

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Beat Feminisms: Aesthetics, Literature, Gender, Activism

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► PAUL STEWART

University of Nicosia  
stewart.p@unic.ac.cy

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Famously, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" opens with an angry lament: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked" (2015, p. 28). More pertinently when considering Mackay's *Beat Feminisms* is a later, no less angry lament for those lost to the domestic consumerism of mid-fifties America:

who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman's loom (Ginsberg, 2015, p. 30)

Here, the inert, domestic female threatens the creativity of the non-normative male. Yet the passage is also replete with misogynistic tropes focused on an appropriation of the Classical Fates. In Greek mythology, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos were a female trio of considerable power yet they are reduced by Ginsberg to being mere 'shrews', and rather than having the ability to form and dispense destiny, they are hopelessly restricted by their one-eyed vision. Even the metaphorical associations of the Fates are appropriated as acts of spinning, weaving and cutting human destiny are subsumed into the image of the craftsman controlling his own production if he can only escape the deadening inertia of his female partner.

It is important to start with this poet and this poem – even in a review of a book devoted to female Beats – precisely because of the male-centred mythology (in the Barthesian sense) that surrounds the movement. Indeed, that mythology encompasses the moment that 'Howl' was first performed, at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1955, in what was "a festival of cross-continental and cross-cultural pollination" (Raskin, 2004, p. 9). However, such apparent diversity did not include any female voices.

The opening chapter of Mackay's analysis rightly

focus on the development of the Beat Generation mythology and its implications; rightly, because, as Barthes points out, "the very principle of myth [is that] it transforms history into nature" (2000, 129) and 'naturalness' is itself at the heart of the Beat mythology. One such myth circles about the violent death of a woman. Joan Vollmer-Burroughs was fatally shot by her husband, William Burroughs, at a party in Mexico City on September 6, 1951. Mackay focuses on what the textual treatment of this violent event reveals about the representation and place of the female within male Beat writing, for it "is precisely as a sensationalist piece of Beat history that Vollmer's brief life and tragic death would be passed on to other Beats and later generations of writers" (p. 12). Burroughs' broadly autobiographical novel, *Queer*, written between 1951 and 1953, does not allude to Vollmer's killing, despite the historical proximity, and, in the introduction to the novel (first published in 1985), he writes: "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death" (Burroughs, 1986, p.18). It is hard not to agree with Mackay's conclusion, therefore, that "Burroughs' work strives to erase female subjectivity in order to make room for the emergence of an exclusively male authorial self" (p. 13). As the death of Vollmer is one of the foundational myths of the male Beats, the question becomes not only how women can insert themselves into this aesthetic domain but also how the notion of the authorial self might need to be revised to accommodate the female voice.

The writers focused on – Diane di Prima, ruth weiss, Kathy Acker and Anne Waldman (accompanied by an intriguing section on the performance artists such as Pattie Smith and Laurie Anderson) – are arranged in broadly chronological order and this appropriately suggests Kristeva's three phases of feminism as set out in her essay "Women's Time" (1981). Moreover, it effectively demonstrates a female lineage operating despite of, or in reaction to, the initial exclusion of the female within Beat aesthetics. The book's method is broadly intertextual, with a light Bloomian inflection, as the authors seek to clear their own creative space within a predominantly male canon.

Mackay's nuanced reading of the intertextual relation between di Prima and Keats forms a compelling paradigm of how a female poet at once identifies with and reacts against a male precursor.). So, there is a discriminatory Keats for whom the female cannot hope to gain aesthetic and spiritual transcendence; then, a kindred Keats who believes that "imagination has the power to create new worlds" (p. 36) and who "links the poet's [negative] capabili-

ty to take in uncertainty to their sense of beauty and truth" (p. 36). For di Prima what Keats "is calling a sense of beauty, what obliterates all consideration or all thinking process, is that same experience that we have *whenever* it all drops away. A kind of satori" (1979, p. 19). By linking Keats' capability with a Zen Buddhist form of enlightenment, di Prima allies herself with the Beat sensibility of spiritual and artistic awakening.

Given this double nature of the relation with Keats, Mackay argues that di Prima cannot only indulge in a form of feminist revision as that would be to reject the positive attributes of Keats that di Prima wishes to claim in her own emergence as a female poetic voice. Instead, di Prima makes Keats himself a subject of poetry, and therefore subject to herself as an emerging poet. Di Prima explores this Keatsian dynamic in her first book of poetry, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward*, but the collection moves "from poems that appear as Keatsian-like meditations on beauty and truth to pieces that openly ask questions around the notion of female Beat poetics" (pp. 49-50). As Mackay recognises, the Beat vernacular employed by some of these pieces might lead one to miss the "nuanced points the author advances in the poems about ontological questions" (p. 50). Mackay certainly misses little with a series of exemplary close readings that reveal di Prima attempting to "merge the maternal with the poetic feminine" (p. 53), and modern, urban life and mores with the Romantic possibilities of aesthetic transcendence.

Mackay's strength as a close reader, combined with her broad intertextual grasp, serve her well when considering ruth weiss' *Desert Journal*; a text that "adds a spiritual dimension to the notion of the female Beat poetic consciousness" (p. 62). Mackay focuses on the image of the desert itself and draws on Biblical, Romantic and even contemporary post-Iraq war texts to elucidate the shifting possibilities that weiss exploits. For example, the imagery associated with the journeying in the desert of Moses and the Israelites allows weiss to find a personal angle within the theological at the same time as making Exodus seem contemporary to a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century readership. Whilst her use of Exodus suggests a certain sense of communal effort as it strives towards identity, her use of Christ's forty days and nights of temptation in the desert pivots towards the figure of the sole desert-wanderer as they walk a trail of "slow and reflective self-discovery" (p. 66). Again, we find that the British Romantics – especially Wordsworth and Shelley – play a key role in fashioning a discourse of personal and poetic completion through a relation with the natural world.

However, Mackay's broader intertextual analysis – encompassing Stephen Crane, Robert Frost, Yeats and others – recognises that a countervailing discourse that focuses on the desolation and threat posed by desert spaces. As such, weiss is inheriting a multifaceted and shifting poetic imagining of these wastelands, and this serves her well as Mackay argues that the "center of weiss' poetic vision of a journey through the desert is the idea of transformation through fluidity" (p. 71). This might also account for the apparent gender fluidity within the earlier sections of the book, leading one to wonder "why weiss transforms the poetic voice in *Desert Journal* from ungendered to a voice that emerges as having a female identity" (p. 73). In answer, Mackay argues that weiss finally emerges from the fluidity of gender and the desert as a clear, lucid and visionary female voice that still manages "to accommodate ambiguity and unknowingness in the identity of a speaker" thus retaining the negative capability that di Prima so prized in her reading of Keats (p. 73).

Discourses of fluidity and fixity, especially in terms of gender and associated imagery, become key to Mackay's reading of di Prima's later work, *Loba*, to which a whole chapter is devoted. Intertextually, the British Romanticism of Keats has now been joined by the female modernism of H.D. whose long poem, *Helen in Egypt*, provides di Prima with the impetus to attempt "a conscious visionary project that addressed female authorship directly" (p. 81).

*Loba* is a work containing approximately 200 poems coalescing around the figure of the loba, a quasi-mythological she-wolf "who is formed throughout the poems, first as an animistic woman and then as a being who contains the soul and consciousness of all women" (81). Women from Greek, Egyptian and Judeo-Christian mythology are seen as "lost moon sisters" who, along with women of flesh and blood, form a communal whole which the loba assembles. But di Prima is aware that there is a danger in forming such a community on an essentialist concept of femaleness. Therefore, she is careful to include the material conditions of a variety of women within different socio-political, cultural and economic environments lest she fall foul of the idea that white middle-class women can speak for all women. However, she still wishes to find "a common language for women in order to express female agency" (p. 83), as Mackay argues, so this inevitably leads to a delicately nuanced poetics. Initially, the volume emphasises the communal aspects of the female and, through a variety of tropes and re-imagined individuals, works to effectively merge the figures of the mother and daughter,

as if those two figures formed the bedrock of female experience. This is achieved at the end of the book as Persephone is imagined in a Hades which is now “the realm of the feminine where mother and daughter come together in one essence to share what makes them female and human” (p. 85) and the loba proclaims: “there is no knife can sever me from her/where I go down to bleed, to birth, to die” (Di Prima, 1998, p. 314). Mackay is very careful when she glosses this final stanza: “Di Prima decides, then, to end the book with an image of union, *presumably* held together by the core femaleness which all women are *supposed* to share” (p. 85. My emphasis added.) The caveats are necessary, because “alongside the pieces that strive towards constructing an essentialist female voice, there are those who challenge it” (p. 86). Partly this achieved through including hostile voices within the work, as in the section ‘The Critic Reviews Loba,’ but mainly through undermining traditional tropes of essential femaleness, most notably the figure of the mother, and by allying the loba with female authorship; in effect, “a poet who sets out to write her own myths” (p. 87). This suggests positing “female authorship not through consistent antipatriarchal messaging but in textuality as consisting of disparate parts, as in the diverse female identities the poet attempts to depict in the collection” (p. 89). Subtly, but convincingly, Mackay suggests that rather than identifying an essence of womanhood, the discourse of the loba reveals the “histories of the production and organization of this essence” (p. 90).

On the strength of Mackay’s analysis, *Loba* makes an important contribution to female and feminist poetics of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also makes an important contribution to a specifically Beat female poetics. Mackay makes the case that one section of *Loba* – ‘The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare’ – is a response to Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’. Di Prima knowingly adopts the long breath-line and repetition patterns of ‘Howl’ and gives “the perspective of a female Beat [who] integrates the woman’s experience of discontent into the Beat message of anti-conformity” (p. 99). However, this posits “female beatitude” as being “just out of reach” (1998, p. 125), as Di Prima puts it. Mackay makes the positive case that this might mean that there are more narratives of the loba yet to be written, but there is less positive possibility; that of falling into yet another series of pre-existing discourses surrounding the female. The female as the unknowable, the absent, the marginal, or that which is defined by lack rather than plenitude.

“Beat feminisms are [...] visible in the most unlikely places” (p. 101), writes Mackay, as she

analyses an academic and artistic celebration of William Burroughs; the man who shot his wife and once wrote an article for *Playgirl* entitled “women: a biological mistake?” Despite his apparent misogyny comments (which Mackay claims were often satirical or deliberately sensational [Mackay, 101]), the Nova Convention in New York in 1978 saw performances by such female artists as Laurie Anderson, Kathy Acker, Patti Smith and Anne Waldman. Mackay points out that 1978 came at the height of punk (which owed a debt to Burroughs), but also at the height of awareness of women’s literature as being linked to sexual politics within patriarchal hegemony. Common ground was apparent, though, between Burroughs and the performance artists Laurie Anderson and Julie Heyward in their shared interest in technologically mediated experiments in voice, image and text. In effect, this challenges the notion of a stable, unified self and recognises that notions of self are already always mediated in some form. So, “Anderson and Heyward’s electronic voices on the Nova stage express the idea of the possibility of freeing oneself from the constraints” of a consistent self (p. 106) which anticipates such issues within high post-modernism. Mackay argues that Anderson’s subsequent career would re-purpose Burroughs’ techniques and emphasis on the mediated self “to write a discourse of experimental, multimedia narratives of ungendering” (p. 115).

This chapter – entitled “Radical Interventions” – is particularly strong on the interventions of Anne Waldman and Kathy Acker. Waldman performed her poem “Skin Meat Bones” which, in contrast to the ungendering of Anderson, anchors both self and gender within the corporeal. Acker, argues Mackay, deploys Burroughs’ cut-up techniques in a “clearly parodic” manner (p. 117) as can be seen in her novel *Don Quixote* which turns La Mancha into New York and the Don himself into a punk woman in the early seventies. However, Burroughs’ contention that the self is already mediated is reflected by Acker as her novel confronts the male texts that have placed women within a passive role, including, amongst others, the works of Shaw and Wedekind. (Again, Mackay’s range is impressive.) Mackay is astute, though, to recognise that the parodic use of male texts (which extends even to plagiarism) still gives credence, and a certain power, to those texts and that “Acker’s actual alternative to male texts may lie outside this novel, outside language and narrative” (p. 124).

Many of the theoretical threads and arguments of Mackay’s book coalesce in the final chapter, devoted to Anne Waldman. So, Waldman’s *Fast Speaking Woman* offers a series of sometimes contradic-

tory representations of the female which shares di Prima's mistrust of essentialism. Yet, there is also a clear visionary aspect to the work which shares some of the hope of renewal and purpose that marked weiss' *Desert Journal*. However, Mackay detects a more "direct correlation with feminist strategies of female authorship as the book is arguably an elaborate demonstration for the need of cleansing through poetry before the female voice can begin to take shape" (p. 129).

This cathartic role of poetry was linked by Waldman to the shamanistic practices of Maria Sabina, a Mazatec woman who used magic mushrooms in her indigenous healing rituals which were then appropriated by the ethnomycologist and former banker R. Gordon Wasson and popularised by his article for *Life* magazine of 1957. A steady stream of Americans and Europeans then descended upon Sabina's remote village in search of a transcendental experience. Recently, this has been criticised as "a story of extraction, cultural appropriation, bio-prospecting, and colonization" (Geber, Flores, Ruiz, et. Al. 2021, p. 573). For Waldman, the debt to Sabina is acknowledged but some of the more troubling implications and consequences are not. This is more pressing, perhaps, as Mackay also highlights Waldman's "overt references to groups of women who are seen as oppressed, abused or generally disempowered" (p. 133). Perhaps this book was not the place to tease out some of these issues, but it remains a task very much worth undertaking.

After outlining Waldman's ability to place herself with a Beat genealogy of her own choosing, Mackay focuses on the *Iovis Trilogy*, a work which combines gender fluidity, alternative canon-making and poetic activism into the socio-political realm. The fixity/fluidity dichotomy is resolved through Waldman's commitment to transformation as the core principle of identity and poetic form. Again, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* provides a key intertext, joined now by the works of Sappho, which are at once fragmentary, entirely textual and yet imply some form of initial community. Waldman envisaged the *Trilogy* as making "cultural intervention into public space" (2011, p. xi) and therefore "propose[d] a transsexual literature, a transgendered literature, a hermaphroditic literature, a transvestite literature, and finally a poetics of transformation beyond gender (2001, p. 24). Mackay's task is to trace the literary strategies that are employed to this end, and she does so with some skill. So, H.D.'s impressionistic method in *Helen in Egypt* is re-purposed in Waldman as the individual poetic voice is seen as an amalgam of previous female voices. However, the voice is also often presented as being hermaphrodite in nature, as

"both male and female or masculine and feminine energies may exist within the writer" (p. 144). This fluidity and indeterminacy are also found in Waldman's *Trickster Feminism* which adopts discourses of mirroring, deception and inconsistency in order to challenge the fixed, and therefore restrictive and reductive, historical narratives of gender. Instead, in a telling phrase, Waldman offers "this body of difference" (2018, p. 26), which merges the corporeal, lived experience – so redolent of the Beats – with a postmodern play of transformative possibility.

*Beat Feminisms: Aesthetics, Literature, Gender, Activism* is an important work. It has the claim of being the first book-length study of female Beats within a feminist perspective and, through its scope of three generations of writers, it provides a clear genealogy – one might say a canon – of female Beats who re-imagined female poetics and, thereby, Beat aesthetics. At the same time, it engages with the theoretical difficulties and debates within feminism and charts how each writer developed aesthetic approaches to those difficulties. Too often, an academic author is tempted to tackle the theoretical issues and then proceed to apply the conclusion to the texts that are ostensibly the main focus. Mackay never falls foul of this. Throughout the book, it is the literary text that provides the base through which theoretical concerns are tested and, in some cases, found wanting. It is through her skill as a close reader that Mackay achieves this as she unfurls the nuances of the texts and how they intersect, appropriate and challenge the weave of previous texts from which they emerge. No doubt there are some issues which are elided, but Mackay's book offers a clear starting point from which these issues can be addressed. Above all, Mackay's coherent, clear-eyed account makes one want to go back to the authors themselves with a new sense of the importance of their work.

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