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## TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

What Is It Beat Women Want? A New Reading of  
ruth weiss, Lenore Kandel and Joanne Kyger

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## **Abstract**

The present study aims to analyse the poetry of Ruth Weiss, Lenore Kandel and Joanne Kyger in order to determine how the literary production of the women of the Beat Generation differs from the men's. Paraphrasing one of Kyger's lines, my analysis will be guided by the answers that each author may give to the question 'What is it that women want?'. Ruth Weiss struggles to find an identity of her own and opts to create a genderless poetry; Lenore Kandel clearly identifies with transgression, but her notion of female identity discloses features that subordinate it to the man's; Joanne Kyger exposes the anxieties of motherhood and marriage, as she strives to balance her domestic role and her creative work. This new reading shows that, while an intent of transgression is somehow always present in their poetry, as in the men's, identifying a woman's innermost desire is their own distinctive concern.

*Keywords:* Beat Generation, women, poetry, Weiss, Kandel, Kyger

## **Resumen**

El objetivo de este estudio es analizar la poesía de Ruth Weiss, Lenore Kandel y Joanne Kyger para determinar cómo se diferencia su producción literaria de la de los hombres. Parafraseando a Kyger, mi análisis estará guiado por las respuestas que cada autora proponga para la pregunta '¿Qué es lo que quieren las mujeres?'. Ruth Weiss se esfuerza por encontrar una identidad propia y opta por crear una poesía sin género; Lenore Kandel se identifica claramente con la transgresión, pero su idea de identidad femenina revela aspectos que subordinan la mujer al hombre; Joanne Kyger expone las ansiedades de la maternidad y el matrimonio, mientras intenta crear un equilibrio entre su rol doméstico y su trabajo creativo. Esta nueva lectura muestra que, pese a que casi siempre hay un intento de transgresión presente en su poesía, como en la de los hombres, su particular interés está en identificar el más íntimo deseo de la mujer.

*Palabras clave:* Generación Beat, mujeres, poesía, Weiss, Kandel, Kyger

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## Introduction

Recently, with the general spread of feminism throughout much of the Western world, some critical voices have advocated for the significance of the writing of women of the Beat Generation. Indeed, several books and publications about the literature, mainly poetry, produced by these women, can be found, from *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996) by Brenda Knight to *Girls Who Wore Black* (2002) by Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson, but I have not found any research or analysis on their literature separate from that of the male writers. It is in some way assumed that their features are similar due to the fact that they belonged to the same generation and had more or less the same influences on their writings. In the worst of cases, it may be simply that critics have not considered these women writers relevant enough for literature.

That is why the focus of these dissertation would be to examine what it is that can make of the poetry of the women writers of the Beat Generation a literary production by itself, perhaps distinct from that of the men. In order to achieve this, the main material I will use is the poetry written by three women authors and the existing bibliography on women writers of the Beat Generation that may provide an adequate background for the later analysis. The analysis will be focused on the poetry written by Ruth Weiss, Lenore Kandel and Joanne Kyger, three of the most important female writers of the Beat Generation. I would like to examine whether they can be said to share some features as Beat writers or rather they introduce new concerns, and also whether there are any common thematic features present in their poetry or each one gives a different view.

My reasons to choose these three authors were that their writing seemed to have some common elements on a first reading of their poetry. In addition to that, each of the three writers belong to different generations inside the Beat Generation, as Ruth Weiss is contemporary to the creation of the movement, then Joanne Kyger belonged to the second generation, and finally Lenore Kandel, from the third and last generation was the closest to the feminist movement of the sixties. The choice of writers in time is an attempt to show the situation of women writers in every stage of the Beat Generation.

The fundamental question that will guide my analysis is ‘what is it that they want?’, perhaps, as a group of women authors, and more importantly, as individual writers. The results are given in this B.A. Dissertation and shown in four parts:

The first chapter is a general review on the state of the question, with a short explanation of what the Beat Generation was and how what has been said about this generation was only about the male writers. Then, the emphasis will be on the presence of women writers in the Beat Generation, how the male writers that initiated this movement were influenced by other women authors and what has been said about them by critics and scholars till this day.

In the second chapter, there is the analysis of Ruth Weiss's poetry, where I comment on her most important poems from *Steps* (1958) and *DESERT JOURNAL* (1977), after a brief biographic information. My approach to Ruth Weiss's poetry is that she uses it to talk about her personal experiences from the moment she had to run away from her home in Germany to her new life in America where she participated in the literary and cultural life of San Francisco. The conclusion drawn from my analysis is that, as Weiss plays with language and gender in her poetry, her somehow failed struggle to find her gendered self in a new country, in a new reality, is revealed. Only at the end of her production, as a woman writer, she includes themes of love and sorority that the men do not.

Lenore Kandel's poetry is discussed in the third chapter. In this section, I analyse Kandel's poems from *The Love Book* (1966) and *Word Alchemy* (1967), where she focuses on the sexuality of women together with a religious mysticism influenced by her Buddhist beliefs. Her poetry is the closest to the transgressive style of the male Beats as she writes openly and with detailed, explicit descriptions about sex. Therefore, it is recurrently commented how she explores the theme of sexuality, typically used in Beat literature, from the perspective of the woman as the one that desires and not the object of desire. My interpretation of Kandel's poetry is that, though Lenore Kandel seeks to show the features of the liberated, independent woman, the female figure of her poems has some features that indicate some kind of subjection to the male in the sexual sphere and also in marriage.

Finally, the fourth chapter deals with the literary production of Joanne Kyger, who writes more about her role as a mother and wife. Her poetry is commonly understood as portraying a woman longing for freedom outside the confinement of the home and the family to develop her role of women writer. My analysis of her poetry shows a woman struggling to know what she is supposed to do, how she can fulfil the role or roles that society expects her to play: 'What is it that they want of me?', which in turn may prompt her ask, 'What is it that I want?'

As will be seen, the three share features with the male Beat writers, and also similar themes among themselves: what they experimented and what they lived as women, that is, their relationship with the men in their lives, their experience as mothers and wives, their sexuality and their lives as independent women writers in a predominantly male group. However, what is most characteristic about their poetry is that it does seem to show a common concern relating female identity and the problematic question of female desire: 'What is it a woman wants?'. Their different answers are what I seek to explore here.

## Chapter 1

### The Beat Generation and the Invisible Women Writers

The Beat Generation is generally described as a group of writers that shared a way of thinking and experimenting life. They belonged to the artistic spheres of San Francisco and New York in the fifties and beginning of the sixties. Their writings were guided by their lifestyles that were full of drugs and experimentation in all areas of their lives, by freedom, oriental mysticism, more specifically Zen Buddhism, and the resistance against the values and the ways of living of the American middle class before the war. They started a counterculture that rebelled against the consumer culture and explored a new sense of collective identity. In addition to that, language played an important role in the consolidation of this subculture and many of the words they used were taken from jazz. For their way of writing, jazz became a central element, as a reference and as inspiration. They adopted the way of creating of the jazz artist: solitary and tortured.

The Beat Generation as a literary movement began with the publication of *Howl* in 1956, by Allen Ginsberg and *On the Road* in 1957, by Jack Kerouac, as is generally described, the most important figure in the generation and the most studied, together with William S. Burroughs and his work *Naked Lunch* (1959). But in fact, there were three generations of male Beat writers: the first wave of the Beat Generation originated in New York and corresponds with the most important writers, born in the 1910s and 1920s; it included Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, mainly. This group also produced literary material during the second wave, with writers born in the 1930s such as Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, and Lew Welch. The height of the third generation coincides with the sixties and it mixes with other activist movements and the hippie counterculture; within this group we find writers like Ed Sanders, Jerry Garcia and Lester Bangs, but also some musicians are included in this movement such as Bob Dylan and Lou Reed, considered Beat writers because of their lyrics.

What about the criticism of the Beats' literary production? There were some experts on the literature of the Beats that were responsible for most of the analysis we have nowadays on them. One of those experts was Ann Charters (b. 1936), professor of



American literature, who lived the beginnings of the Beat movement as she was an important figure of the second wave of this generation; her work was very influential in that her anthologies gave coherence to the movement and also, she was the first one to include women writers in one of her compilations, *The Beats* (1983). She wrote Jack Kerouac's first biography, being the only one that had access to the writer and could interview him. Charters also edited numerous books about the Beats, such as *Beat Down your Soul* (2001) and *The Portable Beat Reader* (2003). With her, the editor and activist Bill Morgan (b. 1949) was the biographer of the most important authors of the Beat Generation, such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg. Thanks to that closeness to the main Beat figures, he was an expert of the movement. His main works about the Beats were *The Beat Generation in New York* (1997), *The Beat Generation in San Francisco* (2003) and *Beat Atlas* (2011). As we will see, literature on the women of the Beat Generation started to appear with the increasing interest on feminism and the female presence throughout the past decades.

In an interview to Allen Ginsberg about the women writers of the Beat Generation he answered: "Among the group of people we knew at the time, who were the [women] writers of such power as Kerouac or Burroughs? Were there any? I don't think so" (Grace and Johnson 140). Most of their "colleagues" seemed to be unaware of the value and relevance of their literary production. The marginalization of women may be also seen in their daily lives. In the article "The Origins of the Beat Generation" written by Jack Kerouac in an issue of *Playboy* magazine in 1959, he stated that "The 'cool' (hipster) today is your bearded laconic sage (...), whose girls say nothing and wear black'. This applies also to the narratives of these male writers; there, "women function as girlfriends, whores, wives, mothers —figures defined almost exclusively by their relationship to men" (Savran 44). In an interview to Joanne Kyger (Grace and Johnson 140), she admits that male Beat writers never considered her a Beat writer. In fact, very few women — only Diane di Prima and Ann Waldman— were mentioned in the compilations of Beat writers and in books about the Beat Generation as minor authors, or did not appear at all. Most of the times, they were mentioned because of their relationships with the men writers, as they were seen as their muses and not as writers themselves.

It was not until the 1990s that critics began to talk particularly about the women writers of the Beat Generation, whose work has provoked the attention of scholars of the twenty-first century. These scholars are Brenda Knight, Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C.

Johnson, all of them women who felt inspired by those Beat writers. Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson worked together in *Girls Who Wore Black* (2002) and in *Breaking the Rule of Cool* (2012). In the first one, Grace and Johnson made a compilation of articles about women writers of the Beat Generation, analysing their works and their presence as writers in the Beat scene. According to Grace and Johnson, “women writing Beat brought nonconformity, scepticism, and gender dissent to postmodern culture and literary production” (23), but because of the patriarchal model prevalent among the male writers, women writers were excluded from the literary scene by the men and they were ignored as artists. For the second one, they interviewed most of the women writers about their literary production and analysed in what way they were present in the Beat Generation among the predominance of men from the point of view of the protagonists. In the case of Brenda Knight, she makes an exhaustive study on the creation and evolution of the Beat Generation with the women as the protagonists in her work *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996) on the women writers, artists and muses of the Beat Generation. There is a part in this book dedicated to the female precursors of the Beat movement, like Helen Adam or Madeline Gleason, both members of the San Francisco Renaissance and important influences for the Beat poets. There is another section on the women that served as muses for the male Beats like Joan Vollmer Burroughs, Eddie Parker Kerouac, or Jan Kerouac, all of them wives, girlfriends or daughters —like the case of Jan Kerouac— of the Beat writers. They also wrote mainly autobiographies and memoirs that give a different perspective of the Beat way of life of travelling without worries; instead, the women’s memoirs told what women had to do when their husbands or partners were away and they had to take care of the house and of the children. Finally, there is the part dedicated to the women writers with a selection of their most important works. According to Knight, women Beat writers expressed a rebellious critique of their value in the patriarchal society and they rejected the established roles of women in the America of the fifties; their writings put into words their sexual freedom and the freedom of expression.

It is becoming clearer and clearer that the beginning of the Beat Generation has its seed in the literary production of some women like Helen Adam, one of the mothers of the renaissance in the American literature and an influence on the writings of Allen Ginsberg and other women writers. Also, Madeline Gleason created the San Francisco Poetry School in the late forties and early fifties and in 1947, and organized the San Francisco Poetry Festival, that was the first event of those characteristics in United States

and was the seed to many more of this kind mainly during the sixties.

According to Grace and Johnson (8), the three generations of women writers correspond with the ones of the male Beats. They share the dates of the different waves. The writers that belonged to the first wave were Ruth Weiss, Helen Adam and Madeline Gleason. These writers aimed to escape the traditional models of literature by incorporating different aspects to their poetry: in the case of Adam, she changed the ballad form, and Weiss incorporated jazz elements into her literary work. The second wave is where we find the largest number of women writers with names such as Lenore Kandel, Elise Cowen, Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger, and Ann Charters among others. This generation was inspired by the key male figures of the Beat Generation and their work was very critical of traditional literary genres and forms based on the subordination of women, which put these women closer to the second-wave feminism that was to come. Another significant aspect of this generation of women writers is that most of them had access to higher education. This means that most of them attended college and gave them independence from their Beat literary models. The third generation was very closely related to the feminist movement and the sixties hippie counterculture. The most important names in the literary area were Anne Waldman, Janine Pommy Vega and the musician Patti Smith, whose poetry is related to the Beat scene. The writing of the third generation is marked by women's freedom and autonomy.

I will examine the work of three women Beat poets who were contemporary to some of the most significant male writers. These writers are Ruth Weiss, Joanne Kyger and Lenore Kandel.

Ruth Weiss (b. 1927) is contemporary to the first generation of Beat male writers and shares many of their influences, but as opposed to literary production of her colleagues, hers is almost out of print. In her poetry, she uses language as a "free-flowing force" from her unconscious toward others; according to Weiss, "the language is sacred, therefore dangerous. To be used with care" (Skerl 58). Furthermore, Weiss's poetry reflects picture-like images of her life because of her spontaneous method of free association inspired by the avant-garde poets; she achieves that by using word inversions, neologism and contemporary slang. One of her major inspirations is the American jazz folk tradition that was present in the way she performed her poetry. As a result, she creates a kind of dialogue between the poem she is reading and the musicians and also the audience. As for her literary production, she published her first volume *Steps* in 1958;

however, her most important work is *DESERT JOURNAL* (1977), a compilation of forty poems written from 1961 to 1968 in which she given an account of an internal “journey of self-discovery” (Skerl 60).

The writer Lenore Kandel (1932–2009) was the author of *The Love Book* (1966), a collection of poetry that broke with the conventions about female sexuality as being passive and subjective to man; this book, together with some other works from male beat writers was confiscated in the mid-sixties because of its obscenity. Kandel’s work was interpreted at that time, and still is, as portraying the sexual liberation of women and the use of taboo words in the new literature of the Beat counterculture. Kandel herself stated that the book was an attempt to “express her belief that sexual acts between loving persons are religious acts” (Knight 281). Her poetry is a bridge between the sacred and the sexual; that is why she calls her poems ‘holy erotica.’ Because her poetry is full of explicit sex between a man and a woman that expressed some kind of sexual equality, she was considered a link between the Beat Generation and the hippie movement.

Finally, the poetry of Joanne Kyger (1934–2017) is a reflection of her reality. Her first book of poems was published in 1965, *The Tapestry and the Web*, where she did a revision of the character of Penelope of the *Odyssey* in “The Odyssey Poems”; next to the publication of her first book of poetry, she has published many more collections, but her literary production has not been studied until recently, thanks to Linda Russo and Anne L. Waldman who have analysed and studied her figure in publications about the Beat Generation, like the above-mentioned *Girls Who Wore Black* and *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, respectively. Kyger’s writings were very much influenced by her studies on Zen Buddhism, but also by the atmosphere of North Beach in the San Francisco of the early sixties.

As in any of the anthologies and works on the Beat Generation women that I came across there is not any analysis of how women writers are connected to each other or to the movement they are part of, in this B.A. Dissertation I aim to search for thematic connections in the poetry of the three authors I have mentioned, while considering whether those themes could be considered properly ‘Beat.’

## Chapter 2

### The Genderless Poetry of ruth weiss

ruth weiss (b. 1928) was of German origin, born in Berlin in 1928, but in 1933 she had to escape with her parents to Vienna, where she wrote her first poem at the age of five. In 1939, she fled with her family to Holland in order to get to the United States. Her life in America began when she was eleven years old in New York and then in Chicago, where ruth graduated from high school in the top one per cent of her class (Knight 241). In 1946, she returned to Germany with her parents, but she soon moved to Switzerland to study at the College of Neuchatel. During those years in Switzerland, she wrote short stories and kept a journal that she later destroyed. She moved to Chicago again with her parents in 1948, to the Art Circle, a rooming house for artists where she would give her first poetry reading a year later. In 1952, she finally arrived in San Francisco's North Beach, where she met Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac, the latter becoming her haiku-partner. Indeed, the haiku is one of the strongest influences on weiss's poetry as she explained in an interview: "Haiku is a fabulous discipline for making each word succinct, meant, cutting out the fat, a perfect exercise for poetry" (Grace and Johnson 65). Another influence on weiss's poetry was jazz music, which she included in her poetry reading; weiss created an innovative style of reading poetry, that would be followed by many of her colleague writers. When she finally settled in America, she refused to write her name with capital letters because that reminded her of Germany, as in German all the nouns are capitalized.

Her literary production starts with the publication of *Steps* (1958), but her most representative work is *DESERT JOURNAL* (1977), a collection of forty poems written from 1961 to 1968 in which, in Skerl's words, she "recounts an internal journey toward self-discovery" (60). Some other important works by weiss are *GALLERY OF WOMEN* (1959), "THE BRINK" (1960), and *SINGLE OUT* (1978). It may be said that weiss's poetry is like viewing still-life fragments of her life, even though she does not want to use her poetry to express private angst. The result is a poetry in which she tells the story of her life putting the focus on the facts, without showing her thoughts or feelings on the poem, perhaps just an account of events:

october 1938 we had to flee vienna.

my grandmother hungarian boarding house

was wanted by a nazi official.

hungary was still out of nazi clutch & my grandmother hungarian.

we were austrian citizens-

my father, his mother's only son.

we left quickly in the night for the swiss border.

This fragment belongs to the poem *II – INCIDENT*, from *SINGLE OUT*; the action of the poem is set in 1938 when she and part of her family try to get to Vienna and then to the United States. Later on in the poem, the poetic voice will clarify how a young woman helped them get on the train. In this poem, the author uses indistinctively the first person in the plural and in the singular form to describe her experience accompanied by her family; it can be said that her first poems before arriving to America are less experimental in terms of gender and identity than the poetry produced later when she struggled to discover her place in a new reality.

In relation with weiss's personal experiences as shown in her poetry, her work also contained a commemoration of her Holocaust origins, as she was from a Jewish family that escaped from the Nazis. That is why in the collection of poems *SINGLE OUT* (1978), she wrote a poem called *DANCE* about the horrors of the Holocaust she and part of the family could escape, but that some of her relatives and many other Germans could not:

naked

lined up for the gas chamber

shame & blame & guiltless guilt

take a shower

wash clean the sin

the lie

hypnotic shuffle in

SOAP & SILVER CLEAN LIKE RAIN

It is worth mentioning that in this poem there is no gender marker. We do not know whether the poetic voice is a male or female individual or whether it is a group of

people. It seems as if weiss's poetry does not have a poetic voice with a defined gender or all of them at the same time. We can see another example of her play with gender portrayed in her poetic production in an excerpt from *SINGLE OUT*, where weiss narrates a party in 1950 Chicago:

the party was in full swing–  
chicago 1950  
i had just come back from new orleans & making circles.  
old faces  
new faces  
lifetalk  
deathtalk  
any talk to keep the thread & nervous.  
are you here?  
is he?  
she is.  
he is.  
he is who?

At the end of this fragment it is clear how weiss plays with the identity and gender of the poetic voice, highlighting that she does not know either whether it is a she or a he, or even who the poetic voice refers to. On the other hand, the fragment could be a conversation that the poetic voice could be having at that party.

In the *SECOND DAY*, weiss changes the subject at the middle of the poem leaving the meaning incomplete:

There is a point  
where the last rescue  
of love is possible  
there is that point of lasting  
the tall love calls

a cat shadow  
on a wall  
and is it a or the  
or is it a or the  
or is it singularly plural?  
who are you to say  
how s should be placed  
if?

weiss plays with the grammar of the poem and she is concerned with the linguistic features of poetry, as language for her, in Skerl's words, "is the vehicle for individual escape from materiality" (63). The poem begins with the theme of love as the last possible rescue for the poetic voice, but at some point, the poetic voice starts to doubt about the right way to express it in linguistic terms and leaves its meaning open and unresolved. Thus, the focus of the poem is changed to form rather than content and weiss uses the same method as in the previous poem where she plays with the gender of the poetic voice, except that in this case the doubt is in the use of the definite or the indefinite grammar feature. The idea of indefiniteness of the identity of the poetic voice, however, is still present.

It can be said that *DESERT JOURNAL* breaks the rules and changes the standards and expectations of poetry in terms of language, as there is a multiplicity of voices throughout the work, changing from "she," to "he" and even "we" or "you." This feature makes a de-personalized and de-sexualized poetic voice that helps separate the figure of ruth weiss from her poetry, as her intention may be to evade herself from her own personal history.

That transgender poetic subject changes on the FORTIETH DAY when it is defined as a female who hears her own voice, amazed at its power, her strength to carry on disappears and the female subject is now a more passive one that will be rescued by the man, representing the gender hierarchy present in society. In fact, some years before the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the United States, ruth weiss's work can be considered a proto-feminist, as it incorporates some kind of sorority to her literary production with the publication of the book *GALLERY OF WOMEN* (1959). In this



collection of poetry, she made poem-portraits for female poets, written out of “my respect and admiration for these women with whom I felt a kind of sisterhood” (Knight 245). weiss also publishes *MY NAME IS WOMAN* with her prose-poem sketches of women friends, like the poet Madeline Gleason, with whom she kept both an artistic and personal relationship. In the artistic area, they both shared some characteristics in their poetry, mainly because their works were revised by each other before being published. In an interview to ruth weiss of 1999, when she is asked about the people who supported her in her artistic career, she answered:

We met in the late fifties. We were booked in the same program at a bookstore, and I had just finished this kind of collage poem, and she and her lover Mary Greer were sitting in the first row almost falling off their chairs laughing. When it was Maddie’s turn to read, I fell in love with her work. From then on it was a deep, deep friendship. (Grace and Johnson 68)

In fact, weiss wrote a poem dedicated to Gleason in which it is exposed their shared experiences when writing their poetry:

FOR MADELINE GLEASON

“do your poems haunt you?”

oh Maddie

is not the poem of our life

a haunt

drawing us

releasing & drawing us?

a stronger line each time

drawing us the artist

drawn & quartered

into seasons, elements...

The poem begins with a question that could be applied to most of weiss’s poetic production, as weiss’s poetry seems to be a search for meaning in her life, a search for a place where she can be herself. In addition to that, what can be mainly highlighted is a kind of sorority or connection between both writers. This can be seen in the use of the

pronoun “us,” that creates a similar identity as women writers who struggle to create poetry that express their inner selves.

*DESERT JOURNAL* appears to be an exploration of the mind of the poetic voice throughout forty days. It could be described as an inner journey of forty days with a poem for each day the subject is in that desert; each poem goes through all aspects of human consciousness and human thought. weiss’s experimentation in *DESERT JOURNAL* is focused on how poetry is written and how it is performed, rather than in the themes she addresses; the prologue of the forty poems includes how the reading of the poems has to be performed:

you are entering a certain desert

like stones or bones

marking sand

flame & cloud

things with wings

call your number

read your day

see if it talks to you alone

like stone or bone

in sand

other days

other ways - - -

As the poem explains, the audience said a number and then weiss read the poem that corresponded, so the readings were always different.

In terms of form, she describes her poetry as a circle instead of a line, as she confirmed in an interview: “I never worked with straight lines. ‘The dot become a line become a circle become a dot’ —that’s from one of the poems in *DESERT JOURNAL*. That is a very strong image in my work: a dot become a line, become a circle” (Grace and

Johnson 67). This circularity of weiss's poetry is also seen in its content, because it plays with the illusion of linearity by naming each poem by the day number, from one to forty.

In conclusion, what can be said about weiss's poetry is, first of all, that it is similar to the male Beat writers from a formal point of view, as she makes use of language experimentation to create new forms of poetry. On the other hand, with respect to the gender identity portrayed in her poetry, it is a search for one: poetry is used as a way of finding herself through the use of a transgender poetic voice that allows the poet not to be identified with the poetic voice and not to make connections between her and her creation. In the end, the poetic voice fails to find her gendered self, and as a result her poetry is genderless, as it portrays a multiplicity of identities with which the poetic voice does not identify.

## Chapter 3

### Lenore Kandel's 'Holy Erotica'

Lenore Kandel (1932–2009) was born in New York in 1932, but later that year, her family moved to Los Angeles, where she spent her teenage years. When she was still a teenager, she decided to become a Buddhist and a writer, since she read “everything I could get my hands on, particularly about world religions” (Knight 279). In the 1950s, she returned to New York with his father, the screenwriter Abel Kandel, and to study at the New School of Research, but she dropped out and by 1960, she went to San Francisco. There, she lived in two of the bohemian artistic centres of the sixties: North Beach, the epicentre of the Beat Generation, and Haight-Ashbury. In her time in San Francisco, she discovered the Beat scene and met the Beat poet Lew Welch, with whom she had a relationship. Welch introduced her to other Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, who was a student of Buddhism. She met other Beat women such as Carolyn Cassady and Joanne Kyger, and Diane di Prima, the latter being the one with whom she had the best relationship. In 1970, she was involved in a motorcycle accident in which she suffered dangerous spinal injuries, but she recovered from it and kept on writing poetry till October 2009, when she died of lung cancer.

Jack Kerouac's work was a major influence in her literary production, and he was also impressed by her intelligence. In Kerouac's novel *Big Sur* (1962) there is a character described in the novel itself as “a big Rumanian monster beauty of some kind I mean with big eyes and very tall and big... but also intelligent, well read, writes poetry, is a Zen student, knows everything...” (75), that matches the description of Lenore Kandel.

She wrote two collections of poems, *The Love Book* (1966) and *Word Alchemy* (1967), apart from other three chapbooks: *An Exquisite Navel*, *A Passing Dragon*, and *A Passing Dragon Seen Again*, all of them published in 1959. The publication of *The Love Book* caused controversy because it was considered pornographic and it was arrested for obscenity that same year, in 1966. The book consisted in a compilation of four poems, “To Fuck With Love Phase I,” “To Fuck With Love Phase II,” “To Fuck With Love Phase III”, and “God/Love Poem.” It was considered transgressive writing that offended the establishment culture because of the use of taboo words and because the poems talked about sexually liberated women. Kandel's second collection of poetry was *Word*

*Alchemy*, in which she wrote an introduction talking about what poetic language was for her:

Whatever is language is poetic language and if the word required by the poet does not exist in his known language then it is up to him to discover it. The only proviso can be that the word be the correct word as demanded by the poem and only the poet can be the ultimate judge of that. (Kandel xviii)

She goes on to say that there are no barriers to poetry now that it has gone out to the streets, and it does not need to be classified. According to Kandel, poetry is not made to be “comfortable” and “safe,” it is a “manifestation/translation of a vision, an illumination, an experience” (Kandel xvii). That is why she also speaks of the process of censorship she went through with *The Love Book*: “Any form of censorship, whether mental, moral, emotional, or physical, whether from the inside out or the outside in, is a barrier against self-awareness” (Kandel xviii).

Most of Lenore Kandel’s poems deal with “heterosexual love grounded in Beat poetics and Eastern mysticism” (Skerl 90). Sex may be said to be the ultimate act of love in her poems. In fact, she admits in the introduction of *Word Alchemy* that two of her poems “deal with physical love and the invocation, recognition, and acceptance of the divinity in man through the medium of physical love” (xvii). There is an example of it in poems like “God/Love Poem”:

there are no ways of love but / beautiful /

I love you all of them

I love you / your cock in my hands

stirs like a bird

in my fingers

as you swell and grow hard in my hand

forcing my fingers open

with your rigid strength

[...]

your cock rises and throbs in my hands

a revelation / as Aphrodite knew it

[...]

your body moves to me

flesh to flesh

skin sliding over golden skin

as mine to yours

The fragment begins with the poetic voice saying “I love you” to the lover and the couple seem to be having sex all through, presenting sex as a natural way of showing love. Indeed, Kandel represents a love that is close to an erotic mysticism. This is clear in the poem because of its spiritual elements, when she writes that the lover’s erection is a revelation, a mystical act that was possible thanks to the Goddess Aphrodite. Some have argued that she presented a poetry of pleasure and love as an alternative over “the national pastime of death” (Kandel xix) —a reference to the Vietnam War— because the audience of her poetry was young and she is aware that many of those young men chose a different way of life closer to culture and literature that would participate in the hippie and anti-war movements. Going back to the spiritual love, the title itself makes clear what the poem is going to be about: Kandel is equalling the words “God” and “Love.” Throughout the poem there are references to gods and goddesses such as Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty according to Greek mythology. There are some other instances in the rest of the poem:

there was a time when gods where purer

/ I can recall nights among the honeysuckle

our juices sweeter than honey

/ we were the temple and the god entire /

[...]

Your face above me

is the face of all the gods

and beautiful demons

your eyes...

love touches love

the temple and the god

are one

Here, Kandel plays with the words 'honeysuckle' and 'honey,' which refer to the 'drink of the gods' in Greek mythology, but the poet uses them with sexual connotations. So, she combines again sexuality with spirituality. This combination of elements is also seen at the end of the poem, when the poet compares the union between a man and a woman during sex with the union between 'the temple and the god.'

What is interesting here is that this comparison seems to express some kind of subordination of the woman to the male figure in: "love touches love / the temple and the god / are one." First, the temple is equalled to the woman and the god is the man: she becomes a temple for the man-god above. The comparison could be interpreted in two ways: in a spiritual way as the woman is the matter that the soul of the man shapes, as it was thought in ancient Greece, which would match the mythological references; and also in a sexual way, as it could refer to their physical union. Second, it seems to portray a mystical union between two subjects in which one of them (the woman) exists fully inasmuch as it is united to the other (the man). This idea seems to contradict a reading of her poetry simply as that written to portray a woman liberated through the free enjoyment of sex as an act of love.

In another order of things, as Lenore Kandel said in the introduction of her collection of poetry, she wrote about experiences and about awareness, that is why a recurrent topic of her poems is the use of drugs and its consequences on the people that surround her. That is a very typical of the Beat writings, to talk about the addiction as a mythic vision. In "Blues for Sister Sally" she describes the female subject, in the form of Sally, with the typical Beat features as men represented women in their works. Lenore Kandel divides the poem in four parts, in the first part we are introduced to Sister Sally:

moon-faced baby with cocaine arms

nineteen summers

nineteen lovers

novice of the junkie angel

lay sister of mankind penitent

sister in marijuana

sister in hashish  
sister is morphine  
against the bathroom grimy sink  
pumping her arms full of life  
(holy holy)  
She bears the stigma (holy holy) of the raving christ  
(holy holy)  
holy needle  
holy powder  
holy vein

What we can understand from this fragment is that Sally is a nineteen-year-old girl addicted to drugs. In the poem, Kandel talks about her in religious terms, as we can see in the title when she calls her Sister, and throughout the poem with the repetition and the spiritual invocation of 'holy,' as in the case of the poem "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg.

Also, the poet refers to Sally as a "novice of the junkie angel" in the poem, which is a reference that appears in another poem by Kandel titled "Junk/Angel." In this poem, we are presented with an angel as a representation of the drugs they consume. The angel represented as the junkie is also a typical element in William S. Burroughs' works. In most of Kandel's poems about drugs, she portrays a very specific type of girl that Jack Kerouac considered as quintessentially Beat in his novel *The Subterraneans*: "a woman of 25 prophesying the future style of America with short almost crewcut but with curls black snaky hair, snaky walk, pale junky anaemic face...the cold pale booster face of the cold pale girl" (18). In the second part of the poem "Blues for Sister Sally," Lenore Kandel refers to that kind of girl:

[...]

how shall we canonize our sister who is not quite dead  
who fornicates with strangers  
who masturbates with needles  
who is afraid of the dark and wears her long hair soft and



black

against her bloodless face

It is said that what Kandel does with this poem is to highlight the presence of women in the Beat culture that marginalized them. She put the “cool” girl that Kerouac considered as “being silent and wearing black,” mainly their wives and girlfriends, in the centre; she is now the protagonist. But again, those angelical women are idealised and submitted to the power of the other, in this case, drug addiction.

A similar situation of women ignored in their daily lives is shown in her poem “Morning Song,” where she writes on marriage and mostly on the figure of the wife as ignored and subjected to the man:

Eyes shut as an unborn bird he lay unmoving and examined the  
presence of his wife. wife. WIFE. wiFe. wife. She smelled of moderate talcum  
powder and pale perfume. Saturday movie theatres. Shoe sweat  
and popcorn. Undertones of good toast and a rhyme of bacon.  
She existed.

Somewhere directly beside him, adjoining his right flank

And chest and outflung arm lay a woman. his. Wife

This poem shows the perspective of the man contemplating the presence of his wife. It can be interpreted as a vision of possession, not only for the repetition of the pronoun “his,” but also because of the description of the woman as “adjoining his right flank,” considering the wife as his subordinate. Truly, the wife is portrayed in the poem as a companion to the man and she only exists because of the man, as it is seen in the last verse where the author portrays from the perspective of the man how “a woman” exists only as his wife. For instances like these present in her literary production, Lenore Kandel was described as the figure that linked the Beat culture into the hippie movement and the beginning of the feminist movement.

However, there is something contradictory. As the analysis of Kandel’s poetry show, the theme that is more present is female sexuality. Her decision of writing openly about sex, and putting the female figure as being sexually active was something transgressive and against what was established as adequate. But there are also some

instances throughout her poetry where her idea on man-woman relationship as a subordination of one to the other was prevalent. It can be concluded that Lenore Kandel's poetry is close to the male writers of the Beat Generation as she talks openly about sex to somehow shock society and she also uses some figures typical from Beat writing such as the junkie angel that frame her as a Beat writer. But the reality of Kandel's poetry is that she still portrays some kind of subordination to the men in that the female identity is fulfilled only through the union with the male that completes her.

We have seen in the case of Ruth Weiss how she unsuccessfully tried to find her gender identity, and now with Kandel she could be contradicting herself by presenting the idealized sexual union between a man and a woman as a solution to the subordination of women, in which the reality is that the woman is defined only through her relationship with the man. The contradiction is part of the fight for identity, which is not something easy to find as it can be seen in the cases of these poets. Let us see what happens with Kyger.

## Chapter 4

### What is it Joanne Kyger wants?

Joanne Kyger (1934–2017) was born in California in 1934, and because her father was a Navy Captain, Joanne and her family had to move on several occasions. In 1959, she began her studies on philosophy and literature at Santa Barbara College, where she founded a literary magazine. She left college in 1956, and a year later she moved to San Francisco, when she was twenty-two years old. There, she discovered the North Beach area and the City Lights Bookstore. Once she settled in San Francisco, she started to work in a bookstore, and by night she went to share her poetry to The Pace, the bar where all the Beats gathered. That is how she met Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, whom she married, and many other Beat poets, but also the San Francisco Renaissance poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, who became her mentors in the literary scene of San Francisco. From this moment on, she started to participate actively in the artistic circles of North Beach.

She went with her husband at the time, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg on a trip to India, and the three of them recorded in a journal their experiences on the trip and on their meeting with the Dalai Lama. In the case of Kyger's journal, she expressed her desire of achieving independence as a woman and her struggle to find her own identity in her relationship with Snyder. When the couple arrived in San Francisco in 1964, they decided to break up and she focused on the publication of her first collection of poetry, *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965). From that moment on, she published other important collections such as *Places to Go* (1970) or *Just Space: Poems from 1979–1989* (1991).

Her literary production constituted an important link between different poetry movements in twentieth-century America, as she was deeply influenced by the San Francisco Renaissance as well as the Beat Generation. With the Beat Generation writers, she shares the influence of Eastern religion, the appearance of other Beat writers in her publications and the reflection of quotidian activities, like snap-shots of her life in her literature. This last feature is predominant in most of her literary production; her poems are records of her daily life:

[...]

Gary says of the blond child  
tensely crouching on the porch he's  
not human. At 2 ½ an unfaltering  
icy blue stare in my eyes he DEMANDS  
both hands before him, uh - uh,  
want, want  
& his parents cower  
what is it, what is it you want.

[...]

In this fragment from the poem “Burning the Baby to Make Him Realer,” Gary Snyder —Kyger’s husband at the time— makes an appearance playing his role as parent. This poem does not portray the typical image of a young happy couple with their small child; instead, it represents a kind of anguish and doubt about what to do with the child. In fact, the name of the poem is quite revealing on the attitude towards the child. But the concern about the role of parent is mainly the woman’s: at the end of the fragment, she asks: “what is it, what is it you want?”.

This is an important question that in the first place refers to the demands of the child, but that could be extended to include what is it that society wants from her, what her role is, as mother and as wife, or even understood as a question that she makes to herself so as to discover what is it that she wants in life. These questions will be present throughout her poetry.

The topic of the women failing to be the perfect housewife and mother is repeated in many of her poems. We often see in Joanne Kyger’s poetry the relation between the feminine with domesticity, as in “She Comes Up...”:

She comes up  
a long walk behind her  
and all the struggle of what will happen today.  
The dirt laying limply

over everything

and the laundry has been soaking for two days in the bathroom sink.

I am so worried.

The angry wife screeching in the kitchen

In this fragment, we see how Kyger uses the image of the dirty laundry to write a poem in which she also expresses some kind of guilt for not having performed the duties that she, as a mother and wife, feels the social pressure of the time has to perform at home. This idea of a 'bad' housewife is present in some other poems by Joanne Kyger, where she shows herself far from that image of the perfect housewife typical of the American fifties.

Her first and most relevant publication, *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965), was a revision of the story of Penelope, from the *Odyssey*. In this work, Kyger used the mythological stories of the *Odyssey* that concerned Penelope to adopt them to her own experiences:

Waiting again

What for

I am no picker from the sea of its riches

I watch the weaving— the woman who sits at her loom

What was her name? the goddess I mean

— not that mortal one

plucking threads

as if they were strings of a harp

SPRING, 1960

Kyoto

Here, the poet uses the reference to weaving to establish a connection between the poetic voice's waiting, with Penelope's waiting. Somehow, Kyger becomes Penelope. She also presents a woman that is somehow domesticated and trapped within the house just "waiting" without being able to develop her creativity. This idea of the trapped creative genius of women and them being ignored in the intellectual circle was highlighted by Joanne Kyger in Johnson and Grace's words: "if you happened to be a woman you had no access to the muse herself since you WERE female and couldn't take a (same sex) female, or a male, as your muse, therefore you could never be a great poet" (182).

But what is new about Kyger is that poetry for her constituted a way of identifying herself, not so much as a female self, but as a human self. She talked about this same topic in an interview published in *Breaking the Rule of Cool*: "I never wanted to be called a poetess because it seemed that it was just concerned with your particular female identity, whereas I thought the identity of a writer was much bigger than that" (Grace and Johnson 144). As Grace and Johnson suggest, Kyger did not want to describe her poetry as woman-centred because the poetic voice "has a lot of personas and personalities," so it is always a danger "to set a male/female dichotomy or duality; the self is more important than the sum of the parts" (148).

It is no surprise, then, that in her poetry the idea of freedom is also represented, of liberating the women from all those home duties that she talked about in her poems. This idea is seen in the poem "Look the Bird is...":

[...]

go bird you keep this place  
at the very farthest wall  
pushing and scratching to get out  
thru the cracks in the batten  
where the light comes in after storms  
& the weeds tear thru in August  
all all  
has fled

has gone flicked by  
& scratched the soil.  
& you claw foot fix it  
fix it I'm going.

4.63

This fragment shows a desire for freedom of the poetic voice through the image of a bird. The poem seems to be a call for freedom of the poet that is imprisoned in a domestic world, trapped in the roles of wife and mother, leaving aside her role as writer and artist.

Nevertheless, it would seem that the content of Kyger's work also reflects conflicting desires between stability and her desire to write: the poet wants to stay in a place but at the same time, her creative impulses make her unable to sit still, like the example on the previous poem. But it may not be like that. In the previous example we see the case of wanting to go away, but the rest of her literary production, we find instances where she expresses a sense of domestic comforts that contradict that desire to escape that stability. We can see an instance of domestic comfort in the poem "The Pigs for Circe in May" from *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965), where she refers to the figure of Penelope:

[...]

She had a lot of maids and a staid housekeeper.

I mean, I admire her. The white robes

and keeping busy

she fed her animals

wild acorns, and men crying inside

with a voice like a woman

from the sun and the ocean

She is busy at the center, planning out great

stories to amuse herself, and a lot of pets,

a neat household, gracious

honey and wine

She offers.

[...]

This fragment may be interpreted as an inner desire of the poetic voice of being like Penelope: a woman in charge of other and that is busy “offering” herself to the needs of other people. In fact, in the poem it is clear that the poetic voice wants to be more like that woman as she says: “I admire her.”

These last two examples may express that Kyger somehow wishes she could be comfortable with her role as mother and wife, in contrast with her identity as a woman writer. She seems to understand that the feminine aspect does not always respond to the stereotype of the woman being defined by maternity and by her relationship with men, but by her condition as a desiring individual, in her case as a poet, unbound to society, wishing to be able to fulfil the creative as well as the domestic roles in society.

To conclude this analysis about Joanne Kyger’s poetry, it can be said that hers is the most different from the Beat features, as she does not experiment with poetry or looks for a shocking effect on the reader. On the aspect of identity, she looks for a liberation like in the case of Lenore Kandel, but instead of using the sexuality of women to achieve it, Kyger portrays a desiring, active subject seeking for creation; the way of liberation for Kyger is the creation of poetry.



## Conclusion

The purpose of this new reading was to determine whether the themes that appear in the literary production of women writers of the Beat Generation were the same, or at least similar, to the ones of the male writers' works, and also what may have been their common concern, if there was any. For this study, I have analysed the poetry of Ruth Weiss, Lenore Kandel and Joanne Kyger as a representation of all women writers of the Beat Generation. I focused the analysis only on their poetry, aware that in order to analyse all Beat women literary production more thoroughly memoirs and narratives should be included.

It is possible to draw a common line in the thematic choice of these authors' poetry in line with the question present in Joanne Kyger's "Burning the Baby to Make Him Realer" of "what is it, what is it you want?". If the poetry written by the men of the Beat Generation is identified with its transgression in the formal and thematic aspects, women's poetry can be said to be focused on the complex question of identifying their desire.

Beginning with Ruth Weiss, her approach to that question in her poetry is what she wants, and most importantly who she is. The common feature of Weiss' poems analysed is the doubt on the gender of the poetic voice, as if the author was neither sure of how to consider herself. Her poetry is a mere account of episodes of her life without a clear protagonist; sometimes it is a she, sometimes it is a he or an it, or it may be a plural one. What could be highlighted of her poetry is the indefiniteness in grammar and also in identity. That underscores the difficulty of understanding her poetry, and therefore, the difficulty of answering the question of what is it that she wants.

The approach of Lenore Kandel is completely different. Her poetic voice is clearly female, who enjoys her sexuality and expresses her desires without restrictions. The question of "what is it, what is it you want?" applied to her poetry clearly shows that what she wants is to transgress and getting closer to the Beat literature. As a woman, her desire seems to be expressed in her poems where she, in a very detailed way, talks about sex. But, as some elements present in her poems, there is a glimpse of dependence on a male figure, in an idealised sexual relationship, that would mean the woman only finds a place for her identity when she becomes one with man.

Finally, Joanne Kyger writes that question in a context where she is overcome by the responsibilities of motherhood; she does not know what is it that the child wants, nor what she wants in life. Is being a wife and a mother what she wanted? Is it to be a writer? The question could be interpreted as what society, her family want of her. Her poetry expresses that doubt of doing what is expected from her and also a desire of freeing herself from those responsibilities. The answer is a desirable balance between herself as a human being, capable of writing, and feeling at home at home.

This study aimed to find out if the Beat women writers could be considered as a different sub-group among the Beat Generation as their themes revolved around them as women and as writers.

The three writers are certainly inside the creative sphere of the Beats, but not all of them follow the experimental and transgressive methods of this generation. In formal terms, all of them try to find new ways of expressing themselves and achieve a more shocking response. In the case of Lenore Kandel and Joanne Kyger, their transgression is also in their thematic choice: the feminine in the case of Kandel, and the poetic creation at the same level as the men, in the case of Kyger.

In terms of female identity, Kyger's poetry proposes an essential question about femininity: 'What does a woman want?' This is a question on female desire without an easy answer: Ruth Weiss struggled to find it by exploring language; Kandel solves it with the idealized sexual union between a man and a woman; and Kyger intends to respond to it with a new ideal of balance between the poet and the domestic woman.

The analysis has shown that the three writers have Beat attributes in their poetry that are mainly based on transgression, be it linguistic, sexual or creative. What distinguishes their writing from the male Beats is that women's principal concern is about the question on female identity and their desire, on what they want. The difficulty of answering that complex question could be the reason why women writers were not understood then and have been long excluded by their male contemporaries and by critics in general.

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