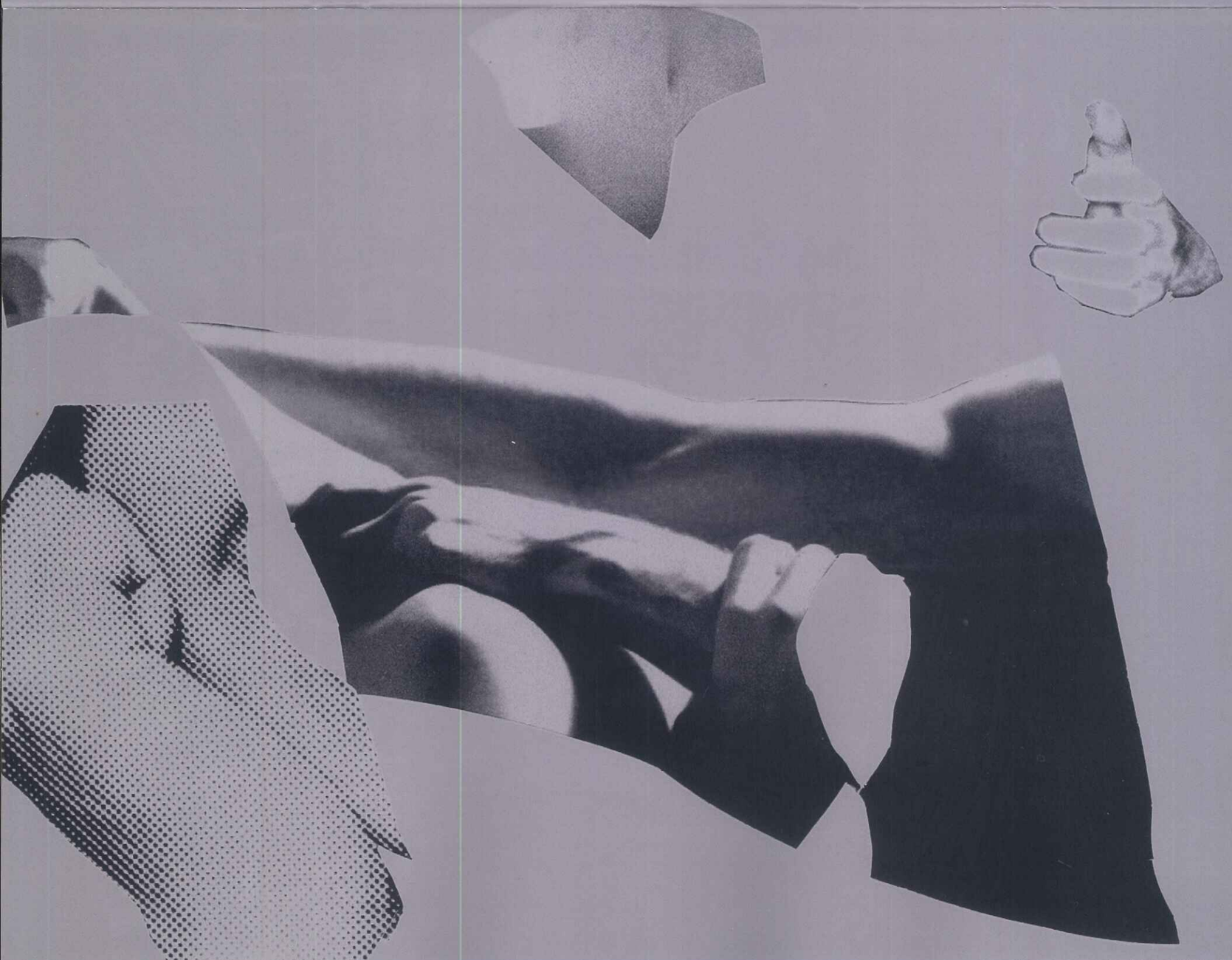
4. A Girl and the Beats

Lynnette Lounsbury





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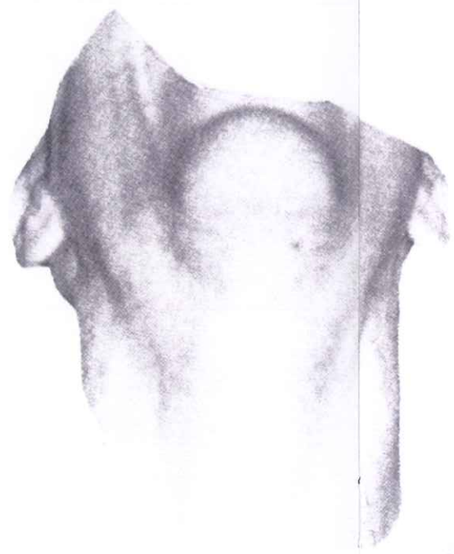
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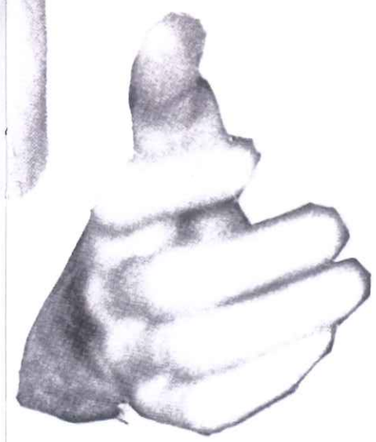


It is a formative experience to fall in love with a piece of literature. I suspect some people never do; it takes a lot of reading to find your way into the things that move you, the things that resonate with you on a cellular level. There is, in literature, that possibility – and it is rare, and thus precious – of finding such a raw representation on the page, that you discover things that you couldn't articulate about yourself opened up in front of you. You become more, and quite often, you can love yourself more because of it. There are books that have made me more courageous, characters that have taught me things about love before I needed them and given words to the sort of pain that is soundless and bound. I have loved myself in the difficult pragmatism of Scarlett O'Hara, cringed at the ambivalent rage I recognised as my own in Hamlet, knicked my fingers on the razor satire of Terry Pratchett. I have been unravelled by the absurdity of Tom Robbins. But the way I fell for the road and the sky and the in-between worlds of open-heartedness in Kerouac's works, has been an unparalleled literary love affair.

When I read *On the Road*, I was sixteen. I fell for the energy of the words. The expanse of the images. Kerouac wrote the text in three weeks, on a continuous reel of paper, single-spaced to save time. That energy infuses the text – it grabs you and drags you along with it. You want to taste it, it's so visceral. I read more Kerouac, and then I read Cassady, and Ginsberg and Burroughs. I loved the world. I love the men in it. I loved how they shared themselves with each other and the world. Generously. They shared their weaknesses and flaws as openly as they did their passions. But I always had, and still have, that sinking understanding that there would have been no place for me in that world. There were no strong, fully formed and fascinating women in the beat world. There were women, certainly, but they felt like cardboard cut outs, something to move around, admire, shift gently out of the way when necessary In fact the only women Kerouac and Ginsberg seemed to genuinely respect, were their mothers.

When Kostas Myrsiades wrote in *The Beat Generation* that the Beats emerged in opposition to the dominant "square" culture of 1950s America – the sexual repression, xenophobia, nine-to-five work ethic, materialism





and extreme patriotism – one glaring omission was any real reactive opposition to the parochial patriarchy that still viewed woman as significant less able in every regard (except perhaps as temptress or mother). There was a rejection of repressed sexuality, but not of sexism. The women in Kerouac's literature are

passive, submissive and often end up the abandoned victim rather than an active participant. In his work Jack associated women with two things – pleasure and pain. There was no middle ground, no deeper soul connection. Women were beautiful but difficult, pretty but dumb – "Marylou was a pretty blonde with immense ringlets of hair like a sea of golden tresses….like a long-bodied emaciated Modigliani surrealist woman….But, outside of being sweet little girl, she was awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things." Women were something to look at, to admire, but to be wary of on any deeper level – certainly not an avant-garde idea. Women were often simply called "the girl" or "she" and described in terms of their looks: "she was about sixteen, and had Plains complexion like wild roses, and the bluest eyes, the most lovely hair and the modesty and quickness of a wild antelope." In On the Road there was "the cutest little Mexican girl", her breast sticking out straight and true, the wife whose "beautiful brown breasts were barely concealed" by her blouse, the "idiot daughter" that Dean dug and all the girls Dean "gunned" coming out of high school in the afternoon before asking Sal to sleep with his wife, just to "see what Marylou was like with another man." Dean's cry of "oh I love, love, love women! I think women are wonderful! I love women!" is disparate to his treatment of his wife. There is a gaze here that simply doesn't engage on anything other than the physical plane – a watcher who sees nothing more than the level to which what he can find pleasure. It is not that Sal doesn't aspire to more, making clear his desire to commune with women outside of sexuality – "real straight talk about souls" – there just isn't any actual effort made to achieve that aim. There is the sense that Jack knows there is a way in which he could engage on a deeper level with women, to know them better and perhaps even write them as more fully-formed, but that he is simply too caught up in his journeys, both physical and emotional, to bother with this. "A pain stabbed my heart, as it did every times I saw a girl I loved who was going the opposite direction in this too-big world." He knows there is more, but has other relationships and journeys that are simply more important to him.

I have looked for well-formed female characters in the Beat writing. I looked hard. Carolyn Cassady, Edie Parker and Hettie Jones felt more like watchers than participants – muses perhaps, facilitators maybe, but not respected equals. These talented women, some of whom wrote their own incredible and revolutionary prose, were 'the wives', barely acknowledged by their male peers. They wrote memoirs about their identities in relation to the men around them and I wanted more than that – I wanted to read *them*. And I wanted them to *write women*. I found the beat women

as outsiders in offside compendiums. As afterthoughts and even instigators, but rarely as the orchestrators and creators of their own place in literature. Diane di Prima was an exception, her poetry and prose is soul shaking, but mostly I found that the beatnik space was closed to me –I could look in certainly, but I couldn't

touch. A woman–Joan Vollmer–is often credited with actually creating the beat revolution, with bringing together the writers, inspiring them and according to Brenda Knight, who wrote the great book *Women of the Beat Generation*, becoming "the whetstone against which the great writers–Allan, Jack and Bill–sharpened their intellect." The thing is, the writing–the words I loved, were still written by men about men. And they weren't concerned with writing women well. As Joyce Johnson, author of the tellingly named *Minor Characters*, describes the beat scene as having "very little to do with the participation of women as artists themselves. The real communication was going on between the men, and the women were onlookers… You kept your mouth shut, and if you were intelligent and interested in things you might pick up what you could. It was a very masculine aesthetic."

Ginsberg is quoted as saying "Were we responsible for the lack of outstanding genius in the women we knew? Did we put them down or repress them? I don't think so." And in this I recognise that aged idea–"we'd celebrate them if they were actually talented and we'd write about them if they were interesting," a simplistic explanation that fails to acknowledge disadvantage, exclusion or simple misogyny. Perhaps the beatniks just weren't as revolutionary as they thought–bucking some social and political trends but falling into line with the gender bias and beliefs of their day. And if this is the case, why do women respond to the Beat writers at all? How does this love develop? I am certainly not the only woman to connect with the Beat on a deep level. Is it some self-destructive, self-reductive tendency? I don't believe so. I think it is because we are human before we are woman or men, and the need for self-exploration goes very deep. We are also still emerging from a place of repression and conformity, which makes us seekers of truth and self–looking to find the edges of our new selves. I think it is little wonder we resonate with the Beat desire to shed expectation and find something more.

There are many ways to react to sexism and misrepresentation in literature. The first, and probably the most important, is to recognise it, point it out, make it known. And I feel that this has been done with the writings of Kerouac. It has not gone unnoticed that Kerouac and many of the Beats were a masculine collective interested foremost in exploring their love of each other and their place in the world. It has not gone unseen, the way in which they watched women from a place of self. It has been discussed by many of the far greater writers and scholars who have come before me. It is from here that we have to react– to reject his work altogether, to ignore what doesn't suit us so as not to lose that which does, to rail against it, or perhaps to interact with it creatively. All of these are valid responses and

I can only speak to my own. I have written myself into the narrative of the Beatniks. I have taken from their stories, particularly those of Kerouac, the freedom and raw openness, the rejection of traditional structures and the hope that I can gain some understanding of the world by moving a little outside of it. I have written

them into my stories, created worlds where they are my characters to move around as I wish. As a woman, I have created a place for myself in the literature that I love. I did this by re-versioning Kerouac's history and inserting a version of myself in his story. My novel, *We ate the Road like Vultures*, was at once the writer's usual attempt to cleanse ourselves of the stories that possess us, but also a rewriting of my own youth and my interactions with Kerouac. In my story a woman is commanding her space in the Beat universe, inter-

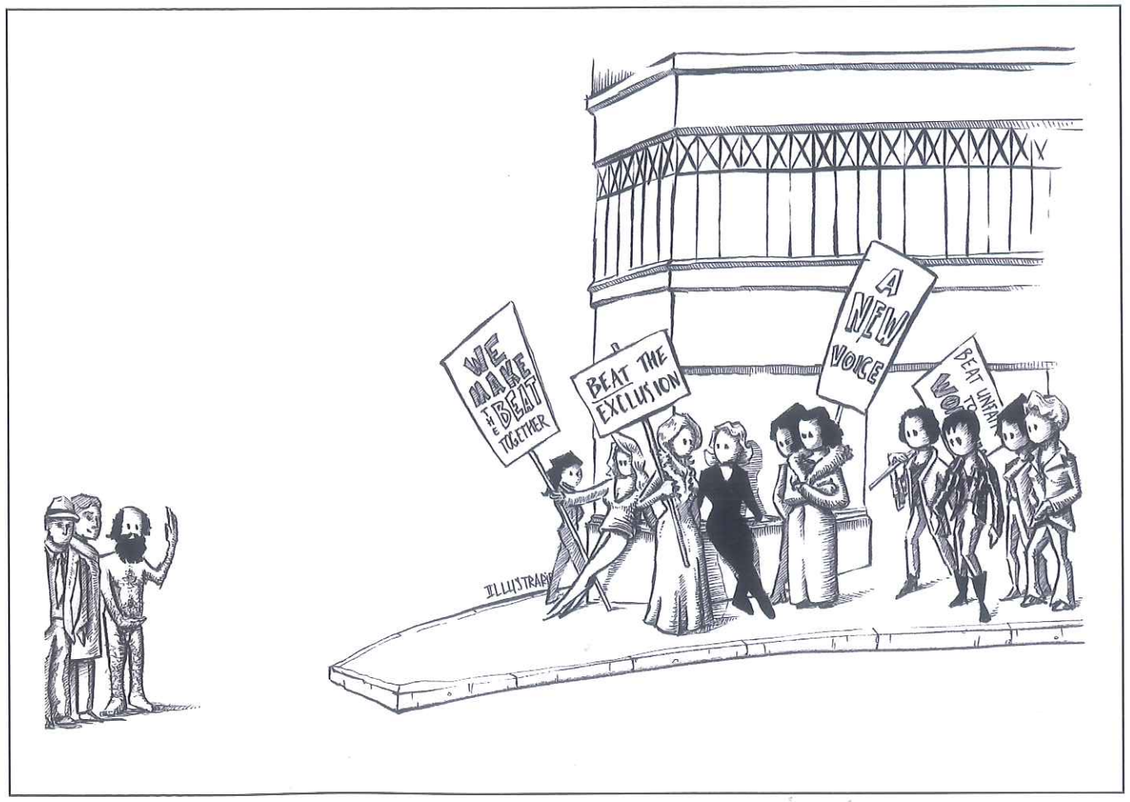


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acting with Kerouac outside of sexuality, on a soul level—something he claimed he wanted. Something I needed.

Discussing feminist issues in literature is still contentious. It shouldn't be, there is no inherent threat here to the canon and there is no desire from women to take anything away from what has been created—but it is. I wrote an article earlier this year for an Australian paper about the way I felt "outside" of the Beatnik writings as a woman, and the usual comments made the rounds—"blah, blah, blah feminism" and "women whining again" being a couple of the most generous (and reprintable—someone suggested I might just prefer to die, than opine). I'm not convinced that this is the established opinion of men in the literary world. I think it is more likely to be the opinion of men who comment on newspaper columns, but I still feel the need to say firmly and as loudly as my pen will let me—women are not taking anything. Feminism is not a movement designed to destroy or disempower. It is about adding new voices to a conversation, about adding new vision, fresh words, a different perspective. It is about looking deeper to find women's voices where they were in their time, sometimes hidden, sometimes silenced and sometimes struggling through self-doubt. It is about balancing out the representations of life. Women have looked for themselves in literature and found paucity—and now we are creating our own place. This is not destruction—this is expansion. This is evolution. The way Jack Kerouac saw women was his own. I cannot say that he was wrong, only that I do not find myself represented in his writing the way I find myself in someone like Margaret Mitchell, Charlotte Bronte or Elena Ferrante's works. I still love his writings, I am still woken and enlivened and filled up by them. I, by writing my own version of my relationship with him, do not want to take from him anything at all—I want to add my voice. I will happily take the backseat in *On the Road*, watching and listening and learning from him. But he can sit behind me in my novel and he can listen to my voice. As I may be able to in someone else's story.

