Beat Queens: 
Women in Flux

BY JOYCE JOHNSON

In 1922 my nineteen-year-old mother Rosalind Ross went on the road. For nearly a year, in her family's effort to improve her marital prospects, she was shipped from cousin to cousin—from Cleveland to Baton Rouge, from Baton Rouge to Little Rock, from Little Rock to Los Angeles. She was the youngest and prettiest of three sisters, a proud and withdrawn girl who dreamed of singing Schubert on the stage of Carnegie Hall. My aunts, who were in their early thirties, still lived with their mother in Bensonhurst; one was a bookkeeper, the other a stenographer. They had no prospects whatsoever. "Stay away as long as you can," my mother's eldest sister Anna wrote her. "There's nothing for you here." My mother saw the Grand Canyon and posed for a snapshot outside the gates of the Fox Pathé studio, but she returned to Brooklyn without a proposal. She gave up her voice lessons and became a secretary. Ten years later she married my father, an auditor in a tobacco firm. In 1935, when I was born, her brother Uda wrote her: "At last you have something of your own!"

After my mother died, I found a
small manuscript typed on onion skin among her papers. It was a record one of my childless aunts had kept of entertaining episodes from my earliest years. I was interested to learn that at age four, I had developed an adventurous streak and had persistently agitated to be allowed to cross our street on my own and go to the candy store on the opposite corner. My mother’s response to me, which my aunt also jotted down, seemed so characteristic that I had the sensation of recalling it word for word: “Why would you want to do that? There’s nothing there.” It seemed to epitomize our lifelong conflict. My need for experience that inescapably involved risk; her need to insist there was nothing out there in order to keep me tied to her.

My mother chose the all-girls schools I attended in New York City—Hunter High School and Barnard College. In the late Forties and early Fifties, they were rather grim institutions in which bright girls were rigorously educated in ironic preparation for limited futures. Except for an aged elevator operator, not one male was visible inside the gray Gothic building that housed Hunter High. Within the conventlike precincts, however, there were adolescent non-conformists. Red-diaper babies who marched in May Day parades, lesbians who were having affairs with their teachers. Audre Lorde and Diane di Prima, two sixteen-year-old poets who would later make their mark, were running Argus, the Hunter literary magazine, where I published my first story. Diane was then writing imitative rhymed verse, but Audre wowed us all in that era of Bomb consciousness with her daring riposte to T. S. Eliot: “This is how the world ends. / Not with a whimper but with a BANG!”

My rebellion began at thirteen with my first sip of that forbidden beverage coffee in a diner two blocks from Hunter. Soon I was sneaking off to Greenwich Village on Sunday afternoons with my classmate Maria Meiff. We played the guitar and sang folk songs in Washington Square Park with a bohemian crowd that was much too old for us, but actually quite harmless. We peered in the windows of bars like the San Remo and Fugazzi’s, which were hangouts of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and other subterraneans at the time. Condemned to be observers, we felt shielded from what we considered “real life” by our embarrassing jailbait status. Yet we had inklings that real life could be a scary proposition. A black ex-convict named Billy became obsessed with Maria, who looked seventeen; Maria was rather fascinated by the situation, but refused to go out for coffee with him in the Waldorf cafeteria unless I came along for protection. When we left Washington Square one Sunday, Billy started following us so we gave him the slip by ducking into Minetta Lane. There we saw a man bashing another man’s head against the curb; blood was everywhere. We ran away to the uptown subway as fast as we could, but I knew that what we had just seen was good material. I wrote up the fight in a paper for my English class and got a C. “Write about what you know,” the teacher reprimanded me in red ink.

What did “real life” mean to a middle-class adolescent girl in 1950? I yearned for it and thought I’d recognize it when I saw it, but could not quite define it. I was sure real life was sexual, though my ignorance of sex was profound. Since no information could be extracted from grownups, and my friends knew little more than I did, I pursued my forbidden research in the dictionary and in the steamy passages of historical novels, trying to connect the dots. At fifteen, I probably knew less than today’s average eighteen-year-old. Until I entered Barnard College in 1951 and took a freshman orientation course called Modern Living, I did not have a very clear idea of how babies were born, nor did many of my classmates. I would meet Jack Kerouac only six years later.

The postwar period was an age of enforced innocence in America. Ground that women had
won in the Jazz Age and during the war years was suddenly gone, as if society had deliberately contracted amnesia. Women who had worked were now relegated to the home, and girls were sent to college to get their MRS. Sexual intercourse was reserved for married couples.

It was unusual in the early Fifties for a young woman to get her own apartment, and if she did, it was a sign that she would be up to no good there. The only proper way for a girl to achieve independence from her family was to put herself under the protection of a husband.

In a journal entry written in September of 1951, when she was a sophomore at Smith, Sylvia Plath voiced the despair and frustration that many rebellious young women felt:

...I have come to the conclusion that I must have a passionate physical relationship with someone—or combat the great sex urge in me by chaste means. I chose the former answer. I also admitted that I am obligated in a way to my family and to society (damn society anyway) to follow certain absurd and traditional customs—for my own security, they tell me. I must therefore confine the major part of my life to one human being of the opposite sex ... 

For unmarried young women, sex was more than adventure, more than a broadening of experience; it was a high-risk act with sometimes fatal consequences, given the inadequacy of birth control. To get a diaphragm in those days from the Margaret Sanger Clinic, an unmarried woman would have to appear wearing a wedding ring (purchased at the Five and Ten) and be prepared to fill out a form detailing the number of times a week she had intercourse with her fictitious husband. "Don't discuss your marriage with your classmates," a friend of mine who married at nineteen was warned by a dean at her college.

For Fifties women, all this repression made sex a very charged and anxious thing. You were breaking the rules. You could lose your place in the world, you could even lose your life. With so much at stake, feelings became very heightened. In contrast, relationships between young people in the Nineties seem so easily entered into and so casually ended, that the novel of love, as Vivian Gornick has noted, is dying out.

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he neighborhood around Columbia University and Barnard College was the birthplace of the Beat Generation, the meeting ground in the early 1940s of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Lucien Carr. The group included two unusually adventurous young women—Edie Parker, Kerouac's first wife, and Joan Vollmer Adams, who had a common-law marriage with Burroughs. As I would be in the next decade, both were drawn to charismatic men who lived the larger lives denied to women, and who offered them little in the way of security or protection. Edie was from an affluent Grosse Pointe, Michigan, family; when her mother discovered that her daughter and Kerouac were living in sin in Joan Adams's apartment, Edie's checks from home were cut off. Determined to stay on in New York with Jack, come what may, Edie worked as a longshoreman for eighteen months loading Liberty ships; after that, she worked as a cigarette girl at 21, earning $27.50 a week. Some of her earnings went to supporting Jack and other early members of the Beat circle who crashed in Joan Adams's famous apartment.

When Edie Parker was nineteen and Kerouac was away at sea, she discovered she was pregnant. Edie knew Jack's fear of familial responsibility, so she had a horrendous abortion by forced labor at five months in the kitchen of a Bronx apartment; the baby, a perfectly formed boy, was dropped into a bucket. Edie survived but was never able to have children. Joan paid even more heavily for the chances she took. She went too willingly where Burroughs led her—she accepted his homosexuality, followed him into experimentation with drugs and became addicted to Benzedrine; she died in 1951, when her husband attempted to
Like me, Elise had hung around in the Village and was attracted to what we then called bohemianism. I had entered college at sixteen; Elise was two years older. The summer before her freshman year, she had actually gone all the way with a boy she was crazy about, who had rejected her soon after—a pattern in Elise’s relationships. Nice young men found Elise off-putting. She was too intellectual, too intense; eruptions of acne flared on her face like evidence of her seething emotions. Elise cared little about making herself pretty. She’d stand in a corner at a freshman dance defiantly rolling her own cigarettes. The aspirations she had, she kept to herself. She was obsessed with T. S. Eliot, but majored in psych. I’d show her the stories I was writing, but she’d never show me her poems. “I’m a mediocre,” she told me, pronouncing the word in an odd hollow French way.

The Beats have often been accused of having no respect for creative women. But in truth this lack of respect was so pervasive in American culture in the postwar years that women did not even question it. One exception was Elizabeth Hardwick, who wrote in “The American Woman as Snow Queen,” an essay published in The Prospect Before Us in 1955 about the contempt of male intellectuals for what she called “the culture-hungry woman.” In his posthumous memoir, When Kafka Was the Rage, the critic Anatole Broyard, a contemporary of Kerouac’s who was very jealous of the Beat writers’ success, complained about girls “who wore their souls like negligés that they never took off.” No wonder an intellectual young woman like Elise felt so little confidence.

I felt surer than Elise about what I wanted to be. Certainly I would write—it was the only thing I was good at—though my belief in my powers could momentarily be deflated by a cutting remark from a man. “Quite the little existentialist, aren’t we?” a male professor wrote sneeringly on one of my papers. Another teacher,
By nature I was rebellious but innately cautious, never questioning the need for a safety net of my own making. Elise proved to be more like Kerouac—unable to find one, not even really trying to.

It was Elise who eventually led me to the Beats, first by introducing me to her experimental psychology instructor Donald Cook, who had been a classmate of Allen Ginsberg’s. Donald had a shabby ground-floor apartment near Columbia where the door was always open—interesting people who later became literary figures kept passing through: John Hollander, Richard Howard, Robert Gottlieb, Allen Ginsberg, even William Burroughs. The phonograph played jazz and Mahler. There were trips to Birdland, solemn experimentation with smoking grass. Elise began sleeping with Donald, painfully accepting the fact that he was not hung up on her. But she would soon fall in love much more deeply with Allen Ginsberg—at last she had found someone who could read her soul. She would remain in love with Allen—a one-sided passion—until her suicide in 1962. Allen, who was still painfully working out his sexual identity, saw in Elise a resemblance to his mother, Naomi, that both attracted and disturbed him.

In 1952 Elise and I read John Clellon Holmes’s article “This Is the Beat Generation” with great excitement, recognizing the name John Kerouac that we’d heard in Donald’s apartment, and finding a stirring affirmation of our own sense of being outsiders.

“There are those who believe that in generations such as this,” wrote Holmes, “there is always the constant possibility of a great new moral idea, conceived in desperation, coming to life. Others note the self-indulgence, the waste, the apparent social irresponsibility, and disagree.” Surely this Beat Generation was the one we really belonged in, not the gray, bottled-up Silent one. Soon we read Holmes’s novel Go, fascinated by the Dostoevskian intensity generated by Holmes’s “boy
gang,” but we were incapable of asking ourselves why Holmes’s female characters were always relegated to the backseat. That sort of analysis would have to wait until the next decade.

For some doctrinaire feminists in our own time, On the Road has been a deceptively easy target. Choosing to ignore the social context in which On the Road was written, they deplore the macho posturing of Dean and Sal and the way Kerouac depicts their transient, totally irresponsible sexual relationships with women. Reading Kerouac now, they find nothing in his work that speaks to female readers. Yet, in 1957 when On the Road was published, thousands of Fifties women experienced a powerful response to what they read. On the Road was prophecy, bringing the news of the oncoming, unstoppable sexual revolution—the revolution that would precede and ultimately pave the way for women’s liberation. It was a book that dared to show that men too were fed up with their traditional roles. It suggested that you could choose—choose to be unconventional, choose to experiment, choose to open yourself up to a broad range of experience, instead of simply duplicating the lifestyle of your parents.

Kerouac seemed to realize how mired in the status quo women were; he saw the intrinsic sadness in lives of quiet desperation. “What do you want out of life?” Sal Paradise asks the pretty little waitress Rita Bettencourt who is “tremendously frightened of sex.” “I don’t know,” she said. “Just wait on tables and try to get along.” She yawned. I put my hand over her mouth and told her not to yawn. I tried to tell her how excited I was about life. . . .” Later Sal asks the same question of a country girl in Michigan. “I wanted to take her and wring it out of her. She didn’t have the slightest idea what she wanted. She mumbled of jobs, movies, going to her grandmother’s for the summer, wishing she could go to New York and visit the Roxy, what kind of outfit she would wear. . . . She was eighteen and most lovely, and lost.”

When I read these passages in late August of 1957, I thought of my mother and her sisters, but Kerouac’s lost girls did not remind me of myself—it was Sal, passionately impatient with the status quo, with whom I identified.

By then I had begun my relationship with Kerouac, but even before that, I’d had my immersion in real life. I’d defied my parents to have a painful affair with Donald Cook, left home, broken with my family, found jobs, had an abortion and had my first taste of despair. Still, I wouldn’t have turned back if given the choice. At twenty-one I felt I’d gone to the bottom and floated up; I had the lightness of feeling there was nothing left to lose, so I’d let Kerouac come home with me the first night I met him. Quite the little existentialist, as my Barnard professor once wrote. Or perhaps my state of mind approached the original definition of Beat.

“Come on down, I’m waiting for you,” Jack had written to me from Mexico City that July. “Don’t go to silly Frisco. First place, I have this fine earthquake-proof room for 85¢ a night for both of us, it’s an Arabic magic room with tiles on the walls and many big round whorehouse sex- orgy mirrors (it’s an old 1910 whorehouse, solid with marble floors)—we can sleep on the big clean double bed, have our private bath . . . it’s right downtown, we can enjoy city life to the hilt then when we get tired of our Magian inwardsness sultan’s room we can go off to the country and rent a cottage with flowerpots in the window—Your money will last you 5 times longer & in Frisco you wouldn’t be seeing anything new & foreign & strange—Take the plane to Mexico City (bus too long, almost as expensive too), then take a cab to my hotel, knock my door, we’ll be gay friends wandering arm-in-arm . . .”

How could I resist such an invitation? I immediately quit my secretarial job at Farrar,
Straus and Cudahy and gave up my apartment. Jack and I were going to live forever on the five hundred-dollar advance I had just gotten from an editor at Random House for my first novel, but unfortunately I didn’t move fast enough. By the time I was ready to leave for Mexico City, Jack, too depressed and shaky to stay alone in that sultan’s room, was on his way to his mother’s house in Florida. From there he wrote me asking for a loan of thirty dollars, so that he could take a bus to New York in time for the publication of On the Road. Being a witness to Jack’s collision with sudden, unexpected fame would soon turn into one of the most profoundly educational experiences of my life.

Looking at Beat women in a paper she read at the 1994 Beat conference at New York University, Alix Kates Shulman saw merely passivity, pathos and victimization. Of course, she didn’t take into consideration the heady excitement of taking part in the cultural revolution ushered in by the Beats. Nor did she acknowledge the courage required to venture into what was then new territory for women. As Hettie Jones succinctly put it in her memoir How I Became Hettie Jones, “Sex hadn’t made us bad.” When Hettie dared to cross the color line to marry the poet LeRoi Jones, her family considered her dead. Like Elise, Hettie would become my comrade and close friend; years before the concept of sisterhood became fashionable, we found in each other the emotional support we could not get from our men or our parents. “We shared what was most important to us,” Hettie wrote, “common assumptions about our uncommon lives. We lived outside, as if. As if we were men? As if we were newer, freer versions of ourselves?”

In our downtown scene in the East Village there was an interesting role reversal going on—women were often the breadwinners so the men would be free to pursue their creative work. I had a taste of this the first night I met Kerouac, when I bought him frankfurters and beans at Howard Johnson’s because he was absolutely broke. I had never done such a thing before. Interestingly enough, it did not make me feel exploited but strangely grown up. During our relationship, whenever he passed through New York, each of the three apartments I lived in from 1957 through 1958 served as a base for him. Homelessness had become Jack’s way of life; even the house he bought in 1958 with his royalties from On the Road was more his mother’s than his.

In the LeRoi Jones household, it was Hettie who paid much of the rent. Her small salary from her job at Partisan Review not only helped to support her husband, but fed numerous other young writers who hung out at their Chelsea apartment, which rapidly turned into a Beat salon. With what was left over, Hettie and LeRoi published the literary magazine Yugen.

“It’s perfectly possible to live with a male chauvinist and not be oppressed,” Joanna McClure, whose husband Michael was one of the leading figures in the San Francisco Renaissance, observed in 1982 on a women’s panel at a Naropa Institute Conference commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of On the Road. It all came down to what kind of male chauvinist you were with. The men Hettie and I found suffocating were the bourgeois, conventional ones. Men like LeRoi and Jack somehow gave us the breathing space we needed. “You’ll end up in Mamaroneck with Marjorie Morningstar,” a lawyer boyfriend of Hettie’s had once predicted. “What unforeseen catastrophe would send me up the river,” she’d wondered, “to decorate a home in Westchester?”

“But you suffered!” I can imagine a feminist critic like Shulman interrupting accusingly. “Don’t forget that!” Yes, indeed, we suffered. We were poor, sometimes even hungry; we had holes
in our black stockings and wore thriftshop clothes; whenever Consolidated Edison turned off the electricity, we were plunged into darkness. At times we were frightened. We had orphaned ourselves by becoming “bad women,” so we had no one to fall back on. We took terrible chances with our bodies when we had illegal abortions. We were afraid our restless men would leave us, and usually they did, even when we tried to put up with their affairs. Most of us never got the chance to literally go on the road. Our road instead became the strange lives we were leading. We had actually chosen these difficult lives for good reasons; we hadn’t fallen into them by default, or been kidnapped into fifth-floor walkups in the East Village. We couldn’t take on the task of transforming relationships between men and women because it took such an overwhelming amount of effort to come as far as we had; our most consuming struggle was the break with the mores of our parents’ generation. We experienced the thrill of being part of a movement that changed life in America, and we endured the hard times that came with making something new. Many of us discovered we were tougher and more resilient than we’d imagined we could be.

Would Hettie become a writer herself if her marriage hadn’t broken up? How long would I have lasted as Mrs. Jack Kerouac, coping with Jack’s heartbreaking alcoholism and his jealous Mémère? Sometimes the unhappy endings of love stories turn out to be the right ones.

The subject of Beat women is currently rather fashionable. Two anthologies of the women’s writings have recently been published, and I keep hearing about scholars who are working on papers. There is particular attention paid to Elise Cowen, but too much of it is morbidly centered upon her suicide, as if she is the prime victim even the admires of Beat women have been looking for.

Elise was remarkable because of her intellect, her absolute honesty and her capacity for devoted friendship. The poems she left behind are rough and unfinished but have the power that comes when a writer holds nothing back. Elise’s obsessive love for Allen Ginsberg set her on an impossible course—as if she had to prove herself worthy of him by living as he did. She even emulated him sexually—entering into an affair with a Barnard classmate when Allen became involved with Peter Orlovsky. I remember feeling very worried about her in 1957 when she set off for San Francisco on a Greyhound bus with only a few dollars in her pocket. As usual, she was unable to hold a job. She ended up in a North Beach skid row hotel and came to grief when she found she needed an abortion and couldn’t afford one. By the time she found a psychiatrist who signed the papers permitting her to have a clinical abortion, she was five months pregnant. The operation was traumatic for her.

Elise had been subject to depression ever since I met her and had slit her wrists when we were in our junior year at Barnard. She had a toxic relationship with her parents, especially with her father who was far too emotionally involved with her. She began taking speed around 1960 and deteriorated very quickly. Her parents had her committed to a mental hospital and then had her released in their custody even though she was far from stable. In our last conversation, she spoke of radios listening in on her; her parents were planning to take her to Miami Beach, of all places. A few weeks later, I heard about her death.

“I wonder how I’ll wear my hair when I’m thirty,” I remember her saying. But she never found out. I’ve often thought Elise was born too soon. In a time with more tolerance for nonconformist behavior in women she might even have survived. Elise could never conceal what she was. She could never put on a mask as I did and pass in and out of the straight world.
When I was writing my memoir *Minor Characters*, I went, for research purposes, to the twenty-fifth reunion of my Barnard class of 1955. Few of the renegades I’d known were there. Most of the women present had followed the traditional Fifties path, marrying soon after or even during college, becoming housewives in the suburbs. Some, judging by their nametags, had married two or three times. Now with their children grown, they were wondering how to get into the job market. They had difficulty describing themselves—“I live in Scarsdale,” they’d say, or “I have a son at Yale.” One of them went up to one of the few members of the class who had never married, peered at the single name on her nametag, and said, “What’s the matter? Didn’t anyone like you?” These women looked old to me. How had vibrant girls turned into these matrons? I felt grateful that I had escaped this fate.

I thought of Elise as I stood on the Barnard lawn drinking punch. When the 1955 yearbook was passed around, I looked for her picture. I found a blank rectangle with her name printed underneath.