

Fashion and Female Beat Identity in the Writing of Jones, Johnson, and di Prima

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Abstract: In her article "Fashion and Female Beat Identity in the Writing of di Prima, Johnson, and Jones" Raven J. See discusses how the women writers of the Beat Generation have become iconically defined by their fashion choices. Clothing and accessories offer Beat women a means to construct and express their identity and Diane di Prima, Joyce Johnson, and Hettie Jones write about fashion in their narratives of self-creation. Like their male contemporaries, Beat women make style choices that allow them to reject mainstream culture and identify within Beat subculture. However, these women write about their decisions to accept or reject certain styles in particularly female terms. Their discussion of fashion is also a discussion of female embodiment, and their fashion choices are often assertions of control over their own bodies.

Raven J. SEE

Fashion and Female Beat Identity in the Writing of di Prima, Johnson, and Jones

Joyce Johnson begins her memoir *Minor Characters* with an image of Rilke's "penniless, slightly disheveled girls" (xxxiii). This group of young female artists "on the verge of abandoning themselves" serve as an introduction to the women of the Beat generation (xxxii). What marks these women as unique is their dress: "When they lift their arms as they draw, it appears that their dress isn't buttoned in back, or at any rate not completely. There are a few buttons that they couldn't reach. For when the dress was made, no one had imagined that they would suddenly go away, alone (xxxii). Their misbuttoned dresses signify their transgression and mark them as artists and pioneers. These girls have chosen to defy social convention, and they wear it openly. Johnson employs this image of disheveled and rejected fashion norms, to place herself and her female contemporaries in a larger tradition of nonconforming women. "Runaway[s] from respectability," the women of the Beat generation parallel their male peers in their rejection of convention and mainstream, industrial-capitalist values (xxxiii). However, as women navigating the dominant 1950's patriarchal culture, their decision to rebel becomes both more difficult and more dangerous. As Ann Douglas writes in her introduction to Johnson's *Minor Characters*, "Discarding her traditional garb, the woman Beat, unlike the male, had at hand no garments of cultural myth to don in its place" (xxvi). Picking up Douglas's metaphor, I am interested in the way the women of the Beat generation draw from the examples of rebellion available to them to both figuratively and literally create their own "garments." Discussions of fashion and clothing permeate Johnson's memoir as well as the memoirs of other prominent female Beat writers, Hettie Jones and Diane di Prima. Here, I aim to explore how each of these memoirs thinks about clothing as a means for fashioning identity, specifically a female Beat identity.

Described by Kerouac as "girls" who "say nothing and wear black" the women of the Beat Generation have become iconically defined by their fashion choices. Beat poets like Anne Waldman and Ruth Weiss wear a variety of styles and colors and even allow their fashion to become a part of their performance, but it is the uniform of thick black dancers' tights and long sleeved black tops that remains the most dominant image of Beat women in our collective cultural consciousness. In *20th Century American Fashion*, Linda Welters describes Beat women's "distinctly recognizable style" as consisting of "skirts with black stockings" and "turtlenecks or leotards" for tops (356). While I will explore how Jones, Johnson, and di Prima write about aspects of this look in their own fashion, their discussions of clothing and accessories push beyond the image that Welters conjures. Crucially, Welters' text also fails to distinguish between Beat artists and the image of the beatnik that would emerge from mainstream media.

Coined in a 1958 article in the San Francisco *Chronicle*, Herb Caen uses the term "beatnik" to describe the 250 "bearded cats and kits" attending a house party. Lacking the authenticity of the Beat artists and writers themselves, the cultural figure of the beatnik is a creation of the media which dilutes the Beat ethos and offers it up for mass consumption. In *Clothing and Fashion* contributor Adam MacPharlain draws a distinction between Beat and beatnik style and notes that the fashion of the Beats is often overshadowed by the beatnik stereotype which includes "a goateed, sandaled male in all black, from his slacks to his turtleneck sweater to his beret, with dark glasses" (41). The trope of the beatnik or the beat chick all in black was, and continues to be, perpetuated through media images. Early figures include the goatee-sporting Maynard G. Krebs on the early 1960s sitcom *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* and Audrey Hepburn dressed in slim fit black slacks and turtlenecks free form dancing in *Funny Face* (41). Today, images of Taylor Swift dressed in a black turtleneck, a beret, and dark frame glasses populate Pinterest under the tag "beat generation fashion," and teen sitcoms like Disney's *Girl Meets World* show the title character time traveling and becoming a beat by donning ankle-length black slacks, dark long sleeved tops, and a beret.

MacPharlain notes that this stereotype did have some basis in reality; however, the fashion of the Beats themselves was much more varied. Marked by a "relaxed style that countered the more put together look popularized by mainstream media," Beat fashion served as a symbolic rejection of social convention (41). For male Beats, this was often achieved through relaxed fit or casual garments like jeans and T-shirts, patterned shirts, and ungroomed facial hair. Female Beats adopted similar styles, trading structured garments for loose fitting sweaters and jerseys, and allowing their hair to grow long or remain unstyled. Women wore skirts of various styles, as well as thin fit black slacks and black tights. Unlike the men, Beat women did not always have these options readily available. For example women's jeans were not available throughout the United States until the 1950s, and universities and businesses could still legally require women to wear dresses and skirts (Panek

<<http://www.levistrauss.com/unzipped-blog/2014/09/celebrating-80-years-of-womens-jeans/>>).

Finding the same relaxed fit or casual garments meant buying men's clothes or creating one's own, and choosing to wear pants was still a political act.

Hettie Jones takes on the significance of black tights in her 1990 memoir *How I Became Hettie Jones*. She writes playfully about what "beat" is and what it looks like. "To be beat," she explains, "you needed a certain B-movie graininess, a saintly disaffection," and "a wild head of hair" (46). Ted Joans is a "beat picture," a "black man always dressed in black, from a black beret on down" (46). As for Beat women, they have "all found Goldin Dance Supply on Eight Street, where dirt-defying indestructible tights could be bought" (46). More than an accessory, these tights "freed [women] from fragile nylon stockings and the cold, unreliable, metal clips of a garter belt" (46). These tights are practical and they are freeing. They are cheap, warm, and they do not have to be washed. In their durability, they provide access to a host of new spaces and uses that are unavailable to a woman who wears only nylons. Made for dancers, they are worn by women who seek movement, and they are only available in black.

In contrast to the creams and pastels that were more traditional for young women to wear in the 1950s, black signified darkness, difference, or something threatening. Wini Breines echoes this in her book *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties*, "the Beats wore black. Black turtle-neck shirts, black stockings, black sunglasses" (148). Beyond the Beats, black became the color of rock and roll, hoods, and "bad girls" across America. As Breines notes, "it was a white time in America," and it is not a surprise that black became associated with dissenters. Breines also notes that this darkness was often associated with black or immigrant youth. In the cultural imagining of dissenters dressed in black and likewise the Beats' desire to associate themselves with darkness, Breines's assessment echoes Norman Mailer's controversial 1957 essay "The White Negro." Mailer argued that African Americans are disenfranchised by society and must live every day with the real threat of violence whereas the hipster adopts this model as a rejection of conformity. I think it is important to consider what Robert Holton describes as the "inventory of inverse symbolic capital" or the appropriation of African American and working class emblems to construct a space outside of the mainstream (19). Fashion is often appropriate and middle class white youth, who could attain traditional standards of attractiveness, have the power to use emblems of black culture to freely create alternative spaces in a way that black communities themselves cannot.

Jones's memoir continues her discussion of Beat fashion when she recalls an article published in the *Partisan Review* in 1959. The author, Diana Trilling, complained about the "girls" of the Beat Generation. Jones writes: "She didn't find us pretty, and hadn't liked our legs at all. 'So many blackest black stockings,' she wrote with distaste" (129). Trilling's article is about Allen Ginsberg and the burgeoning Beat scene and Jones sees herself reflected in the "girls" that Trilling dismisses. Jones finds humor but also takes a kind of pride in Trilling's distaste. Fashion, specifically the black stockings, allows Jones to identify herself as a member of Beat Bohemia while rejecting the values of the mainstream culture. Here, the *Partisan Review* represents a high-brow intellectual literary elite and Jones takes pleasure in being found ugly and distasteful in their view. Just a year later, Jones receives a compliment on her black stockings from another writer at the *Partisan*. Of this incident she writes: "I [was not] able to resist adding, after I'd thanked her, that she could buy them on Fourteenth Street, at the Bargain Hosiery Center next to the Catholic Church" (129). Her inability to resist telling the writer from *Partisan Review* where she bought her tights illustrates the way she continues to connect this look to a Beat identity. She brags that she got them at the bargain store rather than a boutique or department store. She takes pride in their cheapness and practicality and rejects the capitalist notion that she should desire fine or expensive things. She then adds the detail that this store is located on 14th Street, in Greenwich Village (also called "the Village" for short), a space almost exclusively inhabited by Beats and Bohemians in 1959. Jones uses these anecdotes centered on her black tights to reflect on Beat's presence and growing popularity in 1959. After the publication of "Howl" (1956) and *On the Road* (1957) put Beat on the cultural map, her Bargain Hosiery store on 14th Street began to see a lot more traffic. Even the Barbie like mannequin in the window is now dressed in black tights. She recollects walking by the store with her friend Helen and being struck by the crowd: "It felt odd to have so prompted the culture, to have many other women want to seem to be you, whatever they thought you were. I turned to Helen and shrugged. Both of us were wearing black stockings, of course, but so was an old woman coming from Mass" (130). Clothing becomes a means for these women to opt in to the subculture they see emerging and mark themselves as members. What Jones witnesses, and then relays here in her memoir, is what MacPharlain discusses in his distinction between Beat style and beatnik fashions. Media portrayals "influenced a trickling down of hip fashions to the middle class" (41). More than a member of this burgeoning beatnik scene, Jones is a pioneer. Her inclusion of the old woman coming from Mass in this scene is a reminder that the tights serve a practical purpose. Jones wears these tights because they suit her

lifestyle, and it is her experiences that the girls flocking to the Bargain Hosiery hope to emulate by buying the same clothing.

"Howl" and Ginsberg's performance of the poem at the Gallery Six reading are generally recognized to have spurred the creation of what we now talk about as the Beat generation. As Robert Holton has noted, the poem spoke to a specific audience and opened up new spaces for cultural division and inclusion. Diane di Prima recalls the sense of inclusion she felt when first reading "Howl" in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*: "I knew that this Allen Ginsberg whoever he was, had broken ground for us all—all few hundreds of us ... It followed that if there was one Allen there must be more, other people besides my few buddies writing what they spoke, what they heard, living, however obscurely and shamefully, what they knew, hiding out here and there as we were—and now suddenly about to speak out ... I was about to meet my brothers and sisters" (177). Poetry and language serve to connect di Prima to something larger than herself. Ginsberg and his poem are evidence that a movement of shared ideas exists beyond her and her few "buddies." There are others who live lives that look like hers and she longs to meet them.

Fashion serves as a means for expressing these new lines of division and inclusion. Joyce Johnson writes in *Minor Characters*, "I long to turn myself into a Bohemian, but lack the proper clothes" (31). At thirteen, Johnson longs to separate herself from the life her parents are grooming for her. Their apartment on 116th Street is quiet and genteel. There is affection in their home but, as Johnson notes, no passion. Her sweaters are hand-knitted from "fine" fabrics and she is much "more formally" dressed than other girls in their "cheap" "store-bought garments," but she is unhappy (20). Johnson describes her life with her parents as existing "in a kind of cultural loneliness," and she longs to feel some kind of connection (20). Bohemia offers Johnson all that she is lacking. She imagines that the girls in dark clothes and long earrings that populate the Village must experience lives full of romance and adventure and if she could only look like them, she could do the same.

While Johnson remembers herself "in black of course," it is a belt from the Sorcerer's Apprentice that is her teenage desire: "Oh, the belts I see in the Sorcerer's Apprentice ... Such a belt—aside from enhancing your appearance, which I was sure it would immeasurably—is a badge, a sign of membership in the ranks of the unconventional. The way is smoothed for the wearer of this belt ... The way is smoothed because the problem of outside matching inside is so beautifully resolved by this simple means, which only costs money. I'd have been humiliated if anyone had told me that the desire to possess these items was, within a different context, like the desire to possess a certain kind of baseball jacket" (32). The belt not only offers a young Johnson membership into the club, like owning the right baseball jacket, it also allows her to reflect the discord and frustration she feels with her conventional middle-class life. Johnson desires what she describes as "real life," something that is decidedly not of her parents' world, something "dramatic, unpredictable, possibly dangerous" (30). Having one of these belts will not only mark her as different, but will provide her access to the kind of life she desires. In marking their wearers as Beat or Bohemian, Johnson's belt and Hettie's stockings take on what Dick Hebdige described as "symbolic dimension," becoming "a form of stigma, tokens of self imposed exile" (2). Or, as Robert Holton explains: "In the conformist 1950s, the Levis and work shirts, the art, the jazz, and the dope acted as diacritical markers accenting a separation from middle class identity and the cultural compromises it was believed to entail" (19). The right garment offers its wearer the power to claim or even create a specific cultural identity while rejecting others.

More than an expression of personal identity, fashion is a performance meant to be seen and believed by others. Items of clothing take on the power to signify one's belonging to or exclusion from particular social groups and communicate that to others. When Joyce Johnson leaves for Barnard College and decides it best to "give [up] Bohemianism," she illustrates her commitment with the clothing that she packs (47). In order to become collegiate, Johnson puts on a "Black Watch plaid skirt that fastened in front with a large safety pin, dark-green Bonnie Doon knee socks, and matching lamb's wool (lamentably not cashmere) sweaters" (47). Name brand and clean cut Johnson believes her new clothes will help her to leave behind her fascination with the Bohemian subculture of the Village. However, when she meets Elise Cowen she feels immediately connected to this girl who "clearly was not collegiate" (51). Elise's clothing gives her away as the kind of girl Johnson should avoid if she wishes to belong to the collegiate crowd: "She was even wearing one of those telltale belts from the Sorcerer's Apprentice—the spiral kind—into which she'd tucked a drab and unbecoming skirt and a demure white blouse with a Peter Pan collar, the kind your mother might make you wear in seventh grade, pulled tightly over her large breasts" (51). Elise's belt from the Sorcerer's Apprentice signifies her movement in the Village and communicates that she knows and chooses to wear the fashions of Bohemia. Her drab and unflattering skirt and blouse are in stark contrast to the cashmere sweaters and pleated plaid skirts of Johnson and the other girls. She rejects the traditional standards of attractiveness and in so doing marks herself as an outsider. Despite Johnson's attempt to avoid Elise and the world she represents, she finds in Elise a

close friend and a shared understanding.

In *Young, White, and Miserable*, Breines takes on the myth that the young women of the 1950s did not rebel, but were active participants in what she terms postwar American conformism. She points to the women of the Beat generation and the personal accounts they share in their memoirs as evidence of this rebellion. For di Prima, Johnson, and Jones fashion becomes a means to enact and discuss that rebellion. When di Prima attends Swarthmore College in 1951, she seeks to distinguish herself from the "blonde girls in cashmere sweaters, with single strands of pearls, [who] seem to own this place" (88). In contrast, she romps about the woods around the school "dressed like nothing they have ever seen on this campus" (89). Her red sash, waist-length hair, red satin ballet slippers, and cut off jeans with the ragged edge deliberately mark her as different, even strange, and di Prima enjoys that she is like nothing these well dressed girls have ever seen before. Here her clothing choices are made in opposition to the image of what a good college girl is supposed to look like. Red is bright and loud and stands out amid the pastel or neutral tones more common for women at this time. Her hair is untamed and her jeans are cut off giving her the freedom to move about the woods. In this account di Prima offers her classmates as well as us as her audience a new image of what it means to be a white middle class college student, and more specifically what it means to be female.

Jones also uses descriptions of clothing to set herself up in opposition to mainstream fashions. She recalls noticing another girl's clothing on a trip to Newport. "I first noticed this other young woman's high heeled mules. She was wearing these with tight toreador pants, a style that keeps coming back like a son ... In contrast were my demure old brown sundress, the bulk of my new handmade sandals" (32). It is in this moment that Jones decides to return home and pursue her relationship with LeRoi; she recognizes that she is weird, but she has found a man who wants to be with her because of her difference. Like di Prima, Jones takes pride in recognizing her weirdness. Unlike the fashionable women she encounters, she sees herself as something more than a "fantasy" a "woman who'd just begun to make herself up" (32). Jones finds not only transgression in her decision to wear chunky handmade sandals rather than high-heeled mules but also the power to create herself. Yet even as fashion allows Beat women to reject convention, grants them access into Bohemia, and defines them as cool, their memoirs also tell the story of how their iconic garments render them invisible within Beat subculture. Kerouac's girls who wear black, say nothing. Johnson opens her memoir with a photograph, a Gap ad for Khaki's in which Kerouac stares out from MacDougal Street. Johnson notes that part of the original photograph has been cropped away; in it you would have found an "anonymous young woman" "all in black of course," invisible (xxxix). The woman missing from the picture is Johnson herself, and it is this literal removal that prompts her to write her memoir. Later, Johnson details the moment Elise enters Ginsberg's Village world for the first time. Elise is struck by the women here. They are "all beautiful and have such a remarkable cool that they never, never say a word; they are presences merely. But she herself is tormented by speechlessness. Why can't she say more? What must he think of her? She's choked in her red dress" (74). Rendered silent and invisible, the women that Elise sees in Ginsberg's Bohemia remain cool so long as they "never, never say a word." The girls who wear black and say nothing are readily available. They populate the men's world in so far as they are objects for pleasure or companions who are down for anything. In ascribing to this image and the "rule of cool," women are granted access into Beat Bohemia but not in the same way as the men.

Beat women are unique in their ability to inhabit multiple realms. Even as they work to oppose ideas of female identity imposed on them by a mainstream culture that seeks to control and define them, they must navigate the same pressures within Bohemia. As Ronna Johnson and Nancy Grace discuss in *Breaking the Rule of Cool*: "Women Beat writers dissented from gender assumptions of Beat and mainstream cultures; making their own use of the Beat aesthetics and culture by which they were colonized, they developed a subaltern's recourse, the art of being in between" (21). As Johnson and Grace have illustrated, Beat women are a marginalized group within a marginalized subculture and they must doubly contend with the misogyny of the culture writ large but also within Bohemia. I am therefore interested in exploring the way Beat women rely on fashion to navigate multiple spaces in a way their male contemporaries do not have to. The "ones who dared to leave home"—women like Johnson, di Prima, and Jones—find themselves cut off from the financial support of their parents for choosing to pursue a life of which their middle class families do not approve. In order to support themselves and often their partners or male friends, Beat women took jobs in offices, literary agencies, and publishing companies. Johnson discusses her attempts to move between worlds that she feels she does not fully inhabit in *Minor Characters*. In 1956, working at a literary agency by day and living in the Village and writing her novel by night, Johnson feels as if she does not fully inhabit either realm. Fashion becomes a means for her to navigate the day time world: "It took great effort and vigilance to report to my job on Madison Avenue, my hair wound into a chignon around a horrible doughnut-shaped thing called a

rat" (118). However, her "office identity seemed as precarious as [her] hairstyle," as if the whole thing might unravel and the people of this day time world would realize she was one of those girls who "had broken the law," "slept with men," and harbored "contempt for the books the MCA Literacy Agency was attempting to sell to publishers (118). Despite her contempt for MCA and the lives of her superiors, Johnson cannot simply drop out in the same way as the male Beats. She does not have the same freedom to move, to write, and to drop out of mainstream society as her freedom depends on earning an income. Johnson sees herself as a kind of imposter at MCA, but she also does not feel she belongs fully to the male dominated Beat scene.

Jones recalls meeting Joyce Johnson around this time in the late 1950s. While Johnson sees herself as perched precariously between realms, Jones remembers her as blending them with ease. At first glance Johnson is "conventional, almost prim" (80). She is "properly dressed in a neat princess coat and nylon stockings" (80). On second glance there is something in Johnson's movement and her hair that gives her away. Jones remembers "a certain familiar carelessness showed in the mess of her flyaway blond hair" (80). Jones recognizes Johnson as kindred. Her untamed blond hair reminds Hettie that this is the woman she has seen with Kerouac at the Jazz wagon. However, in Johnson's princess coat and nylon stockings, Jones recognizes a woman who lives in the same in-between spaces that she herself inhabits. Jones writes "we lived outside, as if. As if we were men? As if we were newer, freer versions of ourselves? There have always been women like us" (81). From somewhere outside, in between the mainstream and counterculture, Beat women carved out their own domain.

In these memoirs, fashion becomes a tool for Beat women to navigate and understand identity. Jones's decision to reject traditional nylons in favor of her practical black dancers tights is an act of agency and so is her decision to write about it. The ground breaking texts in this field like *Girls Who Wore Black* already point to the way women of the Beat generation have become the agents of their own recovery. I want to think about that in terms of not only reclaiming their voice, but also in reclaiming their image. When Johnson recalls the cropped photograph of herself standing expectantly on MacDougal Street she makes herself visible. As she describes the image, we begin to see that girl - the one "dressed in black of course" (xxxix). Though her look reminds us that she belongs to this group, she is more than the stereotypical Beat girl in a recognizable outfit. Through memoir we see her expectations, her sacrifices, her desires and growth. We see the way she and countless other "anonymous" young women inhabited and shaped the counterculture. Johnson conjures a similar image at the memoir's close. She invites us to see a girl "all in black ... black stockings, black skirt, black sweater" (261). This girl is "not mourning for her life but is in the direct center of everything" (261). The image that Johnson chooses to leave readers with is still of that girl in black, she wants to remind us that she was here, and the only thing she wishes to give up "is her silence" (261).

For Jones, fashion serves as a tool to directly discuss the societal limitations and restrictions women face. She explores the practicalities of women's clothing and celebrates the freedoms made available by ditching restrictive fashions. In her discussion of the iconic black tights she acknowledges them as a symbol of Beat subculture and a means for young women to mark themselves as members of that group. However, she suggests that they first became a staple of Beat fashion because of the freedoms they afforded women. Later in her memoir, Jones looks at the way fashions restrict women's bodies as she recollects her struggles to find clothing when pregnant. There are few ready-wear options available for pregnant bodies and even the sewing patterns are restrictive. She recalls: "You couldn't buy patterns then for 'unconstructed' women's garments without set-in sleeves to restrict the arm and darts to shape -- and reveal -- the breast" (84). When Jones finds no options for patterns that allow her to move freely, she simply throws them out and creates her own. She creates what she calls "anti-clothing" (84). These garments drawing from kimonos and djellababs and shapes found outside Western culture offer comfort, freedom, and movement.

In the pages of the memoir, Jones uses artistic and political language to discuss her creations. She discards the patterns "as if throwing away the score, because to make it all up, to improvise, became a way" (84). Here she evokes the improvisational qualities of jazz music and Beat poetry in her discussion of sewing. In discussing how to improvise or change the pattern, she notes, "once you release the shoulder, and allow the breast its natural room, you make way for the next step, the taking off the hard, restrictive bra (soon, soon)" (84). Writing retrospectively from 1990, Jones nods to the bra burnings of the Second Wave feminists and the freedoms that would emerge through fashion in the years to follow. Jones not only chooses new clothing, she creates a new pattern when the only options the culture offers are too restrictive. Her act of creation, she tells us through context, is a feminist act. Jones shares similar thoughts on fashion and feminism in her interview in Johnson and Grace's collection *Breaking the Rule of Cool*. When asked how Beat women contributed to the women's movement, Jones responds, "I love to mention clothing! Young women today don't have any idea of the discomfort ... to take off

your girdle was a radical move" (160). Jones notes that removing the girdle allowed women to walk and move freely in a way they could not before. She goes on to advocate everything from wearing pants to trading high heels for comfortable orthopedic shoes and small purses for shoulder bags. With each progressive example she reiterates the importance of moving freely. One's range of motion and available actions are certainly expanded when exchanging long skirts for pants and heels for comfortable shoes. A large bag with a strap freed women's hands and allowed them to pack enough to leave home for the night. What Jones wants a younger generation to understand is the power of changing fashions to allow women greater access to the world.

Lastly, in di Prima's memoir she uses fashion to discuss her rejection of accepted ideas of attractiveness and femininity. She recollects one day standing alone in her 5th Street apartment she "chose not to be beautiful" (115). Di Prima writes that hers was a rejection of the "burden of beauty" (114). She sought to escape the objectification that limits society's understanding of women as people but also to tear down a barrier that she saw "between the truly beautiful women and men in [her] world, between them and the world itself" (115). For di Prima rejecting beauty meant fully experiencing her life. She cuts her long red hair into a crew cut, adopts a "costume" of corduroy men's shirts and jeans, and dresses in large sizes that hide her body (114). While di Prima's memoir details her struggle to control, experience, and ultimately accept her body, this moment feels like more than just a reactionary hiding or covering up. Di Prima shares that in dressing this way, she "opened up the door and let [her] rough and tumble self out. Let the tomboy out who never had room at home. Let the forthright, cruel truthsayer out of the shadows" (115). Like Jones, di Prima recollects her choice to change her clothing as a freeing act. She pushes this one step further when she then considers the way this choice allows her to push the boundaries of how she imagines both her gender and her sexuality. She writes "I tromped through the city as some strange hybrid: neither gay nor straight, neither butch nor femme. I cleared some kind of path, cut a swath" (114). This simple choice to cut her hair and change her clothes that day on Fifth Avenue opens, a door for di Prima that allows her to begin to explore her identity in new ways and to become the grand poetess and figure that we recognize today.

In the visual culture we inhabit image matters. In the recovery work that Beat women have begun and we as readers, scholars, and critics have continued, it is important to consider both voice and image. Though seemingly obvious or trivial, the fashion of the Beat generation and of Beat women in particular seems to be a rich and yet largely unexplored space through which we may be able to gain a greater understanding of the scope and influence of Beat women. Fashion can help us to better understand Beat not only as an artistic movement but also as a counterculture with a lasting scope of influence.

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