they were craving to be taken seriously or give meaning to their lives, and ‘authentic’, ‘genuine’, and ‘real’ were prevalent buzz words. However, the 1950s did not offer them a sense of being real. For them, being patronized, virginal, and female did not match with the desire to be significant. When works like *On the Road* were published, many girls were extremely influenced by Kerouac’s road trips and wished for similar adventures. Jan Clausen, for example, grew up in Southern California. Aged 16, she read *On the Road* for the first time and immediately realized the “moral and intellectual intensity” of the work:

> Emerging from a childhood of many advantages, I was bitter, suddenly, against my parents, on account of certain experiences withheld from me: Smith Act trials overhanging my formative years; alcohol binges; steamy dramas of marital infidelity; the benny-popping, reefer puffing role models they might have been, tearing back and forth across the continent with infant me asleep in the back seat […]. My background had been deficient. (Breines. “The Other Fifties”: 391)

Yearning to copy Beat men’s lifestyles, many young female Beats moved to New York City to indulge in jazz, poetry, shared apartments, and countless afternoon café sessions, because only in Greenwich Village or, to a lesser extent, in North Beach/San Francisco, one could be a real Beat. Ronald Sukenick describes the young girls in the Village as a “grungy purity […] in its deliberate isolation from the world of Uptown”. These female beatniks were “confronted with the promised land of previously repressed impulses, a risky new underground landscape to explore consisting of everything deemed unreal by the dominant culture, which amounts to almost everything” (Breines: 1994: 393).

When girls came to the Village from the Upper West Side, like Joyce Johnson, or from Long Island, like Hettie Jones, they often started to wear typical Beat downtown outfits: black tights from Goldin Dance Supply on Eighth Street, belts with brass spiral fasteners, sandals that laced up the ankle, and dangling beaten-copper earrings. To understand the radical nature of such an outfit, one must remember that the dress code for working women required nylons and high-necked dresses, even in summer. Lionel Trilling’s wife Diana did not like the look of the Beat girls – “So many blackest black stockings,” she sniffed after seeing them at a 1959 Columbia reading by Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky (Jones: 1997: 129). In a 1999 interview, Hettie Jones complains about the discomfort of traditional 1950s women’s clothes. Taking off one’s girdle was a radical move, “without feeling blistered all the time” (Grace: 2004: 160). Wearing pants was also unusual for women. At Jones’ College in the fifties, young women had to wear garage mechanic uniforms, “monkey suits,” in order to climb all the ladders on the stage. Every decent woman was supposed to wear high heels to work. When Jones first came to New York City, she threw them in the sewer. Instead of high heels, she was wearing weird, red old lady’s shoes she got in the orthopedic shoe store. Of the shoes, Jones says: “They were weird! But they were comfortable”. Furthermore she adds, “to stop carrying that
Women in the 1950s

little pocket book – the kind that came back into style not too long ago” was a radical move: “But instead to wear a shoulder bag and to have your hands free. And what you needed was a big bag anyway if you weren’t going to go home at night, you know!” (161).

In general, 1950s’ “bad girls” wore black – black leather jackets, boots, and stockings. In comparison to innocent suburban teens, they were represented as darker. For the adult culture of the time, the dualism of light and dark played a crucial role. Maladjusted white teens chose the threatening darkness including African American jazz and blues, while the “good,” approved teen culture was light and white. It was a white time in the U.S.: Success was represented in white terms on TV, in advertisements, and other forms of popular culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that beatniks, hipsters, and other outcasts of society felt “black” and were imagined to be dark. Due to the fact that the rest of the society was – superficially – white, the Beats wore black. Hipsters wore black turtleneck shirts, black stockings, or black sunglasses. “I dumped out my inheritance of pastel colors and princes and collected a new bag of black sweaters, jeans, psychopaths and beat fantasy,” Sheila Rowbotham recalls (Breines: 1994: 397). Another adolescent says, “I just wanted to be a beatnik. I quit wearing pink and orange and always wore darker colors. I was one of the first people in Charleston to get dark stockings. I was in a shop once and a girl goes, ‘Look, Mommy, that lady has white arms with black legs’” (397). Erasing one’s difference, assimilating, was a sign of Americanness, and difference was supposed to be invisible in postwar America. The U.S. presented in popular movies, television, and magazines were white. Black people were practically invisible in the mass media, and if they appeared, their portrayal was often racist. Wearing dark or having dark skin signified difference in postwar society. It also meant being unable to attain prevailing values and standards of attractiveness, being an outsider. The good taste and decorum excluded those who did not conform, as they threatened middle-class orderliness.

For WASPs, even Jews were considered dark. “As an outsider Jew I could have tried for white, aspired to the liberal intellectual, potentially conservative Western tradition. But I never was drawn to that history, and with so little specific to call my own I felt free to choose,” Hettie Jones explains (1997: 14). She tells how black and white were blurring divisions for her, because Jews were different. Not feeling American, her outsider status and her love of music, especially jazz, indicated that she had more in common with African American people than with mainstream Americans. Combinations of working-class, lower-middle-class, or immigrant backgrounds, as well as lesbianism cast some women aside to societal margins and bohemia. Being attracted to blackness/darkness – symbolized for many girls by beatnik clothes, romances with male outcasts, the love of rock’n’roll, and interest in black culture – many teenage girls were pulled away from their families.

Many of these women became writers and artists, but being excluded from U.S. society, they were not even always welcome among their male counterparts. Even tough they shared the same lifestyle and often started relationships with other hipsters, female bohemians mostly stayed among themselves in expressing their artistic impulses. Women copied the male ‘Rule of Cool,’ but the Beat “boy gang” – termed by Ginsberg – did not offer an enlightened or empowering vision of women. Seen from this perspective, female Beats did not only have to counter the prevailing conservative gender roles imposed on them by dominant culture, but by joining male Beats, they were often also confronted with sexist attitudes. Many works by male Beats clearly show that they “relegated women to the role of sexual surrogate, muse or mum; it did not raise them to a position of artistic equality” (Davidson: 1989: 175). At the same time, women of the Beat Generation had to define themselves within this available network, because no other social security was available for them. These bohemian women had no “supportive environment of either an underground salon network or a feminist movement” (174). Contrary to that, male Beats were masters of bonding, being involved in homosocialities of male friendship and love, while females had to face the situation that they were excluded from the “Beat Brotherhood”. It is crucial to point out that the Beat subcultural revolt was primarily based on men, beginning with small alternative cliques up to the Beat Generation’s melting with the Hippie Movement in the late 1960s. Cultural critics agree that Beats’ male-centeredness was a successful strategy to rebel against the pressures of conventional family life and consumer culture. Ginsberg’s, Kerouac’s, Burroughs’, Snyder’s, or Holmes’ lives and writing began to focus not only on a counterculture promising a non-mainstream future, but a counterculture based on the ideal of the “boy gang”. Both the U.S. media and male Beats presented female Beats in a pejorative way. In his study about how the media perceived the Beats in the 1950s and 1960s, Steven Watson found out that the general impression was that the male Beats’ “favourite activities were smoking reefers, playing bongo drums, and chanting poetry with a cool jazz backup,” while the female Beats’ “favourite activities were drinking espresso, attending poetry readings, and dating black jazz musicians” (1998: 258-259). Mirroring the prevailing clichés of the time, the media saw Beat men as active while women mostly observed the scene and were given attention only in relation to men. Yet, women were not passive or totally absent: They were there at a crucial moment in history, observing the subcultural scene as wives, lovers, friends, financial supporters, and drinking mates. What is more, many of them wrote down their experiences, depicting the Beat Generation from an extraordinary, female perspective. Particularly the numerous autobiographical texts written by female Beats are important social documents of the time, because women were often “the most observant and sober witnesses” (Knight: 1996: xi). The following chapter aims to analyze the strongest autobiographical subgenre used by female Beats – the memoir form.
4 Women Beats’ Life Writing: The Memoir Genre

[...] the memoir, which has become an accepted, high genre, is one of immense possibilities, the way you work with cross-genres and documentation. [...] And then, memoir can be so imaginative. There are so many of these smarmy memoirs, but writing a memoir isn’t therapy. Yes, it does help you to tell these stories, but it’s not a self-help reality. So that should be distinguished. (Annie Waldman in Grace. *Breaking the Rule of Cool*: 269)

Well, life is made up of stories. And it’s all autobiographical narrative. In the last few years, I’ve been trying to figure out where the narrative is going. (Joanne Kyger in Grace. *Breaking the Rule of Cool*: 148)

While male Beat authors have continually been in control of the public’s interest and readership, most discussions of these icons – Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs – leave out a number of female contemporaries who were just as much part of the Beat literary movement as their male counterparts. Yet, they have not been absent. Even though resisting categorization, the rather small group of female Beat authors can be subdivided into three major groups. First generation Beat writers – male and female – were born in the 1910s and 1920s. Among the first women Beats are Madeline Gleason (1903-1979), Helen Adam (1909-1992), Sheri Martinelli (1918-1996), ruth weiss (1928-), Carolyn Cassady (1923-), and Carol Bergé (1928-). These writers were contemporaries with Kerouac (1922-1969), Ginsberg (1926-1997), and Burroughs (1914-1997). The largest group, however, occurred in the movement’s second generation. The female writers, born in the 1930s, were mostly influenced by seminal works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs. The male writers of this second generation were Philip Whalen (1923-2003), Lew Welch (1926-1971), Ted Joans (1928-2003), Gary Snyder (1930-), Gregory Corso (1930-2000), Michael McClure (1932-), and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (1934-). The women writers, a decade or more younger than the first generation Beats, often had to face male prejudice against their capacities as writers. Female writers of the second generation include Joanna McClure (1930-), Lenore Kandel (1932-), Elise Cowen (1933-1962), Diane di Prima (1934-), Hettie Jones (1934-), Joanne Kyger (1934-), Joyce Johnson (1935-), Ann Charters (1935-), and Brenda Frazer/Bonnie Bremser (1939-). This generation also includes Beat scholar Ann Charters, who wrote important literary histories – notably her groundbreaking 1973 biography of Kerouac, with which she began building a canon of Beat writing. She was the first to institutionalize women writers in the Beat canon when she edited *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America* (1983), where she included seven women. The work of second generation female Beats is marked by a radical critique of traditional literary genres and forms that have been based on women’s subordination to men. The transition from Beat to the hippie counterculture in the 1960s was encompassed by Beat’s second and third generation. While the civil rights movement had a direct influence on counterculture activism, the Beats provided the hippie community with a dissenting style of conduct. The third generation of women Beats was born during World War II, endured the fifties, and came of age in the sixties. While the second generation of women Beats anticipated the second wave women’s movement of the late