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Research Report

**“Girls Who Say Nothing and Wear Black”: Women of the Beat Generation
and Their Influence Across Irish Women’s Writings.**

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Allen Ginsberg, legendary Beat Generation writer, once suggested that there is a sore lack of any outstanding genius in the women around him.¹ The Beat Generation was a collective of writers characterised by jazz-inspired, bebop poetics and spontaneous, imagistic composition originating from a small New York City community in the postwar 1950s of the United States of America. The mainstream knew them for their obscene frankness and practice of promiscuity, substance abuse, reckless travel, and refusal to conform to perfectly fine social norms; iconoclasm which constituted a shared desire for freedom and a life truly well-lived, beyond a McCarthy seal of approval. Despite the Beats' reputation as a boys club, reinforced by the endless accounts of the homosocial trio of Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg, the women involved in the sphere did not stand idly by chain-smoking and nodding along as the boys pontificated with the boys.

Mischaracterised by Kerouac as merely 'girls' who 'say nothing and wear black,' even a basic inquiry into the matter renders his statement absurd. Beat women were equally prolific in their writing as their male peers, and have been critically excluded from the conversation due to deeply-embedded misogynistic attitudes and obstruction of opportunities from society that were mirrored in the male members of the hypocritical subculture they belonged to. Despite this, Beat women generated their own poetics of Beat writing, of which stylistic and experiential elements can be identified even in contemporary Irish poets. Though the canon of women Beats is vast and as yet undefined, this discussion will focus on Diane di Prima, Lenore Kandel, and Ruth Weiss — who famously stylised her name in lowercase — before moving to consider their influence in the works of Irish poets Elaine Feeney and Kimberly Campanello.

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Diane di Prima, Lenore Kandel, and Ruth Weiss are three distinct individuals and artists yet intrinsically tied to one another through experiential similarities. Born in New York to an Italian family, di Prima is recognisable as the most famous Beat woman, and among the few respected by the Beat men.² She was the author of more than thirty books, and contributor to over three hundred literary magazines and seventy anthologies, and became San Francisco's poet laureate in 2009.³ Kandel, also originating from New York, was a second generation Romanian immigrant born to a family of writers. Having moved to San Francisco in 1960, she became the object of the city's longest obscenity trial, accused of trying to 'condition' the public into a 'new type of morality'

¹ Johnson & Grace, 'Visions and Revisions,' p.10.

² Johnson & Grace, 'Visions and Revisions,' p.4.

³ Quinn, 'Willingness to Speak,' pp.175-6.

through her collection of poems *The Love Book*.⁴ Ruth Weiss, born Jewish in Berlin and escaping Nazi persecution, fled with her family to the U.S. in 1938.⁵ Having spent some time in New York, her family eventually settled in Chicago, from which she hitchhiked to San Francisco in 1952.⁶ Known to define herself at first as a 'jazz poet' more than a 'Beat poet,' scholars assert that she may have been one of, if not the, first to perform poetry alongside jazz music in 1950's San Francisco.⁷

All three women share experiences in transnational identity and staunch activist efforts. The transnational experience is difficult to bear in itself, especially given the anecdotal but long-told notion that the emotional weight of these experiences is carried by the women of each family, whose silent suffering proves their devotion, and whose daughters must inherit the same. This is a uniquely female experience, one which cannot be realised by men, and may be part of what overarchingly constitutes why their work has been ignored: men cannot understand it. Though the 'woman writer = feminist writer' is a conduit fairly contested by indeed these women writers and others, their very existence as writers and activists is, in its context, inherently revolutionary. How, then, are such revolutionaries resigned to being merely niche matters within a conversation they helped to create? It is as when women operate as assuredly and assertively as men, Sieghart contends, we make them suffer.⁸ Where we give men 'brilliant,' we bestow women with 'diligent.'⁹ Alongside surmounting meaningful hardship in their lives, each of these women possessed genuine artistry and, regardless of the content of their work, have faced scrutiny for the unfortunate miscalculation of nature by their being a woman.

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Women's role in upholding U.S. American postwar society by the invisible, unpaid economy of their labour in the home was only reinforced by the Cold War paranoia of the 1950s; anyone, especially women, that dared to reject the desperate national ploy to skirt communism and remain in the comfort of capitalism were cast aside. Di Prima takes a defiant approach to the traditional romantic relationship in her twelve-canto 'Love Poems' from *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward*. Rejecting the idea that woman cannot be too selective of who one dates, she proclaims:

⁴ Lazendorfer, 'Forgotten Poet.'

⁵ Encarnación-Pinedo, 'Introducing the Poet,' p.XV.

⁶ The Beat Museum, 'Interview.'

⁷ Encarnación-Pinedo, 'I see you dancing,' p.63; Höfer, 'Traditionally New,' p.113.

⁸ Sieghart, *The Authority Gap*, p.96.

⁹ Sieghart, *The Authority Gap*, p.104.

you are not quite

the air i breathe

thank god

so go.¹⁰

The 'Love Poems' are several odes to various lovers and relationships in varying terms of free verse through which di Prima speaks in the beatific language of Cool. Though still ironically restrained by her playing by the rules of Cool, which are doubtlessly male-oriented, her willingness to tell of her multiple lovers, and indeed to reject some of them, is inherently renegade for any woman to do. Kandel, however, entirely transcends and spurns the societal expectation of her to be a docile, traditional woman with *The Love Book*. In this small series of ekphrastic poems to her own and her lover's bodies, and their sexual relationship, Kandel offers liberated, ritualistic expressions of devotion reminiscent of Buddhist prayer. In 'To Fuck With Love Phase II', her use of a ragged mise-en-page recalls the manner of the Preces in Christianity, a call-and-response type of prayer which is instinctive:

sacred our acts and our actions

sacred our parts and our persons

sacred the sacred cunt!

sacred the sacred cock!

miracle! miracle! sacred the primal miracle!¹¹

Her bold use of expletives in her public discussion of the very taboo topic of female sexuality, one which is analogised through the ever-precious God and worship, along with her liberal use of visionary free verse, positioned her as a wilful outlier from the very society that would have repressed her regardless. Each of these writers share a defiance of not only traditional rules of poetics — largely disregarding rhyme and meter in favour of imagistic expression — but too the rules of language itself, abandoning capitalisation and employing diction evocative of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a linguistic variety and culture from which the Beats drew

¹⁰ Di Prima, 'Love Poems,' XI.1-4.

¹¹ Kandel, 'To Fuck With Love Phase II,' 21-5.

significant inspiration and appropriated from. Gregory Corso, a key Beat writer, when questioned on the underrepresentation of women in Beat literature, stated: 'In the '50s if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female your families had you locked up.'¹² Given this, it is difficult to understand why scholars such as Heal nonetheless suggest the idea that women were confined to specific boxes in this era is 'oversimplified.'¹³

It cannot be contested that these women were prolific writers who fought relentlessly to be seen and heard as much as their male counterparts. Despite their distinctive poetics within Beat literature, U.S. patriarchal society, as one that is afraid of itself, deemed such agency and sexual freedom from their core labourers as a threat to the very system that worked. If everyone — man, woman, other — is wearing a suit on Wall Street, or in search of a greater existence on the road, who is watching the kids? It is, as Millett delineates, for when groups such as women have no representation in political structures that their position in oppression is stable and continuous.¹⁴ Patriarchy's chief institution is the family unit which requires a mediation between the individual and the social structure to function, yet it is this failure to co-operate that has in practice continued to fail women who may fall on the periphery.¹⁵ Consequently, weiss, di Prima, and Kandel's supposed roles in fuelling McCarthyist paranoia and societal sensationalism by merely chancing to question a system which denies itself as broken became an immovable obstruction to gaining a measure of similar success to the Beat men.

Ironically, the supposedly radical, tradition-rebuffing Beat men feared the power and talent of these intelligent, artistic women writers, thus taking advantage and mirroring pre-existing societal gender inequities in their supposedly progressive circles; they kept women from achieving the same success as they did, lest the meaning of such success become diluted. Such power and agency in the work of the Beat women is continually articulated through both allusory narratives and images and overt, candid assertions. weiss and Kandel are comparable in that their work most often leaves the reader wading through visionary vignettes; they and their work command and present agency by merely being. In 'A La Blake', weiss utilises a scant, singular stanza to position herself in a cyclical metaphor for the many faces and faculties possessed by women:

¹² Macleod, 'Fast Speaking Woman,' p.3.

¹³ Heal, 'Transnationalism and Resistance,' p.37.

¹⁴ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p.24.

¹⁵ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p.33.

a thief

is an angel

is a woman

am i

is a peach-pit¹⁶

Identifying woman as 'peach-pit' beckons a discreet yet sharp allusion to the anecdotal presence of the unease-evoking cyanide in peach pits; one may not estimate precisely the latitude of potency which women, or peach pits, possess — nevertheless, it persists. Similarly, Kandel's 'To Fuck With Love Phase III' resumes the incantatory nature of the collection and furthers its vision as a facetious hymnbook. Boldly likening her lover's scent to that of 'the lust of erotic angels fucking the stars',¹⁷ Kandel's frankness is not intended to be inherently polemical; rather, it is more interested in positioning itself and herself within a normative truth:

I have whispered love into every orifice of your body

as you have done

to me¹⁸

To Kandel, simultaneously, female sexuality and sensuality is wholly ordinary and yet operates as one of the greatest strengths of the oppressed class as long as it is secretly the greatest weakness of the oppressive class. Di Prima, on the other hand, differs from both weiss and Kandel; where she likewise plays with chimerical imagery and erratic verse, she becomes even more direct in later works, such as in 'Revolutionary Letters #63':

Every housewife a political prisoner

...

Every woman a political prisoner

¹⁶ weiss, 'A La Blake,' 1-5.

¹⁷ Kandel, 'To Fuck With Love Phase III,' 25-6.

¹⁸ Kandel, 'To Fuck With Love Phase III,' 37-9.

Every woman a political prisoner'¹⁹

Further into her life as an activist, she is evidently less concerned with style and layout, skipping over conventional syntax, in order to get to the point; a point which, when taken by women en masse, could prove trouble for the comfort of the large-scale population of men — Beat or otherwise. In effect, even the attempt to define Beatdom among male Beat contemporaries is innately male-centred: a 'man' is Beat when 'he' goes for broke.²⁰ This is significant to their own contribution to the exclusion of their female peers as, like Johnson and Grace point out, *who* were Beat writers was largely decided by interpersonal associations.²¹ Most significantly, and perhaps overlooked, Knight suggested in the first place that, because of the mainstream success and sensationalism of the Beat Generation, received primarily by the men, the very thing that makes Beat had been negated; because the women remain marginalised, they are rendered solely what remains authentically Beat.²²

In essence, despite each being up against the wall of a splintering society, the male Beats had every opportunity to shoulder the impediments of their female peers if they so wished and believed to be right. It is so that they could not escape the congenital fear of women's power, but there also exists a further frustration that their mere 'experiences' were also sentient, intellectual beings; that 'Beat' among women did not only mean rejecting sexual squareness in more readily available service of male desire. It appears that Beat women too utilised their Beatdom in a much more altruistic way, which contrasts with the undeniable self-serving manner of Beat men. It is clear, then, that the women's self-actualisation and pursuit of a greater existence, of that which is truly Beat, became a source of envy for Beat men, enhanced by the likelihood that the girls were just better at it than they were. They estimated such abandon to be their birthright, something exclusive that could not be accessed by everyone, much less their sisters and girlfriends. Woman is always, according to Cixous, associated with passivity; if she is not passive she does not exist.²³ This is the way it has always been. Man is the subject, the 'Absolute,' as per de Beauvoir, and woman is the 'Other.'²⁴ As such, the interruption of this stasis is what led to begrudgery at best in Beat circles; men need not consciously desire women's subjugation to reap the benefits. Fundamentally, weiss, di Prima, and Kandel were worthy opponents to their male peers; that such peers' progressiveness

¹⁹ Di Prima, 'Revolutionary Letters #63,' 41-8.

²⁰ Clellon Holmes, 'This is the Beat Generation.'

²¹ Johnson & Grace, 'Visions and Revisions,' pp.2-3.

²² Knight, *Women of the Beat Generation*, p.5.

²³ Cixous, 'Newly Born Woman,' p.64.

²⁴ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.26.

stalled as regards to the Beat women evidently attests to a pre-existing bias against women that persisted even in Beat philosophy.

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Moreover, the legacy of Beat women — while unjustly underexamined — can be traced to contemporary Irish poets, namely Elaine Feeney and Kimberly Campanello. In Feeney's 'Mass' from her collection *The Radio Was Gospel*, the poet constructs biting, satirical criterion with which one might understand the parameters of religion in Ireland, with distinctly Irish vernacular, affirming: 'There'll be a mass for the anointing of the bollix of the bull'.²⁵ Through the vast repetitive outline of the daily trivialities for which mass will certainly be held, the poem concludes its singular run-on form with a less humorous reality:

Mass will not be held for the souls of your gay sons.

Mass will not be held for song-and-dance makers, the apple
cart topplers.

There will be no women's mass.

There will be no mass solely by women for women.

Your daughters will not hold mass.

There are very strict rules for the masses.²⁶

Feeney directs here a jocular, if comforting, depiction of what is all too familiar — being the prolific convergence of the Catholic church and Irish life — before awakening the reader to what is truly behind such banalities. Her use of uncomplicated syntax and repetition through a course of uninterrupted end-stopped lines is reminiscent of di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, wherein both poets in these instances seem not to be altogether too concerned with style over the pressing issue at hand. Conversely, in 'Daughter', Feeney declares herself a 'farmer's daughter', before subjecting the reader to an almost visceral spiel of ruralisms — 'arra shtop, shtop entirely, / poor fuckereens.'

²⁵ Feeney, 'Mass,' 20.

²⁶ Feeney, 'Mass,' 78-84.

— the very ‘sibilant consonant / speel’ which marks her identity but which she spends ‘years shedding.’²⁷ Feeney’s use of slang is evocative to that of the Beat women’s, in that it becomes a means of deconstructing one’s given identity, that which is endeared and shameful and difficult to place oneself within and thus beyond. Interestingly, Feeney’s earlier poem ‘Getting the Priest for Roethke’ similarly carries this; a young boy’s account of Theodore Roethke, American poet and Beat contemporary, in Inishbofin, a somewhat controlled perspective meets an uncontrolled subject with Roethke feverish and ‘sweat lathered’ with ‘poems / mad in his head.’ The poem juxtaposes the foreign, mad Other with the solemn, traditional authority figure of the priest — the one ‘dressed / like a swan in heat’ — in an attempt to initially discern what is wrong or right, but in the end reveals itself to be in actuality an undermining not of the Other but that which defines itself against it, a unique margin which only the truly excluded by way of religiosity and virtue-signalling comprehend.²⁸ Further to this, Campanello’s ‘*MOTHERBABYHOME*’ is likewise an indictment of the Catholic church, particularly with respect to the Tuam Saint Mary’s Mother and Baby Home where 796 children and infants died and were buried between 1926 and 1961. Deriving the form of a 796-page ‘report,’ each page with its vastly differing constructs includes the name, death-date, and age of each of the recorded 796 children, sometimes interrupting what is otherwise being told:

The practice was

Kelly Mary 06/12/1925 6mts

to offer no pain re lief as suf-fering was regard.ed

as part *ofher*

*punishment*²⁹

The inclusion of their names and ages serves to attach lives and deaths to the figure which may tend to become anaesthetised through continuous discourse. One page of the ‘report’ simply reads:

sure they’re

all dead and

gone

²⁷ Feeney, ‘Daughter,’ 1; 6-7; 8-9; 10.

²⁸ Feeney, ‘Getting the Priest for Roethke,’ 25; 26-7; 6-7.

²⁹ Campanello, ‘*MOTHERBABYHOME*’.

enveloped³⁰

Though '*MOTHERBABYHOME*' just predates the 2020 sealing of the Mother and Baby Home records by the Irish government, it nevertheless predicts the general cultural malaise toward righting past wrongs. Campanello exposes this societal trait with some pages as simply:

invisible nameless

men who raped

the women got

them pregnant

out of wedlock³¹

Campanello's essential ethereality of assemblage form pauses in such instances; men here are nameless, reproducing the real dynamic where these socially unlawful pregnancies were in many instances a product of sexual violence, yet the culpability was somehow with the now-fallen woman. With many pages of the poem simply resigned to masses of layered typescript, especially toward the end where one can make out stray repeated lines reading 'delay', the unintelligibility speaks to the murkiness surrounding this national failure and becomes an aesthetic representation of the collective trauma attached to it.³² Despite instances of scholars such as Cummins dismissing Feeney's 'misleading' layout as hindering her collection, it is those like Bracken and Harney-Mahajan that argue for the very abundance and excess of contemporary Irish women's writing post-austerity as that which is integral to the endurance of resistance and interrogation of government structures.³³ The demand of accountability from these institutions is driven by women's writing; the poems are not so much about the cases themselves, Darcy illustrates, but rather the public conversation around them, and the effort to mobilise and shape those conversations.³⁴

Feeney finds commonalities with di Prima in their directness and shared reckoning of motherhood on their craft, whereas Campanello shares similarities with weiss and Kandel through their shared avant garde abstractions and overarching expression on women's issues. Both the contemporary Irish poets and the postmodern Beat women poets are intrinsically linked in that they

³⁰ Campanello, '*MOTHERBABYHOME*'.

³¹ Campanello, '*MOTHERBABYHOME*'.

³² Campanello, '*MOTHERBABYHOME*'.

³³ Cummins, 'God in the Universe,' p.114; Bracken & Harney-Mahajan, 'A Continuum,' p.9.

³⁴ Darcy, 'Recent Documentary Poetry,' p.41.

cannot be artists without being political, because they cannot exist without being political. What does and does not astound is that, some decades after the 1950s, there remains quite the same issues within womanhood, including but not limited to the remaining responsibility of the invisible labour in the home; only now there is the additional expectation and necessity to work full-time alongside this. It is precisely for the reason that, as Millett proffers, sexual dominion is conceivably the most pervasive ideology in this world's culture, and it is through such sexual politics that patriarchy is assumed as endemic in human life; patriarchy's greatest tool is that it persists, and we keep letting it.³⁵ As such, and perhaps until this system ceases, one can draw just about a direct line of influence from the Beat women poets of the 1950s to the contemporary Irish poets of now as, despite major progression, what is and will remain is the deeply ingrained patriarchal social structures which women experience and are compelled to write about.

Conclusion

It has never been a question of merit. The women of the Beat Generation were, whether consciously or unconsciously or both, obstructed by the misogyny that permeated the society they lived in and their artistic circles that mimicked it. In Diane di Prima, Lenore Kandel, and Ruth Weiss, it is completely evident that Beat women's poetics and lifestyles were every bit as innovative, experimental, every bit as *Beat* as their male peers. More significantly, that elements of their influence can be found in recent Irish poets such as Elaine Feeney and Kimberly Campanello, even without mainstream or commercial visibility, is a further testament to such merit which has been ignored. The point is not to paint these women as helpless or oblivious to the realities they inhabited; they lived enriched, artistic lives and remained meaningfully committed to their craft. Rather, the point is that, had such deeply ingrained biases against women not existed, the literary landscape today could look unimaginably different. The work of these — and countless other — women would not so consistently look like a recovery project. Women must, even now, consider that perhaps they are not simply middle-of-the-road, or unbrilliant, in their fields and that instead they live within a system that is inconvenienced by their thinking so. Despite this, an ideal future system does not and will not arrive at once; it is the practice of that future's ideas which gradually reshape and better the current structures. That the work of these women is so political by their

³⁵ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, pp.25, 27.

content and their own existences, that it is so defiant and adamant to effect change, is to ensure that in reading them that you, personally, will experience change too.

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