Spring 4-28-2016

"A Fleeting Moment in a Floating World": The Women of the Beat Generation Through Allen Ginsberg's Eyes

Katie Oates

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Katie Oates
Visual Arts
April 28th, 2016

“The poignancy of the photograph
Inception

Sifting through boxes and binders of seen and unseen, catalogued and uncatalogued prints, illuminated a powerful void; an absence of silence and omission. Though before I delved into the archive of Allen Ginsberg photography, I had speculated that the women of the Beat Generation would present such a void. Donated to the University of Toronto in 2012 by the Rossy Family Foundation of Montreal, it is the world’s largest collection of Ginsberg’s photographs comprising 7,686 prints. Anxiously awaiting the chance to see and hold the photographs for myself, I used the university’s Art Centre and Flickr online databases to facilitate my research until my recent excursion into the archive. These sites were the initial springboard for my larger project, and though they offer a mere glimpse of what the physical archive holds, they appear to be an accurate representation of it.

Sorting through the photographs was exciting, enveloping, and all consuming; like a mystery novel waiting to be solved. Turning the pages in each of the twenty binders, and sifting through eleven boxes that revealed surprises with every print, providing a wealth of knowledge about Ginsberg and the Beats. The archive is thus significant for providing a visual record of the Beat Generation, as captured through the lens of one of its leading figures, containing within it the potential to make significant contributions to Beat scholarship. Ginsberg’s lens offers us a frame for observing the fundamental movement that changed the way that literature was written and accepted within academia and mainstream society, marking a pivotal turning point for it, and American culture.

My firsthand archival research provides the framework for this project, intersecting critical theory and Beat literature. I specifically examine the representation of female Beat writers within the archive in relation to their literary achievements, and their place within such discourse, as well as the online databases. Before discussing my research findings, I will first clarify who the Beats are, the implications of the social climate in which they were writing, and the significance of the archive for acknowledging the women’s erasure, in an effort to rewrite Beat history through Ginsberg’s photography.

**The Beats:**
“All we have to work from now is the vast empty quiet space of our own Consciousness. AH! AH! AH!”

The Beat Generation is typically associated with the three men considered to be the movement’s primary figures: Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs. The aspiring writers coalesced at Columbia University in 1944 over their shared vision to rewrite the art of literature that they felt had been lost in the harsh brutalities of society between wars. This iconoclastic, masculinist community of Beats used their anti-academic attitude to forge their dissent from literary convention and conformist lifestyle. Employing experimentation and, as articulated by poet, Gregory Corso, Beat writing is characterized by “mixtures containing spontaneity, ‘bop prosody,’ surreal-real images, jumps, beats, cool measures, long rapid vowels, long long lines, and the main content, ‘soul.’” More than just aesthetics, the “shared experience” of the Beats can be aptly identified by its place in postwar literary and cultural history; a moment shaped by its social, political, and cultural position, and the rapid changes that

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3. Ibid., xvi.
4. Ibid., xvi.
the 1950s saw: “demographic shifts in population, a change from a hot to a cold war, and a shift from an industrial to a consumer economy.”\(^5\) Or, as described more poetically and passionately by Ginsberg in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1974 for *The Fall of America*,

> There is no longer any hope for the Salvation of America proclaimed by Jack Kerouac and others of our Beat Generation, aware and howling, weeping and singing Kaddish for the nation decades ago, ‘rejected yet confessing out the soul.’ All we have to work from now is the vast empty quiet space of our own Consciousness. AH! AH! AH!\(^6\)

These circumstances led to an “insidiously rote and conformist”\(^7\) backdrop for which the Beats used writing to express their “reaction to and a rebellion against [such] rigidity.”\(^8\) Ginsberg viewed the literary movement as “a group of friends who had worked together on poetry, prose, and cultural conscience from the mid-forties until the term became popular nationally in the late fifties.”\(^9\) This burgeoning underground community of writers was catalyzed when Ginsberg committed himself to a career as a poet, and organized the Six Gallery poetry reading on October 7\(^{th}\), 1955 in San Francisco. Also known as the “Six Poets at the Six Gallery,”\(^10\) Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia, and Kenneth Rexroth foregrounded the shared masculinity amongst the aspiring writers. The Beat movement burst into mainstream society shortly after with the overnight success of Kerouac’s novel, *On the Road*, and the national attention that surrounded Ginsberg’s obscenity trial for *Howl and Other Poems*

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8. Ibid., 5.
10. Ibid., xxvii.
in 1957. Beat literature, and its accompanying ethos, quickly disseminated throughout the nation, and remains significant to cultural, literary, social, and art history.

**Ginsberg: Poet/Photographer**

“I took the pictures not to show others, but as keepsakes of my own total sacraments, personal interest in intimate friends.”

Ginsberg is renowned for defying conventional literary forms and for contributing to the reformulation of the ways in which literature was written and accepted in mainstream and academic realms. Though Ginsberg was also an avid photographer from the early 1950s to the mid 1990s. His early photographs, ranging from 1953 to 1965, were captured “not to show others, but as keepsakes of [his] own total sacraments, personal interest in intimate friends.”

After leaving his camera in India while travelling in the mid 1960s, Ginsberg did not photograph again until 1983, after convinced by renowned American photographer, Robert Frank, to revive his practice. Ginsberg effectively replaced his pen and paper with a Kodak Retina camera, transforming his “peripatetic notes” into visual imagery. His photographs became a “continuous reportage” of his every day experiences, capturing his astute observations of (in)sufficient people and events, as he navigated between the East and West Coasts; as well as his journeys around the globe. He continued to photograph prolifically until his death in April of 1997. Ginsberg’s photographic practice can be considered in two parts, from 1953 to 1965, and from 1983 to 1997, and for the remainder of this paper, I will discuss them as such.

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12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
Women: Marginalizing Cultural Landscape

“We took it for granted that the world was a little crazy if it saw our friendship and sense of sacramental respect for each other to be neurotic, sick, weird, or strange.”

The 1940s and 1950s saw women as belonging to their parents first, and their husbands second, leaving their individuality limited, or non-existent. While the men were at liberty to enact the “wild self-believing individuality’ that Kerouac and others saw as fundamental to Beat,” this moment of nonconformity looked differently for the women. At a time when the stakes for social condemnation were high, subscribing to nonconformity by living independently, leaving home before marriage, travelling the country, or pursuing an artistic career, was much more shocking when enacted by the women, than by the men. Relegated to spaces of domesticity, they were forced to find their own use of the term “Beat.”

Situated between between the Silent and Revolutionary generations, the women were trapped in the ambivalent position of being aware of, and resisting their marginalization, yet lacking solutions to these problems. The male-defined social climate of “widely held, unproblematized assumptions about gender, literary production, and artistic authority,” forced the women to participate in these gender binaries, thereby reinforcing them. Though the female Beat writers sought similar experiences as the men, such unresolved problematics actively restricted their ability to attain, or even pursue, independence. The women transformed their version of individuality into a “revolt for personal freedom enacted by and in their writing.”

Their work challenges these binaries, while also inserting female-centered literature into Beat

18. Ibid., 10.
19. Ibid., 7.
discourse. The Beat women’s literary accomplishments mark them as forerunners of the late 1960s second-wave feminist movements.

Though the women were active participants in the “extended family community”\textsuperscript{20} of aspiring writers, as noted by scholars, Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy Grace, “even as they did write, both privately and for publication, women Beat writers continued to be unacknowledged and excluded from historical concepts and literary considerations of the movement.”\textsuperscript{21} Thus, a significant portion of their work is out of print, not readily available, or simply inaccessible. This means that to fully comprehend Beat history, scholars must “track dispersed, uncollected, and sometimes unpublished sources.”\textsuperscript{22} Johnson and Grace write that “the negation of women Beat writers by critics exemplifies the way a literary school and the roster of its adherents are usually recognized after the fact and founded on exclusion.”\textsuperscript{23} Though there are numerous volumes dedicated to the Beat Generation, the female writers are often given minimal space, or their information is conveyed as an aside to the men, or told from the male perspective.\textsuperscript{24} The women’s exclusion from postwar literary scholarship can be read as an erasure from history, as they have been written out of Beat discourse. To date, female Beat scholarship works toward giving them a voice by reconstructing the parameters of Beat, reconsidering how such a category can be identified, and opening up the definitions that have been carved out thus far.\textsuperscript{25} Their

\textsuperscript{20} Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace (eds), \textit{Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers} (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 87.
\textsuperscript{22} Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace (eds), \textit{Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers} (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 4.
\textsuperscript{24} For instance, seminal texts by Bill Morgan, Arthur and Kit Knight, Jennie Skerl, and James Campbell focus primarily on male writers.
\textsuperscript{25} Scholars such as Erik Mortenson, Anne Charters, Ronna C. Johnson, and Nancy M. Grace.
exclusion from scholarship, and lack of recognition as writers, has subsequently resulted in their lack of presence within the archive.

**The Archive: Virtual vs. Physical**

“We all enjoyed fooling around with the Kodak Retina in the fall of ’53 when Burroughs was staying at my apartment and Jack came to visit us frequently.”

My archival research began before entering into the physical archive and investigating the printed photographs. I first discovered U of T’s online collections shortly after the university had announced its procurement of the archive in the spring of 2014. I was immediately drawn to Ginsberg’s photographs from the formative years of the Beat Generation—images of Kerouac and Burroughs “fooling around,” wrestling, and sitting at their typewriters composing the seminal texts that they later came to be known for—*On the Road, Naked Lunch*. However, when looking through the approximately 300 images on *flickr* and the *Art Centre*, the lack of female representation was discernible. Images of Ginsberg’s lifelong partner, Peter Orlovsky, as well as Burroughs, Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, Paul Bowles, Lucien Carr, and Herbert Huncke, among others, far outnumber the three photographs of Anne Waldman, and the few of Ginsberg’s mother, Naomi, his grandmother, Rebecca, and his Aunt Clara. The women that are present are predominantly in an album labelled “Musicians” on *flickr*, showcasing images of Patti Smith, Madonna, Joan Baez, Natalie Merchant, and Sinead O’Connor, among stars such as Iggy Pop, Paul McCartney, and Beck. This is to say, that the women who were involved in the formative years of the Beat community have little to no presence in the virtual archive. Thus, after using these databases, I had entered into this research with the hope that I would find more images of the women in the physical archive, despite their virtual absence.

More specifically, I had hoped that the online databases were not an accurate representation of the physical; though it proved to be so.

The two days that I spent in the archive granted me the opportunity to look at nearly 4,000 photographs. This empirical research provides me with the necessary framework for this, and future projects. I arrived at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book library, where the largest portion of the photographs are housed, and was met by librarian, John Shoesmith, to discuss the photographs. This meeting provided a wealth of valuable information regarding the contents of collection, how it arrived at the university, and who the donors are. During this meeting, I was also granted access into the storage facility where the archive is held—a space that is generally only accessible to the library staff. Here, I was able to take in the row upon row of shelves bursting with boxes and binders full of the photographs that were awaiting my discovery.

My research entailed looking through 11 boxes that each contain between 36 and 93 photographs, and 20 binders containing 55 to 196, to equal approximately 3,734 photographs—roughly half of what the archive holds. Most of the images have been printed in black and white, though I found four binders with colour images. The photographs were also of various sizes: primarily 8 x 10”, 5 x 7”, and 4 x 6” prints, though binders 17 and 19 had miniature photographs that were comparable to photo booth prints. As the collection is still in the process of being digitally catalogued, the binders had yet to be viewed by the library staff, meaning that I was the first person to see and handle this selection of the photographs.

The Photographs: Early Years, 1953-1965

“We did them while we were in the middle of other matters, like writing or just gossipping, so the picture taking was not very conspicuous at the time, or unusual…just intimate.”

27. A smaller portion, approximately one quarter, of the photographs are stored in the University of Toronto’s Art Centre. I have yet to view these photographs, but plan to for future research projects.
While sorting through the boxes and binders of photographs from the earlier portion of Ginsberg’s practice, it was immediately apparent how scarce the representation of female Beats was. Most of the women that are present, are often not the focal point, labelled as “unidentified,” “women friends” with the other known males, “homeless panhandler,” “peasant woman,” or simply, “woman” or “female” (Fig. 1) Many of these have been photographed during Ginsberg’s travels throughout India, Mexico, and Japan. They seem to be captured more as objects of fascination, than as keepsakes or records of personal experiences with intimate friends, as he stated about his early practice.

Joanne Kyger appears to be the only female writer who was acknowledged by Ginsberg’s lens at this time. Though she was a poet in her own right, her marriage to Beat poet, Gary Snyder, seems to have granted her presence in Ginsberg’s photographs. While Kyger was initially a part of the San Francisco Renaissance, this poetry movement merged with the Beats after Ginsberg’s move to the West coast. Kyger’s poetry illustrates her interest in confronting the burdens of gender conventions as she perceived them, while addressing the women’s experiences and perspectives from this time. Her marriage to Snyder forged her friendship with Ginsberg, and the three of them, along with Orlovsky, travelled throughout India together in 1962. She is often photographed with Snyder, hiking through the mountainous landscapes of Kausani, India; romping through the shorelines of seaside Japan (Fig. 2); and sitting together at Ginsberg’s kitchen table, happily entwined in each other arms (Fig. 3). The sole image of Kyger alone is the most captivating. Snapped in Almora, India, and printed in black and white, the 5 x 10” print shows her sitting beneath a tree absorbed in a book. Seemingly unaware of the lens, Kyger appears perfectly poised atop a ledge overlooking a mountainous landscape. This portrait
diverges from Ginsberg’s typical snapshot aesthetic, framing her as the central focal point; perhaps intended to capture the intellectual mind of his female friend, or perhaps a moment of spontaneity, in which he was simply recording the beauty of the moment (Fig. 4).

While looking through the earlier photographs, a women seated beside Burroughs in New York captured my attention (Figs. 5-6). Alene Lee, or Mardou Fox, as she is called in Kerouac’s novel, The Subterraneans (1958), has demanded anonymity. Lee has requested to be excluded from all Beat discourse, including her name and her writing, thus she does not appear in earlier anthologies. Until recently, she has primarily existed in Kerouac’s autobiographical novels, \(^{29}\) though there is now more literature emerging that works toward placing her into Beat history. Lee’s image in the archive is therefore quite significant, particularly since she is one of the few women who appear in the earlier portion of Ginsberg’s practice. The small black and white prints show scenes of intimacy, holding hands with Burroughs in Fig. 5, and sharing a knowing gaze with him in Fig. 6. These rare photographs suggest that Lee had a close relationship with Burroughs, and likely the other Beat men as well. The exact date of these photographs is yet to be known, for they were placed within the uncatalogued binders. \(^{30}\)

Other women, such as poet Elise Cowen, poet/memoirist/publisher, Hettie Jones, poet/memoirist, Brenda Frazer (Bonnie Bremser), and memoirist Joyce Johnson are among the other female writers who I had hoped to find in the archive. Unfortunately, their images did not meet Ginsberg’s lens, nor did any other female Beat artists. \(^{31}\)

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29. As mentioned, The Subterraneans (1958), and also Book of Dreams (1960) and Big Sur (1962), in which she is named Irene May.
30. The minimal information that I could find about Lee was from Beatdom, a journal that is dedicated to publishing work on the Beat Generation, available online and in printed form.
31. Due to the parameters of this paper, and its emphasis on my research findings within the archive, I only mention their names here. However, their autobiographical information will be included in my larger project.
The Photographs: Turning Point, 1983-1997

“I began to realize that my old pictures were valuable and historically interesting—maybe even art.”\(^{32}\)

After two decades of feminist scholarship, attention was finally being paid to the complex role that Beat women played as writers themselves;\(^{33}\) a turning point that appears to coincide with Ginsberg’s photography, and is subsequently reflected in the archive. Of the nearly 3,400 photographs that I examined, the women were primarily found in the photographs that were taken between 1983 and 1997. Though these images do show an increase in the representation of women, they are still scarce when compared to the men, and feature the same few writers: Diane di Prima, Carolyn Cassady, Anne Charters, and Anne Waldman. These images were not captured in the playful snapshot aesthetic of Ginsberg’s earlier photographs; but rather, they were taken in a manner that is more akin to straight photography, which coincides with his interest to use the camera as an observational tool for reportage. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many female Beats became agents of their own recovery, writing themselves into Beat and postwar literary history through memoirs. These texts document the complexities of their position, and effectively recorded their claims to Beat culture. For instance, di Prima’s *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (2001), Carolyn Cassady’s *Heart Beat: My Life with Jack and Neal* (1976) and *Off the Road* (1994), and Joyce Johnson’s *Minor Characters* (1983). These books were used to voice their desire for personal freedom, as they often felt trapped within the domestic sphere.

Poet and memoirist, Diane di Prima, has remained the most well known female writer of the Beat Generation. She lived independently, writing about about her lived experiences as a

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female artist in a male dominated society. Like Kyger, she used poetry to address the
problems of gender binaries and restrictions, through more explicit assertions. Perhaps it is
this strength of voice that helped her to gain Ginsberg’s recognition as the only “strong writer
who could hold her own.”34 That di Prima was the only female acknowledged as such, speaks to
the extent to which patriarchal structures could be resisted. Di Prima only appears in this later
portion of the archive; though I anticipated on finding her in the earlier photographs, as one of
the few women who has a strong presence in Beat discourse. In the photographs, she is shown
with Ginsberg, poet, Anne Waldman, and other male Beats such Lawrence Ferlinghetti and
Philip Whalen. Di Prima’s career was propelled by her involvement with the Beats, though she
has had persistent success since then, and continues to write today.35

Poet, Anne Waldman, appears in more photographs than any of the other women. She
was actively involved in the later generation of East Coast poets, and her first book publication
was not until 1968. Though Waldman was not writing at the time of the Beats, she is often
associated with them for her close relationship with Ginsberg; he frequently referred to her as his
“spiritual wife.”36 Her image is often captured amongst other men: dressed elegantly and seated
across Orlovsky in an upscale restaurant (Fig. 7), tucked into a corner booth with Burroughs
sharing similar grimaces (Fig. 8), and with Ginsberg and Corso, as the sole women in their social
gatherings. In all of the photographs, Waldman looks to the camera straight-faced, and offers
only the hint of a smile in a small number of the photographs.

35. Due to limited time and space, I unfortunately do not have any scanned images of di Prima to show here.
36. Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace (eds), Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers (Jackson, MS:
University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 18.
Carolyn Cassady is most famously known as the wife of Neal Cassady. Though he was never a writer, he was an influential figure in the Beat community, and a common character in several Beat novels.\textsuperscript{37} Her memoirs, \textit{Heart Beat: My Life with Jack and Neal} (1976) and \textit{Off the Road} (1994), document her emotionally wrenched relationship with her husband and his best friend, Kerouac, as they frequently left her behind to traverse the country in search of kicks, independence, and any experiences that might have helped propel Kerouac’s writing. Cassady was included in the Beat community through these romantic relationships,\textsuperscript{38} writing her side of the story after the dissolution of the Beat movement. Four colour photographs show her sitting at Ginsberg’s kitchen table, addressing the camera straight on (Fig. 9). The photographs appear to have been taken over lunch with Ginsberg, though her surly expression suggests that she does not welcome his camera’s gaze.

Scholar, Anne Charters appears in two images that were also taken in Ginsberg’s kitchen (Fig. 10). However, Charters appears more jovial, captured mid-laugh, and in the midst of writing. Papers, books, and pencils are strewn across the table, suggestive of her substantial contributions to Beat scholarship, and her personal connections with its fundamental figures. Charters is significant for her ability to vacillate between academia and the subcultural realm of Beat writers as a female intellect. She is therefore considered an “anomaly”\textsuperscript{39} within this Beat discourse. Charters has been reading and writing about the Beats since she attended a repeat performance of the Six Gallery poetry reading as an English undergraduate major at the

\textsuperscript{37} For example, \textit{On the Road} by Jack Kerouac, \textit{Go} by John Clellon Holmes, and \textit{The Electric Kool-Aid Test} by Tom Wolfe.

\textsuperscript{38} Kerouac and the Cassady’s are infamous for their three-way relationship. Neal’s frequent infidelity led Carolyn to pursue her romantic interest in Kerouac while Cassady pursued intimate relationships with other women.

\textsuperscript{39} Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace (eds), \textit{Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers} (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 12.
University of California, Berkeley in 1956. She worked directly with Kerouac while writing *Kerouac: A Biography*, which was published posthumously in 1978. In 1983, she helped mark a pivotal turning point for Beat scholarship with her foundational work in *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America*. This was the first institutionalization of female writers into the Beat canon, providing the “first reliable scholarly study of women Beat writers.” As a key scholar on the Beat Generation, Charters continually works to open up and reconsider the Beat canon for the inclusion of additional female writers. As noted by Charters, the 1980s and 1990s was a time when “educated women readers” began challenging the question of whether women played an important role in literature of the Beat Generation. As feminist studies had been well under way by this point, this may be why they have a stronger presence in the later photographs, rather than those from the 1950s and 1960s.

**The Future of the Archive: Exhibitions and Propositions**

“We Are Continually Exposed to the Flashbulb of Death”

The aim of my work with the Ginsberg photography archive is to help create a fuller picture of the past. Recalling one of the notions that Jacques Derrida remarks upon in deconstructing the archive: the archive does not point to the past, but to a particular past. This concept can be applied to the female Beats, who are effectually denied presence within Ginsberg’s photographs, and thus the archive. Though scholars are working to redress the

absence of female writers in Beat scholarship, it must still be noted that such literature has been founded upon socially constructed notions of hegemonic gender binaries. Accordingly, continuing to examine it from this male perspective only risks further perpetuating this past. In understanding Beat literature, and thus the photographs, in relation to their particular moment in time, we can now look back to reconsider and revise this past with consideration to the advancements that feminist scholarship has been working toward since the late 1960s.

In thinking with Derrida, the archive is based on collective memory; it shows us not only what is present, but also what is not.45 Rewriting this history, and making the women visible, is first reliant upon the recognition of their absence. Without this recognition, there will not be the memory of them to trace, leaving our collective memory to be based on erasure. As stated by Johnson, “the literature produced by the canonical male Beat writers has always assumed the presence of women Beats by their refusal to recognize them.”46 Again, this problem is reflected in the archive. As scholars are working to rewrite the Beat canon in recognition of female authors, it is my goal to use this archive to help contribute to rewriting this past through Ginsberg’s photographs.

The absence of female representation within the archive, means that there will be a subsequent absence in future exhibitions of Ginsberg’s photographs. There is currently a travelling exhibition, “We Are Continually Exposed to the Flashbulb of Death”: The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg (1953-1996), that is organized by the U of T’s Art Centre. It was initially exhibited at U of T, when the photographs first arrived, and it will be shown next at Carleton University’s Art Gallery in Ottawa from September 12th to December 9th, 2016. Once

46. Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace (eds), Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 5.
this exhibition is done, the university is planning another one for early 2018, that will take place in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. However, if the women are not in the photographs, and they are not in the archive, then they lack the opportunity for public recognition in these exhibitions. Their traces slowly risk becoming lost and unrecoverable. Recognizing this absence is important in helping to shape the way people know and understand the Beat Generation. Without such work, the women’s erasure is only further perpetuated. As stated by Derrida, the question of the archive is a “question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.”47 That is, if we want to know what the archive of Ginsberg’s photographs mean, we will only know them to revisit them, to know what they meant in particular past.

While in the archive, Shoesmith answered one of my primary questions, and confirmed that I was indeed the first person to go into the archive to conduct scholarly research on these photographs. This assures the significance of my project, and its potential to make significant contributions to Beat scholarship. I have yet to see the Art Centre’s travelling exhibition, though having conducted firsthand research in the physical archive, I speculate that it will exhibit a lack of female artists, much like the online collections.

In moving forward with upcoming exhibitions, and to address the problematics that I have presently discussed, I would propose to recognize the women’s absence, rather than attempting to have it speak for itself. With consideration to the audiences that university exhibitions typically attract—students and faculty from diverse departments, accompanying friends and family—I speculate that this void may simply go by unnoticed. As Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac are the primary figures most often associated with the Beat Generation,

a portion of the exhibition’s viewers may not be aware of the female writers who were present, and who were writing as fervently and passionately as the men. I would therefore provide the women writers the voice that they have been struggling to have heard since the inception of the Beat movement. Though merely adding them to the repertoire of male dominated images may not succeed in accomplishing my proposition.

Additive approaches do not always suffice to resolve initial erasure within the institution, as often, the problem still lays bare. And though I cannot provide a concrete solution to the problematics of female Beat erasure, I will propose potential methods for recognizing their absence. For instance, visitors could first be informed of, or shown, this absence as a way to foreground the particular moment in which they were writing. The exhibition could then illuminate their accomplishments using various display techniques.

Showcasing the women’s absence could affectively elucidate their imposed marginalization, while also reflecting their feelings of exclusion. *Voids, a retrospective* (2009) in Paris, successfully used absence to suggest new ways of thinking about the gallery space. Though this retrospective had a different rationale for using such a technique, I do believe that artist, Robert Barry’s remark that it allows us to be “free for a moment to think about what we are going to do,”48 is applicable to the female Beat writers. An exhibition that is void of content could be a powerful way to show audiences the lack of space that female writers had within the male defined Beat community. In following writer, Orit Gat, “the question today is what could

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constitute ‘display,’” meaning that the parameters of “display” have been opened up to include concepts beyond the object.

To convey ideas beyond the display of conventional art objects, we might consider other strategies for representing the women, in place of the archives minimal photographs of them. An exhibition of poetry, excerpts from memoirs, letters of correspondence, and novels, as well as entire books would allow visitors to quite literally see the women’s achievements. This would be a productive way to make visible the texts that have been denied presence within Beat anthologies and biographies; to illuminate those that often get overlooked or forgotten. Many of these would also work as biographies, for the women’s poems, novels, and memoirs, are often based on their own lived experiences, drawing from the real events, people, and places that have impacted them, as they have navigated the Beat terrain.

A reading table placed among the objects in the gallery space would also be useful for allowing visitors to not only view works by female Beats, but also to touch and interact with them. A compilation of all published texts by female Beats would be included—perhaps held on a nearby shelf—allowing visitors to choose from it as they wish, to then sit comfortably to read, flip through, and share their findings of the women’s literary journeys.

Moving beyond the visual, audio recordings of poetry readings could be implemented to address their position, using their own voices. The women’s emotionally entrenched concerns, angst, and resistance would resonate with visitors in modes that visual displays cannot. As noted by Catherine E. Paul, earlier museological strategies that focused on “object–based

epistemologies” were not always the most successful way to facilitate visitor engagement. Thus, I contend that the combination of visual elements—photographs and literary works—with the audio recordings, and the interactive reading table, would be the most impactful strategy for addressing the lack of female representation within the archive. Facilitating the visitor’s experience by using objects that engage with their visual, audio, and haptic senses would create a comprehensive encounter with the material, that is likely to leave a memorable and affective impression.

Another consideration for the various ways in which the female Beats may be displayed is the Independent Curators International’s exhibition in a box. Implemented in 2010, the art objects are simply placed in a box and sent to an art institution, where curators, historians, and artists (when applicable) are then granted complete control over how the exhibition will ultimately be displayed. Objects can include small artworks, audio and visual recordings, texts, pieces of ephemera, and archival matter. The exhibition in a box could be a successful way to include equal proportions of photographs of the women and the men—to construct a comprehensive exhibition of all Beat writers. It could also be used to create an exhibition that is exclusively about the women. This would be a constructive way to use the Ginsberg archive for creating diverse narratives of the Beat Generation. Furthermore, it would be a fascinating method for observing the curatorial choices from each of the chosen institutions who receive the exhibition in a box.


With consideration to the concepts that Helen Molesworth puts forth in “How to Install Feminist Art,” perhaps the emphasis should be on the context of the exhibition, rather than the art objects. The various ways in which the exhibition is framed, and how the visitors are entering into it and encountering it, can greatly impact the message that is being conveyed. More specifically, the curatorial statements and didactic panels have the ability to shape visitor perceptions before they even enter into the exhibition space. For instance, the information that was published surrounding “We Are Continually Exposed to the Flashbulb of Death”: The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg (1953-1996), makes no mention of the female Beats. It relates that the exhibition features over 150 photographs “capturing [Ginsberg’s] life, loves, and artistic community, including Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Peter Orlovsky and others of the Beat Generation of writers, poets, and activists.” This means that visitors will be entering into the exhibition with the anticipation of seeing photographs of the men who are specifically named here. Rather than supporting the scholarship that is continually working to revise Beat history, statements such as this only perpetuate the male defined atmosphere that dominated literature before the onset on second-wave feminism. My ultimate goal for displaying the photographs in the Ginsberg archive would be to promote knowledge and facilitate discussion. That the women are largely excluded from Beat discourse suggests a lack of accessible knowledge to counter the fundamental problematics of its past.

Dissolution
“The poignancy of the photograph comes from looking back to a fleeting moment in a floating world.”

The archive of Allen Ginsberg photography is significant for offering a visual narrative of the Beat Generation, acting as a supplemental record for our current understanding of the literature and culture from this time. As scholars are currently reconsidering and revising this past for the inclusion of more female artists, it is my goal to use these photographs, and this archive, to help contribute to this important work. I seek to give voice to the female Beats, and acknowledge their presence and contributions to the movement that is exceptional for reshaping the literary landscape of America. The recognition of their absence is the preliminary step in working toward rewriting Beat history. My recent excursion into the archive not only propelled my current research, but also my passion for Beat literature and culture. In observing the obvious gaps that the archive illuminates, my concern lies in the future of the archive. If the women are not recognized in the photographs, and they are not recognized in the archive, then how might we readdress this fissure? As the Beats were “a close-knit group of inimitable personalities that would never be forgotten,”\(^5\) then I propose to give female artists a place within this unforgettable history, to help create a fuller picture of this past—to perhaps allow the women to be more than just a fleeting moment in this floating world.

Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3
Bibliography


