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1. Introduction

The first three novels of Beat Generation writer Joyce Johnson, née Glassman - *Come and Join the Dance* (1962), *Bad Connections* (1978) and *In the Night Café* (1987) - can be read as a trilogy of female Bohemian life in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s (R. Johnson 2002, 69). However, her works as well as the works of many other female Beat authors have been in the shadows of their male colleagues up until today. This neglect raises questions on the position of female Beats within the subculture, as well as within the dominant culture of the 1950s. The USA of the 1950s was a time and place dominated by strict cultural values and people stiffly adhering to the norm, with barely any traces of public rebellion. Nevertheless, the conformist restraints fueled by the Communist scare and the threat of the Cold War built the soil out of which the revolutionary movements of the 1960s, such as the Civil Rights Movement or the hippies, emerged. The newly found domesticity of the 1950s reflected the prevalent conformism of the decade, a decade in which rebellious intentions of the individual were seen reluctantly. Therefore, the creation of the home as a safe space offered a foundation to face the chaos of the world outside. Family served as a stable institution against the anxiety caused by the tense historical situation. In this domestic containment, traditional gender roles were reinforced (Chafe 186-188). Through the media, the image of the perfect housewife was created and celebrated (Friedan 22). American women were expected to adhere to this role. If they did so, they often existed in misery and depression, yet if they refused this model, they took a risk of living on the margins of society. Emanating from this confined place in society, the second wave feminist movement surfaced in the 1960s (Chafe 194-201).

The Beat Generation

Although most (white) Americans bowed to the cultural norms of the times and lived contentedly within them, there were several forms of rebellion against the dominance of cultural obedience by individuals and subcultural groups united by their countercultural ideas. A group of writers, philosophers and poets from the East and West Coast has been especially influential for the literary scene - the Beat Generation. Founded around the nucleus of authors Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, the Beat Generation included a

variety of writers and poets from different backgrounds. However, the majority of them were white middle class men who romanticized the life of an outcast and showed solidarity with those on the margins of society. Instead of adhering to the norms of the dominant US culture, they wanted to push against them. The Beats and their affiliates believed in an artistic exploration of the self and an individual, non-conformist approach to freedom. They experimented with language, style and content and created a new form and style of literature. Influences were drawn from the American poets, for instance Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, but also from musical sources such as blues and jazz music. An important approach of the Beat writers was the approach to transfer poetry and fiction into new, visionary and performative forms freed from academic parameters, the so-called 'bop prosody' (Lee 1996, 2-4). The Beat aesthetic, particularly Jack Kerouac's writing, was coined by a pure, unadulterated language used in order to transport real human experience to the reader. Form became more important than content (Weinreich 51-53). Characterized by the disillusionment of the post war generation, their texts were concerned with personal freedom, exploration of the self, liberation and revolt against the norm. Yet, their writing was not necessarily political, since it did not carry a specific political message. Without a doubt however, Beat writers such as Ginsberg or Kerouac profited from the establishment and its publicity. The notoriety of their prose worked in their favor and spoke to a generation of young people, who shared the ideas and critical approaches of the Beat Generation (Belletto 2017,1). Besides writers and poets, the Beat Generation included a whole cultural scene. Further association with musicians, filmmakers, painters and other artists widened the scope of their influence (Lawlor 2017, 33-34). The designation 'The Beat Generation' was self-determinedly chosen by the artists, introducing their very own meaning of the word 'Beat', which was established in order to categorize their artistic output. Historically, the term originated post World War II in the hustler and jazz scene as a slang word meaning "down and out, or poor and exhausted" (Charters xvii). Since Kerouac and Ginsberg had ties to those social circles, they were familiar with the term and started adapting it for themselves. Moreover, they coined 'Beat' with a further meaning - being a reject of society. (Charters xv-xx).

However, as the Beat canon is primarily defined by male voices, the term 'generation' can be misleading. The general perception does not take into account that, in addition to the renowned male figures, there were also women closely engaged with Beat subculture, who lived in opposition to the dominant culture of the 1950s. Many of them were active as writers

as well (Carden 6). While the men of the Beat Generation were in marginalized positions because of their non-conformist lifestyles, the women found themselves even farther on the margins of society due to their gender. As the future for most middle class white women of the 1950s was to marry a man and bear his children, their conscious decision to engage in nonconformist relationships, live on their own, pursue artistic aspirations and be independent was a major achievement. Often, they had to face severe consequences for actively positioning themselves on those margins. However, their experiences, which considerably differed from those of their male colleagues, are scarcely portrayed in the Beat canon. In spite of the fact that the Beat Generation was often given a countercultural status, the support and empowering of women in their circle was modest: “The marginalization of women undermines the Beat generation’s myths of rebellion, its cherished self-image as ‘dragonslayers of hypocrisy’, contradicting its claims to antihegemonic status.” (R. Johnson 2004, 4) The Beats were a conglomerate of men and women who often lived in close-knit communities, but as scholar Helen McNeil phrases it, “discourse, definition and the often punishing lifestyle of the Beat Generation were set by the men“ (McNeil 178) and materialized in oftentimes sexist connotations in male written Beat literature (McNeil 178-191). Contrary to the novel subjects in their works, the authors' framing of womanhood appears to be only an extension of the literary tradition of the preceding generations. The Beat milieu thus can be classified as “male-dominated, with patriarchal attitudes and an overwhelmingly male orientation.” (Friedman 1996, 201)

Although Beat women writers were active and produced texts alongside their male colleagues, their craft was not critically acknowledged until many years later, and they remain in the shadows. For the most part, their presence has been recognized merely as muses, wives and girlfriends - which is partially due to similar images in male Beat writing (Carden 2). In a male-dominated literary scene within a patriarchal society, women writers faced many obstacles. Regarding subject matter, their novels and prose reflect the circumstances they had to endure and the positions they had to or were able to claim. Female Beat writers and poets such as Diane Di Prima, Lenore Kandel or Joanne Kyger introduced new narrative forms and styles into the Beat canon, for example the investigation of gender differences through parody and satire in Di Prima’s poetry (Friedman 1996, 200-214). Moreover, some of them were active as publishers - for example Hettie Jones, who operated the publication of the Beat magazine *Yugen* out of her

kitchen and thus created a vehicle for her artistic community (Stripe 2017, 69). However, their contributions to the movement were frequently overlooked.

The impact of the Beat Generation's iconoclasm and their writing is still visible in US culture (Belletto 2017, 2). Yet, it has been only until recently that researchers have started to focus on the work of female Beat writers and their contributions. Some of the most important research conducted in this field is the work of Amy L. Friedman, as well as that of Nancy McCampbell Grace and Ronna C. Johnson, who have published a collection of interviews with female Beat authors, titled *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers* (2004). R. Johnson states:

“[A] revision of Beat history is required to comprehend the movement's full field in light of the variations wrung by its subaltern women. As a marginalized group within an always already marginalized bohemia, women Beat writers are a literary cohort colonized by the Beat generation's iconic public image.” (R. Johnson 2004, 4)

General Features of the Texts Chosen

Despite their self-claimed position as outsiders of society and mainstream culture, the Beat Generation created a certain ‚insiderness‘ for its members, one that was “furtive, secret, invisible to square America“ (Belletto 2017, 5). However, as Beat women have been categorically omitted from Beat history, the question arises as to what extent they were part of this ‚inside‘, and which positions they occupied in the subculture. In my thesis, I aim to investigate the images and roles of women in Beat writing and the ways in which female Beat authors responded to them, as well as their approach in creating a female Beat subject and incorporate their experience as subcultural women. To examine this topic, I will consider one work by a male Beat author, *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac, and two works by the female Beat author Joyce Johnson: her debut novel *Come and Join the Dance* (1961) and her memoir *Minor Characters* (1983).

I will investigate the feminist reception and the critique of gender roles that has been critically performed on male Beat texts by the example of Kerouac's novel *On the Road*.

The work is credited as the key text of the Beat Generation, as it encompasses the collective spirit of restlessness, nonconformity and the quest for spirituality (Lawlor 2017, 24). Written in a frantic haze of three weeks on a singular roll of paper (French, xviii), the novel recounts the fictionalized adventures of Kerouac and his companions on their cross country road trips across America and its countryside and offers “a compelling ethnographic portrait of the United States“ (Amundsen 32). Despite purportedly retelling real life experiences, Kerouac uses different names for himself and the other characters, which raises the question if the novel still classifies as a form of life writing. This will be elaborated further in the thesis. The events are told in retrospect through the eyes of a homo-diegetic narrator, Sal Paradise, and with internal focalization. One could argue for an extra-diegetic main narrative, which is the writer Sal sitting down and writing his story, reflecting about the process, and a (by far more extensive) intra-diegetic narrative, which consists of the tales on the road. There are no direct markers in the text, but the narrator states that he is “a writer and needed new experiences“ (Kerouac 2011, 9), and regularly refers to his writing in the text. Early on already, the narrator communicates what he will withhold from the reader - only his exciting life on the road is recounted, the boring parts in between are purposefully left out (French 37).

When *On the Road* was published in 1957 and became an overnight success, Jack Kerouac was dating Joyce Johnson, formerly Glassman, who at the time was working on her debut novel *Come and Join the Dance*, which she started writing before she met him. In 1957, she secured a publishing deal for the novel, however, it took her until 1961 to finish it (Belletto 2020, 317-318). *Come and Join the Dance* tells the story of a young woman in the 1950s, who is about to enter the bohemian Beat sphere. The coming-of-age novel features a hetero-diegetic narrator, and internal focalization through the protagonist Susan. The story covers a time span of only a few days around the protagonist’s graduation from college. Furthermore, the novel has autobiographical qualities, as one realizes after reading Joyce Johnson’s memoir *Minor Characters* (1983). Various characters of *Come and Join the Dance* are closely modeled after real life people, such as the author herself or her friend Elise Cowen.

For *Minor Characters*, by contrast, Joyce Johnson employed a homodiegetic narrator with internal focalization, following the tradition of memoir writing. The story is narrated in retrospect, but in an anachronical manner, and tells of the narrator’s time within the Beat sphere, as well as her coming of age. Moreover, the memoir includes the stories of other

people in the Beat community, such as Jack Kerouac, Hettie Jones or Elise Cowen. Choosing an autobiographical text which was published decades after Johnson's involvement with the Beat Generation offers a refined account of female Beat life from a retrospective point of view by a more experienced narrator.

Methodology and Critical Thesis

In terms of methodology, my approach to this thesis is a close reading and analysis of the primary texts with a special regard to gender images, female authorship and the sociocultural frame in which the texts were produced. Through secondary literature, especially the work of Ronna C. Johnson and Mary Paniccia Carden, I have established a valuable groundwork from which I expand my research. Further, I have consulted a contemporary historically relevant feminist text - *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan - in order to properly place the literary work by Joyce Johnson in a socio-political context, and analyze its "proto-feminist" (R. Johnson 2002, 70) stance. My motivation is to extend research on the neglected work of female Beat authors, and on the ways in which they contributed to Beat culture. I further hope to elucidate the roles and images of women in epoch-defining literary works that are yet unsatisfactorily investigated.

The first part of my thesis gives a brief outline of the gender images created in male Beat literature, which have shaped the ways in which readers perceive women of the Beat sphere. Thereby, *On the Road* is used as an exemplary text. In the second part, I will investigate how the female Beat author Joyce Johnson reacted to and commented on those images in her novel *Come and Join the Dance* and her memoir *Minor Characters*, and the ways in which she portrayed female sexuality in her writing. Further, I will offer a digression on the correlation between feminist practice of life writing and the Beat tradition of life writing, with a focus on autofiction. Eventually, I will take a closer look at the sociopolitical climate of the times, by examining how Joyce Johnson's texts correspond to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

I hypothesize that the proto-feminist approach of Johnson's writing takes place in multiple examples: the revision of pre-existing gendered Beat tropes, the implementation of female characters, a recovering of female-authored voice to reflect experience in autobiographical and autofictional writing, and the textual examination of the struggles of

young white middle class women in 1950s America, as later researched by Betty Friedan. My findings will be summarized with greater detail in a conclusion, which will also give a brief outlook on the potential for future research in the field.

2. Gender Images in Beat Literature: Feminist Readings of Jack Kerouac

To establish a status quo, I will present in this chapter an overview of the images in which Beat women were portrayed in male Beat literature, using the example of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac - a key text of male Beat writing which has been highly influential to the movement. The framework for those models of representation has been created by critic Helen McNeil in her essay "The Archaeology of Gender in the Beat Movement" (1996), in which she compares the male Beat writers' gender discourse to the contemporary public discourse of the 1950s by taking 1957 - the publication date of *On the Road*- as a core moment. She posits the question: "How did 1950s American society construct and maintain the ways the sexes were supposed to define themselves? Did the Beats participate in that construction or challenge it?" (McNeil 179) Her findings will be summarized and applied to Kerouac's text.

Beat Literature in a Sociohistorical Context

From a gendered perspective, Beat literature has generally been classified as 'male literature' by critics (Rogoveanu 381; McNeil 187), and the Beats even referred to themselves as a "boy gang" (J. Johnson 1999,79). When it comes to motifs, most of the key texts focus on the homosocial bond between men, camaraderie and friendship. As Barbara Ehrenreich claims, the "Beats had idealized defiant masculinity" (Ehrenreich 107), stressing the cultural significance of the movement. As a consequence, the spaces women occupy in Beat canon texts are drastically limited. Female characters only played minor roles—"minor characters" in Joyce Johnson's wording—in the literary cosmos of male Beat writers, and if they appear in texts, one can detect recurring patterns in the ways they are depicted. While some of the Beat novels such as *On the Road* (1957) may feature multiple female characters, their portrayals are subjected to highly gendered tropes. Critics have commented on the representation of gender in Beat literature as

“complacently sexist, marked by traditional binary oppositions of female and male, feminine and masculine,[...]“ (Ronna C. Johnson 2020, 163) Apparently, “the best minds of my generation“ (Ginsberg 9), as Ginsberg wrote in his poem *Howl*, only refers to the best male minds of the generation, leaving out the women and their perspectives. Regarding the otherwise countercultural stance the Beat Generation was attested, this raises the question whether the image of women within their literary work differed from dominant cultural norms of the 1950s.

In her essay, Helen McNeil first creates a socio-historical context. As also examined by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), women in 1950s media were either portrayed as wife/homemaker/mother or sex symbol, despite rising numbers of women in the work force. Through this limited scope of images, college-educated women were being discouraged from using their degrees after marriage. The polarity of depicting females as femme fatale (as for example Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield etc) or housewife illustrates how women’s roles in the media were heavily shaped by male desire and expectations. Moreover, the media actively constructed an image of women acting as a threat for male freedom, since women allegedly intended to domesticate men (McNeil 180–183), a notion which was further perpetuated in male Beat literature. In her essay, McNeil points out a hypocrisy in the critical reviews of male versus female authors at the time when it came to judging the author’s ability to portray characters of the opposite sex. While women writers were criticized for their alleged limitation when it came to writing male characters, male writers such as Kerouac were not confronted with those claims and instead credited for portraying society in a realistic manner (McNeil 184-185). Despite its frank recounting of sexual adventures, reducing women to sex objects was not criticized in the contemporary discourse around *On the Road*. This reception indicates that “the Beat discourse on gender was perceived as fitting into the discursive formations which were already in place rather than challenging them“ (McNeil 187). Since pre-existing patriarchal gender norms were reiterated, they were not seen as revolutionary or offensive in mainstream media. While other aspects of the novel were read as countercultural or unsettling, the portrayal of women did not steer attention. According to McNeil, however, the Beats created a new model of masculinity inside and outside of their texts. Contrary to the dominant American cultural model, their idea of masculinity was not immediately connected to war-service. Instead they declared that “freedom for the quest must be absolute; the Beat hero is responsible only to that quest and sometimes to his friends; the ,gang‘ is held together by ties of love“ (McNeil 187).

The Beat Hero

The literary trope of the Beat hero manifests the epitome of the ideal Beat man, and will be discussed with greater detail on the example of Dean Moriarty, a character in *On the Road*.

While life in the group and the bond with other like-minded men held high significance, it was not seen as the ultimate: “The Beat model shares with the dominant model the view of the masculine as individual rather than social. In the dominant model, however, the individual must endure the contradiction between individualism and responsibility.” (McNeil 187)

Responsibility, which in 1950s American society meant for men to have steady lives, go to work, pay taxes, take care of the family and serve the country, was a value the Beats heavily rejected. Irresponsibility on the other hand, was seen as a virtue - the ideal hero in Beat literature is irresponsible, spontaneous, and cannot be tamed or contained by anything or anybody. As the narrator of *On the Road*, Sal, declares:

“[...]the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‚Awww!’” (Kerouac 2011, 7)

Craving the extraordinary, the narrator longs for encounters with people who are unpredictable and unhinged, and finds this manic enthusiasm in the character of Dean Moriarty, who becomes his long-term companion and travel buddy. Despite the first person narrator Sal being the protagonist, Dean can be identified as the hero of the story in *On the Road*. He is the prototype of Beat masculinity: young, vital, good-looking, impetuous, life affirming, and “born on the road“ (Kerouac 2011, 3). Recklessly, he takes from life whatever he wants, unable to commit under any circumstance he “totally refuses the rhetoric of responsibility“(McNeil 188). An absolute lack of stability characterizes his life: A former juvenile delinquent, he now lives off casual work and occasional petty crimes, spending most of his time on the road. Portrayed as a charismatic womanizer, he has affairs with women from East to West all over the country. Disregarding his marriage(s) and later fatherhood, he rejects any notion of responsibility. Instead

of caring for his family, Dean pursues the road - his individual freedom and fulfillment. The narrator briefly touches on Dean's past and reveals the character's lack of familial ties and a home. He grew up in highly unstable conditions and essentially raised himself. It can be argued, that the character Dean represents a critique of dominant culture solidly, since he was raised outside of prevailing societal norms. From his introduction on the first pages of the novel onwards, Dean is depicted as the perfect image of Beat masculinity: "My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry - trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent - a sideburned hero of the snowy West." (Kerouac 2011, 4) By immediately connecting him to the traditional romantic vision of the West, the narrator stylizes Dean as a hero of the American Frontier. In this literary American tradition, the West functions as "frontier territory, beyond societal controls, where an American identity can be forged" (Ellis 38).

The character's criminal past and reckless outlaw behavior further refer to this trope. With his non-academic background, Dean differs from other members of the group, such as the intellectual/poet Carlo Marx or the well-studied Old Bull Lee. An anti-intellectualist stance is a key feature of Beat virtues, thus Dean Moriarty is frequently celebrated for his spontaneity and intuition by the other characters of the novel. Regarding class, the "subversive masculinity of the blue-collar" (Ehrenreich 56) man was idolized in Beat circles. Following this notion, working class life is romanticized in *On the Road* by the narrator Sal, who occasionally takes part in it. In men of the working class, he detects a certain rawness and uninhibitedness, which he also attests Dean: "Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love [...]" (Kerouac 2011, 9-10) . While those primal needs represent virility for Beat writers, the white-collar life many American men led at the time was considered an expression of repressed masculinity (Ehrenreich 56). Since most Beat writers came from white middle class and upper middle class households themselves, those backgrounds are represented in their protagonists. However, a deep fascination with the lower classes and other races is detectable in many of their texts (J. Forsberg 1217; Lee 2017, 193). In *On the Road*, the narrator's trips into working class environments, where he briefly partakes in labor, function as a getaway from a dreaded life according to the norm. However, there is no critical awareness for the protagonist being able to leave working class life whenever he pleases to do so - contrary to people who actually come from the working class, and have no other choice. The

romantic obsession with the working class by Kerouac and other Beat authors is a topic which requires further research, but will not be investigated in this thesis to greater extent.

When it comes to sexuality, contrary to 1950s psychoanalytical discourse, *On the Road* did not promote the notion of a libido repressed by a super-ego. Instead, it featured a “discourse about control and power, functioning as a critique of both the discourse and the practice of male responsibility.” (McNeil 191) The Beat hero is fearful of self-control, which he does not experience as a byproduct of maturity (McNeil 191). Dean is portrayed as a compulsive womanizer, who feels no remorse regarding his sexual escapades. On many occasions, he claims to have no control over his sexual desire - a behavior, which is not only tolerated by the narrator, but even admired and idolized. The character’s attitude towards the sexualization of women and being driven by lust, and the response to it by the narrator are a sign of the cultural normalcy of the sexual conquest. Despite his close alignment with the group and frequent displays of male solidarity, Dean periodically acts selfish and puts his own well being before his friends. On various occasions, he leaves Sal behind just like he leaves behind his women, and is consistent in his inconsistency. His actions in the narrative emphasize the acceptance among Beats of the subordination to the group in favor of the individual (McNeil 187). In Dean’s case, the quest of the Beat hero is his eternal search for liberty, independence, adventure and fun. There is nothing and nobody that can stop him in his longing. As Barbara Ehrenreich analyzes, Beat culture brings together the two main strands of male protest: rebellion against white-collar work and “against the suburbanized family life that work was supposed to support” (Ehrenreich 52). Both of these forms of rebellion are represented in Dean Moriarty, which affirms his idolized status within the Beat Generation.

While Dean embodies all Beat virtues, the narrator Sal occupies a more diffuse position. Supposedly, he only spends half of his time on the road, the other time he stays in the relatively sheltered middle class environment of his aunt’s house, writing on his novel. However, in the text the narrator only depicts the exciting parts of his life, purposefully leaving out his ordinary everyday life. A pattern can be detected in the four parts of *On the Road*: each of them starts with a depressed and tired narrator, who is trying to escape from a situation that either bothers or bores him. He leaves those situations by embarking on another adventure on the road with his companions. And every time, the road helps in changing his mood, until there is a climax in his travels where he is disappointed and returns back to his old life (French 37-38). As Sal claims: “Here I was at the end of America - no more land - and now there was nowhere to go but

back.” (Kerouac 2011, 70). This insatiability is reoccurring and cannot be fixed. It appears to the reader as if Sal was on a continuous search for the authentic Beat experience, but unable to find it. What he is looking for seems unattainable, as it is without his reach (Belletto 2020, 91). As a result, he retreats frustrated and defeated: “Sal has been on the road, but never *of* the road. After each adventure, he has withdrawn to a protected environment.” (French 42) In many ways, Sal aims to be like Dean, he looks up to him, idolizes him - and is repeatedly disappointed when Dean acts in character by being unreliable and egoistic. It can be argued that to a certain degree Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise inhabit oppositional positions: While Dean is a man of action, Sal plays the introverted, pensive counterpart (Amundsen 37). Through his occupation as a writer, Sal is forced to reflect on his actions, while Dean can be spontaneous and unconcerned. For instance, when looking at pictures of his friends, Sal ponders:

“I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, well-ordered, stabilized-within-the-photo lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road. All of it inside endless and beginning less emptiness.” (Kerouac 2011, 231)

The narrator’s inner conflict between stability and the endless restlessness, which Dean embodies, represents the ambivalence of Beat authors between rejecting dominant cultural norms and fully disengaging from them. This is also reflected in their portrayal of women.

Women as Alleged Threat to Freedom

The highest value for the Beat hero was his personal freedom and lack of attachment, both must be pursued at all times. The expectations on men of the 1950s to raise and support a family did not align with the Beat vision of life. Women and their alleged demands for responsibility were perceived as disturbing compared to “the ecstatic possibilities of male adventure” (Ehrenreich 54). Subsequently, an emerging paradigm of women as threat to male freedom can be detected in various texts of the Beat Generation, which is corresponding to images in the media of the time

(McNeil 180-183). Women's association with responsibilities and a domestic routine, as well as the identification with a rooted community is rejected by the men in the stories (Martinez 104). This trope can also be observed in *On the Road*, where on multiple occasions, women are depicted as trying to interfere with male liberty, fun and camaraderie (Carden 2). Commonly, the female characters who were primarily constructed as threats to male freedom were the wives. The best example for a character in the novel, who is subject to this framing, is Camille, Dean Moriarty's second wife and mother of his children. Already in the beginning of their relationship, while Dean is still married to another woman and engaging in sexual affairs simultaneously, a distinctive pattern emerges. Camille is concerned about her partner's whereabouts and worries when he will be back home. In response, Dean shows annoyance and builds a construct of lies which still allows him to pursue his freedoms - fooling around with other women and spending time with his friends partying. Through the accounts of other male characters in the book, Camille thereupon is given the image of being controlling and restricting. For instance, on one occasion Carlo worries about Dean's autonomy: "[...] first he has to beg with Camille, who's already started hating me [...]" (Kerouac 2011, 39). Even when he is married and a father, Dean still periodically leaves his wife Camille for months at a time to pursue his kicks on the road. He tries to calm her agitation and despair with meaningless excuses, leaving behind a frustrated Camille: "But what is the purpose of all this? Why are you doing this to me?" (Kerouac 2011, 100). In the third part of the novel, the situation escalates and Camille deteriorates further as Dean is getting more and more manic and shows signs of leaving for the road again. Knowing what is to anticipate, an infuriated Camille throws him out of the house - an action which is condemned by the narrator, who is involved in the situation. It is completely disregarded in the narrative, that Camille most likely has to manage everything by herself, also financially, while Dean is gone. The reader learns that Dean takes care of their daughter while she works, so it can be assumed that in his absence Camille will not be able to maintain her source of income. The shared responsibility which comes with marriage is not met by Dean, he selfishly opts out whenever his urge for freedom takes over. As Barbara Ehrenreich writes: "In the countercultural vision of the Beats, the ideal of personal freedom shaded over into an almost vicious irresponsibility to the women who passed through their lives." (Ehrenreich 171) Ignorantly, the consequences for the woman left behind- social stigmatization, financial burden, existential fear - are disregarded by the men in the text. Camille's misery might be acknowledged by the narrator on some occasions, who notices how she "gave us all the sad look of a harassed

woman's life" (Kerouac 2011, 170), but he shows no solidarity with her: "I tried to show this haunted woman that I had no mean intentions concerning her home life [...], but she knew I was a con" (Kerouac 2011, 170). Instead, Sal fraternizes with his friend Dean. When confronted with Camille's emotional state, the narrator acts insensible: "It was horrible to hear Camille sobbing so. We couldn't stand it and went out to buy beer and brought it back to the kitchen. [...] I had no idea what was really wrong, except perhaps Dean had driven her mad after all." (Kerouac 2011, 166-167) Through the narrator's account, the female character is perceived as hysterical, emotional and irrational, the male character's complicity in the situation is minimized.

Overall, there is no critical examination of Dean's neglect of responsibility and the consequences of his actions in the text. Quite the contrary, the narrator even has a certain sense of admiration for the character's recklessness. It is also indicated, that he has had an influence on other men in the group: "For years he had been chief prophet of that gang, and now they were learning his technique." (Kerouac 2011, 175) After being kicked out by Camille, Dean is confronted by another female character, Galatea Dunkel, with his behavior. In front of their friends, she accuses him of sexism, irresponsibility and selfishness. While the narrator respects Galatea for being an opinionated woman, who is not afraid to challenge Dean, he does not side with her and instead frames Dean as the misunderstood victim of the situation: "It wasn't anything but a sewing circle, and the center of it was the culprit, Dean - responsible, perhaps, for everything that was wrong." (Kerouac 2011, 176) Once more, women are perceived as overreacting, their right to criticize the Beat hero and show solidarity with other women is denied. The only time, the narrator actually condemns and criticizes Dean is in fact when he is the one abandoned by him (McNeil 189-190).

Apart from Camille's relationship to Dean, there is not much revealed about her in the text. It is indicated that she is a good portrait painter, however, she is not attributed any artistic ambition by the narrator. There are no insights into her passions, her skills or her dreams. Compared to Dean's portrayal, she appears dull. As in other Beat texts, women represent the passive and unimaginative, opposed by the exciting and productive, which men supposedly symbolize (Carden 2). When Sal notices a painting of Galatea crafted by Camille, he assumes: "I suddenly realized that all these women were spending months of loneliness and womanliness together, chatting about the madness of the men." (Kerouac 2011, 170) According to the narrator's assumption, the women's life in absence of their men still revolves around them. The

potential significant bonds they might have amongst each other are reduced to gossip. It is completely disregarded that there might exist a female Beat community contrasting the male community.

Ironically, the male characters of Beat texts are not opposed to the idea of marriage. Sal states that: "All these years I was looking for the woman I wanted to marry. I couldn't meet a girl without saying to myself, What kind of wife would she make?" (Kerouac 2011, 105) When he meets Terry, a young single Mexican mother he falls in love with, he engages in some sort of domestic family life with her for a short period of time: "There was a bed, a stove and a cracked mirror hanging from a pole; it was delightful. I had to stoop to get in, and when I did there was my baby and my baby boy." (Kerouac 2011, 85) Sal cherishes this enactment of domesticity and playing house, and he romanticizes the lower class life he briefly engages in. However, when he has to show up for his newly found family, he prioritizes himself and leaves for the road again. Also Dean, who is married to multiple women throughout the novel, apparently enjoys maintaining a somehow traditional model through the institution of marriage, despite cheating on his wives and eventually leaving them. The narrator attempts to find an explanation for this behavior in Dean's socialization: "Dean had never seen his mother's face. Every new girl, every new wife, every new child was an addition to his bleak impoverishment." (Kerouac 2011, 119) Perhaps, he is searching for a form of stability in his otherwise unstable life, but is not capable of living up to this responsibility himself. Moreover, the male characters cannot cope with criticism from the women regarding their escapades. The ideal wife, according to Sal and Dean, does not talk back and accepts all of her husband's shenanigans without objections: "Never a harsh word, never a complaint or modified; her old man can come in any hour of the night with anybody and have talks in the kitchen and drink the beer and leave any old time. This is a man, and that's his castle." (Kerouac 2011, 185) Also, tasks of domesticity, such as cooking or doing the laundry, are unquestionably considered women's tasks in the novel, and thus do not oppose the traditional gender codes of the 1950s. Analyzing the stance on marriage in *On the Road*, it appears as if the male Beat protagonists are unable to fully break with dominant cultural norms. They want commitment, but only on the female side, being aware that they will break out of domesticity whenever they please. The frustration with common traditional norms is projected onto female characters, who function as scapegoats for the conformity of the 1950s: "[...]much of the Beat rebellion against authority displaced male power on to the maternal/domestic, blaming the woman for what she did not and could not control." (McNeil 192) In certain passages of the text,

this results in blatant misogyny. Martinez observes therein a "defensive individualist strategy for claiming an alternative space for individual, masculine, white power" (Martinez 27). As a result, an alternate trope to the freedom restricting wife was created - the Beat chick.

The Beat Chick

Helen McNeil argues that the Beats inserted a new category of women to their literature, the so-called 'Beat chick': an "attractive, young, sexually available and above all 'dumb' female" (McNeil 189). Within short time, Beat chick was a common term, which was occasionally used in contemporary discourse to describe women in the Beat cosmos - amongst them also many of the female Beat writers. The trope of the Beat chick is featured excessively in *On the Road*, where the narrator and Dean meet countless young women on their travels, who they often are involved with sexually. Here are a few examples from the text: "We picked up two girls, a pretty young blonde and a fat brunette. They were dumb and sullen, but we wanted to make them." (Kerouac 2011, 31) Despite the lack of interest in the girls, the male characters feel the need to satisfy their sexual hunger. This is the same motivation in the next instance, where the protagonist is mesmerized by the female character's good looks: "I took up a conversation with a gorgeous country girl wearing a low-cut cotton blouse that displayed the beautiful sun-tan on her breast top. She was dull." (Kerouac 2011, 220-221) In the final quote, the protagonist yet again has one motive: "[...] and found a real gone dumb girl who was out of her mind and just wandering, trying to steal an orange. She was from Wyoming. Her beautiful body was matched only by her idiot mind. I found her babbling and took her back to the room." (Kerouac 2011, 143) The descriptions of these encounters do not vary much from one to the other: In their depiction, the female characters are reduced to their looks, infantilized and labeled as dumb. On most occasions, their names are omitted, since they are not considered to be of importance. Sole function of the Beat chick is to serve for the male characters' pleasure. Neither their opinions nor their feelings are featured, they essentially constitute voiceless figures.

A theoretical framework which comes in useful when analyzing the ways in which female characters, especially Beat chicks, are depicted in *On the Road*, is Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. This notion roots originally in media theory, but can also be applied to other fields,

such as literary studies, and has been briefly mentioned by Mary Panizza Carden with regard to the defiance of a female Beat character, who opposes said male gaze (Carden 156). The concept of the male gaze bases on scopophilia, the pleasure of looking. In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Mulvey posits that political and social inequality between men and women has an effect on cinematic representations of gender. As a result, those representations of women are shaped by the male gaze and thus correspond to the needs of the male viewer and ultimately patriarchal ideals (Mulvey 833-844). Women are objectified and signify male desire, the viewer/reader has to accept this objectification:

"In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in look has been splitted by active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." (Mulvey 837)

This makes the male gaze the dominant one, not leaving room for any other perspective. *On the Road's* first person narrator Sal is male, alas the reader experiences the text through his lens. His accounts of encounters with women perpetuate the male gaze, as visible for example in this scene where he is meeting Camille for the first time: "I saw a brunette on the bed, one beautiful creamy thigh covered with black lace, look up with mild wonder." (Kerouac 2011, 39) In this situation, the reader has an almost cinemaesque introduction to the new female character. Camille's physique is immediately connoted to sexual and seductive images, she is made into an object of desire for the reader and the narrator. She is introduced to the text as a body before being introduced as a person. The introduction of Marylou, Dean's first wife and the second female key figure of the novel, can also be analyzed with the male gaze:

"Marylou was a pretty blonde with immense ringlets of hair like a sea of golden tresses; she sat there on the edge of the couch with her hands hanging in her lap and her smoky blue country eyes fixed in a wide stare because she was in an evil gray New York pad that she'd heard about back West, and waiting like a longbodied emaciated Modigliani surrealist woman in a serious room. But, outside of being a sweet little girl, she was awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things." (Kerouac 2011, 4)

Again, the female character's description consists primarily of her physical features. There is a mentioning of distinctive characteristics, but they are divided into good/bad sets. Throughout the novel, Marylou is depicted as a seductress, who, despite her supposedly dimwitted nature, knows how to manipulate her environment. Through the male narrator's position and account, a certain perspective on the female characters is forced upon the reader, which can only be challenged when engaged with critically. A good example therefore is the stance on female sexual independence. Undoubtedly, a recurring theme of the novel is uncommitted heterosexual sex on the road, where the protagonist's male companion stays as faithful constant, constituting another epitome of male solidarity (McDowell 414). Male sexuality is lived out, it is celebrated, it opens space for creativity and self-exploration. The male characters' sexual escapades on the road correspond to their quest for freedom and strengthen their bond. For instance, Dean and Sal share sexual relations with various women throughout the novel, and Dean goes as far as actively encouraging affairs between his wives and Sal.

Nevertheless, the sexually independent female character is still portrayed as bad, which can be seen conspicuously in the character Marylou (McNeil 189). As soon as she makes her own decisions, and acts accordingly, she is condemned by the narrator and Dean and discredited: "I saw what a whore she was." (Kerouac 2011, 156) While male sexuality is embraced, women on the other hand are denied of their sexual agency. Female sexual liberation is only acceptable if it is convenient for the men in the novel, and if the male characters hold the power. Amy L. Friedman attests the male Beat writers a "paradoxical reconfiguring of the female [...] upon an axis of Angel-Prostitute" (Friedman 1996, 200). Most strikingly, this is visible in the comparison of the narrator's depiction of Camille and Marylou. Sal describes Camille as "a relief after Marylou, a well-bred, polite young woman" (Kerouac 2011, 158). Despite her role as overbearing wife, she is still credited for being a decent woman. Marylou on the other hand clearly falls on the other side of the spectrum: "Dean was convinced Marylou was a whore; he confided in me that she was a pathological liar." (Kerouac 2011, 148) And further: "He trailed her around town. He wanted absolute proof that she was a whore. He loved her, he sweated over her." (Kerouac 2011, 167) At the end of the novel, the narrator is - despite his countless sexual affairs on the road - still looking for a 'pure' woman. The identifiable Madonna-whore complex shows how female sexuality is policed by the men in the text, how female characters are compressed into a limited role image which is based on sexual codes. As Helen McNeil rightfully concludes: "The insertion of the chick category does not violate any existing gender

codes, rather it opens new possibilities for sex without responsibility (for there is no marriage, or marriage - as with Dean - is not taken seriously). It is sex without guilt (for the true chick never complains). And it is sex without financial cost (because the chick is not a professional prostitute). And it is sex for those who will - mostly - not tell their side of the story.“ (McNeil 189) What is disguised as sexual liberation is eventually only revolutionary for the men who are able to go on the road and enjoy said freedom and rejection of responsibilities. Result is a questionable treatment of female characters. The objectification of the Beat chick is visible in the ways she is treated. In *On the Road*, Marylou almost gets pimped out by Sal and Dean, on several occasions she gets into physical altercations with Dean, and Dean is „offering“ her sexually to Sal without hesitation. Thereby, the Beat chick’s body is seen as something that can be possessed and is freely available to the male character. Concluding, the Beat chick is only constructed as an opposite pole to the overbearing wife, and personifies the Beat male’s desire for an intimate relation without responsibilities.

Another related female trope in Kerouac’s literature is the fellaheen woman, displayed for example in the character Terry in *On the Road*. The fellaheen, typically a lower class Black or Mexican woman, represents the dark, mystique and exotic Other the narrator is infatuated with. (Grace 2000, 39-41) Although it is a highly interesting intersection between race and gender and Beat author’s fascination with the Other, this trope will not be further investigated in this thesis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as research has demonstrated and as I have further elucidated by recourse to Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, following a suggestion of Carden (Carden 156), Kerouac’s female characters in *On the Road* can essentially be divided into two categories: Beat chicks and overbearing wives. Beat chicks primarily serve for male entertainment, in individual cases, they might even be allowed on the road with the male characters, as seen in the example of Marylou. Meanwhile, the wives wait faithfully at home and have to cope with the escapades of their husbands, but recurrently are the safe haven to which they return without remorse after their adventures on the road. What both female figures have in common is that they are subject to a

perpetual cycle of serving as sexual objects of desire for the male characters, only to be abandoned again for the road. From a narratological point of view, none of the female characters in *On the Road* would be considered round. Their representation is one-dimensional and limited, as "both conventional (adherent to domestic values) and transgressive (promiscuous flouters of bourgeois morality), as sexualized 'chicks' and as would-be hausfraus plotting marriage traps" (Carden 2). This dichotomy does not leave space for female characters to unfold on a more complex level, and they are depicted without appreciable characteristics. Despite the Beats' disruptive stance towards the establishment, their perspectives on gender not necessarily differed from the mainstream. There is no direct challenge of pre-existing norms (McNeil 179). What might seem revolutionary in terms of sexual emancipation at first, is in reality only an Avantgardist male heterosexual fantasy come true. The non-commitment of the male characters in the text results in them having the best of both worlds - a sense of stability through a wife at home, yet also adventure and non-conformity through sexual affairs on the road. Female characters are left behind, as their alleged domesticity opposes the road. Patriarchal gender codes are upheld throughout the text, with a patronizing attitude towards women. The constitution of female characters shows the dominance of the male narrator over them, asserted through the male gaze, for example, or their classification into the categories of Virgin Mother or whore. In *On the Road*, considered a prime example of male Beat writing, women stay in the oppressed margins, with their voices unheard. The question is now how female Beat writers encountered such given frameworks.

3. Protofeminism in Joyce Johnson's *Come and Join the Dance* (1961) and *Minor Characters* (1983)

The early work of Joyce Johnson has been labeled as proto-feminist in critical discourse, which means that there are anticipations of second wave feminism in her writing (R. Johnson 2002, 70). In this part of the thesis, I will examine the ways in which said proto-feminist stance is expressed in her writing.

3.1. Revising Gender Codes and Beat Tropes

After discussing the limited literary tropes women occupy in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, I will now investigate how they are referred to and possibly reversed in two texts by the female Beat author Joyce Johnson, her debut novel *Come and Join the Dance* and her memoir *Minor Characters*. Also, I will take a look at the revision of gender codes in both works, and how Beat iconoclasm and concepts such as the "code of cool" (R. Johnson 2004, 23) were treated.

The First Beat Novel by a Female Author: *Come and Join the Dance* (1961)

Come and Join the Dance, the debut novel of Joyce Johnson published in 1961, features a female protagonist, which inevitably brings along a change of perspective regarding gender. Today, *Come and Join the Dance* is credited as the first Beat novel written by a woman about a woman (R. Johnson 2017, 174). Regarding the extensive literary productivity of Beat-affiliated women and scholar's negligence of not including them into the Beat canon until the 1990s -one of the first extensive collections of female Beat writing was Brenda Knight's *Women of the Beat Generation* in 1996- the question what defines Beat literature arises. Multiple scholars have come to the conclusion that the Beat label is an unstable one, but that there are certain characteristics which can be identified in a wide variety of Beat texts (Belletto 2017, 2). Kurt Hemmer argues that the primary feature of a Beat novel is that it is written by an author considered a member of the Beat scene, a novel which is set in the Beat milieu, or a novel that shares certain distinctive aesthetic features. He further identifies the essential trope in Beat literature as "the outlaw undergoing a spiritual crisis" (Hemmer 113). A quest for spirituality reoccurs in almost all of Jack Kerouac's novels, *On the Road* not excepted, in which the narrator Sal craves an enlightening experience throughout the novel. From a narratological perspective, Beat novels commonly use a first person point of view and the concept of the roman à clef. This stylistic form is also used in Joyce Johnson's *Come and Join the Dance*, as the striking parallels

of the protagonist's environment to her own experience as demonstrated in her memoir *Minor Characters* show, as Hemmer argues in 2017 (113-114). Following, I will examine which traditional Beat themes Joyce Johnson incorporates in *Come and Join the Dance*, the ways in which she treats tropes with a gendered connotation, as well as the novelties she introduces to the Beat discourse.

First of all, in terms of aesthetics, the cool and restrained writing style of Joyce Johnson is different from Kerouac's spontaneous prose (R. Johnson 2002, 70). Contrary to Kerouac's method of writing without editing, Johnson's novel overall seems very well composed and thought through, as for instance recurring metaphorical images, such as mirrors, are used throughout her text. Her individual stylistic approach makes an argument that the classification of a novel as Beat is not solely determined through a stylistic classification into the genre, and that there can be a multiplicity of Beat aesthetic styles.

Regarding protagonists, *Come and Join the Dance* also offers new perspectives. While Sal, the male narrator and protagonist of *On the Road* is an older and more experienced character, Johnson's protagonist Susan is only in her early 20s and comes from a relatively sheltered middle-class background. However, she also is at a major turning point in her life, as she is about to graduate college and face her future. Thus, the novel could also be interpreted as a coming-of-age-novel. The two female characters, the protagonist and her best friend Kay, are portrayed as round characters with many nuances, who are caught between their urge to emancipate themselves from traditional norms, and their sense of duty in complying with them. Compared to them, the male characters featured in the novel could be classified as less complexly modeled. All of them are romantically linked to the protagonist - her ex-boyfriend Jerry, her affair Anthony and her romantic interest Peter. Especially towards the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Susan is perceived as a strikingly passive character, which is a distinctive difference to the active and vivid protagonist of *On the Road*. Things "happen to her" (J. Johnson 2014, 4) instead of her acting or initiating them consciously. For instance, when she looks at her college dorm room days before her graduation and notices its emptiness, she "realized suddenly that she had been erased from it." (J. Johnson 2014, 7) However, it was herself who removed the furniture. The protagonist's perceptions demonstrate her dissociation and indifference with the sphere she operates in: "Afflicted with non-thereness, Susan is disembodied, disengaged, dissociated, even from herself." (R. Johnson 2002, 77) Regarding her future, there is apathy and discouragement noticeable in the protagonist's stream of consciousness: "The rest of the time [...] you spent waiting for something to happen to you." (J. Johnson 2014, 13) Instead of taking agency, she

drifts through life, expecting a point of change to just come about. Everything in her life appears to be meaningless to her, therefore she follows conventions only half heartedly and laments the boredom of her life. Critics describe Johnson's protagonist's state of feeling as "an indescribable malaise" (Belletto 2020, 318), which is eventually cause for her opposition to the prevalent conformity surrounding her (R. Johnson 2002,77). The protagonist initially responds to her crisis by taking particular smaller risks, such as not picking up her mail or skipping her gym classes, in order to break the apathy and "to feel frightened rather than feel nothing at all" (J. Johnson 2014,13). Those small rebellions against the system manifest her discontent with the strictly normative construct she lives in. While her initial passivity and self-doubt differentiate her from a traditional male Beat protagonist, such as Sal, her discontent with the hegemonic system she lives in and the rebellion against it aligns with Beat philosophies.

In the narrative, the protagonist Susan takes the position of an observer, attentively studying the people around her and trying to assimilate with them: "The women were all so sleek. They are the adults, Susan thought, looking with wonder at their impeccably sheathed bodies, their bare slender arms faintly tan a month before summer. She listened to their soft laughter and saw how easily the men leaned toward them across the little table." (J. Johnson 2014, 31) As a result of her passive and observing stance, the protagonist lacks a fully developed sense of self, and finds herself in a psychological crisis. It appears to the reader as if she is performing a character in order to cover up her insecurities. In a conversation in which she wants to be perceived as adult, she comments: "[...]which was such a childish remark - not cool, not sleek- but she was determined not to be impressed" (J. Johnson 2014, 31). When scrutinizing her mirror image on Broadway, she asks herself what others would think when looking at her: "The image in the glass always had the same perfect, terrifying blandness. It did not belong to her." (J. Johnson 2014,10) Throughout the narrative, the protagonist constantly worries how she is perceived by others - another divergence from the male Beat characters featured in *On the Road*. Eventually, her identity crisis and apathy lead to depression-like symptoms, which further paralyze her. On a quest for belonging, the protagonist is intrigued by the outcast lives of the characters Kay, Anthony and Peter, who seem content with their place in society, defying norms and conventions. She enjoys her forays into their bohemian milieu, but at the same time suffers from impostor syndrome when she spends time with them, as she is aware that she is different. Reflecting her reasons to adhere to the conventions her family and society imposed on her, the

protagonist notices that throughout her life she chose the path of least resistance, because: „It was easier to be good.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 64)

Joyce Johnson lets her protagonist experience a typical predicament Beat women had to endure in the 1950s. If they conformed with societal norms, they took the risk to end up as housewives caught in an unhappy marriage, however, if they rebelled too much, there was the peril to end up on the margins of society: “Susan’s dilemma is whether to conform or to drop out: to wait passively for the future or to seek it out, to shun urgency or whip it up. Dropping out would position Susan on the edge, at the marginalized field of Beat.“ (R. Johnson 2002, 81) While she toys with the idea of imitating her friend Kay, who dropped out of college in senior year, the protagonist cannot take the courage to make a definite decision. It is indicated in the text that Susan is disappointed from her college experience, as she expected that there would be a change of some kind. This stance complies with the anti-academic Beat views of the time - to the protagonist, the idea of dropping out symbolizes a rite of passage into Beat culture. However, as Ronna C. Johnson acknowledges, dropping out of college was more significant when performed by women, as they had been excluded from universities for so many centuries (R. Johnson 2002, 77). Thus, dropping out for women also signified some sort of defeat by men and the patriarchy, and was not an easy decision. Eventually, the consequences of her actions result in the need for the protagonist to break her passivity. As she is not able to graduate - at least not for now- she is forced to face reality, tell her parents the truth and take responsibility for her actions. During this process, she acknowledges that her graduation is more important to her than she had previously thought, and experiences a self realization regarding her needs: “Everything was suddenly very clear; there was something she could no longer pretend to not know.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 115) Not only does the breaking of her passivity help the protagonist in finding out what she wants, it also reverts gender stereotypes.

Trope of the Silent Beat Chick, Power Relations and Female Agency in *Come and Join the Dance*

The protagonist’s passivity is linked to a Beat trope which is directly referenced in the novel, the one of the silent Beat chick: a young woman who does not talk much and functions as a side character and “signifier of the men’s subterraneasim“ (R.Johnson 2002, 80) within the male

Beat's cosmos. Through the protagonist's passivity, her lack of voiced opinions and her desperate urge to be accepted in the Beat circles she could easily be perceived as a silent Beat chick from an outsider's perspective. On various instances, she fails to speak up her mind, for instance when she intends to break up with her boyfriend Jerry: "I don't see the point of talking - really." (J. Johnson 2014,38) Instead, she lets others decide for her. In analyzing the silence of women, it is further important to consider the socioeconomic status of women in the 1950s. This was before the second wave of feminism, when women still had less rights than men and lived in a strictly patriarchal society. Girls were raised to keep their opinions to themselves and to not disobey men, which resulted in an imbalance regarding outspokenness. In the text the protagonist is directly confronted with the silent chick trope, when Peter refers to her as a silent girl on various occasions: "You know Susan, I've never heard you say anything before." (J. Johnson 2014, 18) - "It's too bad you're always so quiet." (J. Johnson 2014, 67) The account of those situations in the narrative demonstrate the absoluteness which men use to categorize women according to their own, arbitrary terms, and their practice of imposing labels on them in order to keep them docile. Yet, remarkably, the protagonist seems to see herself in Peter's unflattering description and does not oppose it: "She laughed painfully. His description was accurate." (J. Johnson 2014, 19) As Ronna C. Johnson claims, the narration "depicts Peter as a reflective existential surface, a mirror returning Susan's gaze to herself." (R. Johnson 2002, 79) Referring to Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women as the Other, which is defined by men who define it in relation to themselves (De Beauvoir 26-27), Susan accepts the labeling, as she sees Peter's ability to judge. Through the protagonist's description of her encounters with him, it is conveyed that she feels intimidated and "unbearably foolish" (J. Johnson 2014,15) when talking to him, but at the same time she craves his attention. Clearly, the power in their relation is on the older and more experienced male character's end. However, this changes towards the end of the novel.

Regarding power dynamics, it is also important to mention that throughout *Come and Join the Dance*, the male characters see themselves, and are described as, liberators and educators of the women. Peter tells the protagonist that she is worth saving, Anthony proclaims that he is going to reform her and "make her wild and strange" (J. Johnson 2014, 67). Those statements signify that the male characters do not believe in independent female agency in reinventing and finding oneself. Only through their benevolence, the female characters can find their true selves. I suggest that the silent Beat chick trope is a surface, which male Beat writers used in order to strengthen their male characters. Read in comparison to the chick's dull and voiceless presence,

their masculinity and their agency as enlightened reformers can be enforced. Silence can be further linked to invisibility. Women Beat writers have been marginalized, not only in real life, but also in the novels of male Beat writers. Often, they have been reduced to only a few lines in the text - contrary to their male counterparts who were fictionalized with nuanced characters in great detail. Therefore, the attempt of breaking with the silent Beat chick trope could arguably also have a metatextual level for the author Joyce Johnson, as it offers her the possibility to reclaim her own voice through a fictional character.

The Female Beat Characters' Interaction in *Come and Join the Dance*

Apart from the protagonist, there is another complex female character featured in the novel: her best friend Kay. As one can assume when reading Joyce Johnson's memoir *Minor Characters* (1983), the character was modeled closely after the author's friend Elise Cowen, a poet who left her parents' home at a young age and eventually committed suicide. Kay is important in order to portray the consequences a rebellious existence brought along for Beat women. The two female characters in *Come and Join the Dance* are Beat characters on different stages of their emancipation process. While the protagonist is in a constant dichotomy, caught between breaking out of the hegemonic system while at the same time fearing the disappointment of her parents, her friend Kay performs her rebellion against the establishment more consistently. Unarguably, she is more radical than the protagonist in her escape from a normative life and has progressed further in her emancipation. She lives on her own in a shabby extended stay hotel, the Southwick Arms, and has a job to sustain herself. As a college dropout, she is following the path of many Beat figures, while contradicting the main motive for female college dropouts of the 1950s, which was to marry and found a family (Friedan 16). In Kay's case however, it was a refusal of the educational system and thus a direct rebellion against an institution. The protagonist admires Kay's courage and independence, and embraces the idea of imitating her defiant, non-conformist stance. In various passages, it is described how intrigued she is by her friend's new life and spatial autonomy, which marks her transition to adulthood: "She began [...] to stay up all night, and to develop secrets- there were usually traces of mysterious visitors around the room: cigarette ashes, half - empty glasses of beer." (Johnson 2014, 44) Referencing Virginia Woolf, Kay now inhabits a "room of her own" (Woolf 4), a space in which she can lead an independent

life and discover herself. To the protagonist, her friend's lifestyle is surrounded by exciting mystery and she is secretly hoping to become a part of Kay's "dark world for just a little while before the ship sailed" (J. Johnson 2014, 42). Through this romanticization of circumstance, the protagonist is blind to the consequences of the situation. To her, the Southwick Arms Hotel functions as a kind of gateway into the real world, into adulthood, into sex: "Alone in Kay's room, she was suddenly shocked that Kay had actually been living for three months in the real world - for what could be realer than the paint peeling off the radiator?" (J. Johnson 2014, 43)

Due to her admiration for her, Kay functions as an important point of focalization for the narrator. Regularly, it is described how she thinks of comments Kay would make, or how she would act in situations. However, this lessens as the protagonist progresses in the process of finding her own self, and she eventually realizes that she does not want to take the same path as Kay. This is underlined by a recurring motif in *Come and Join the Dance*—spatial settings reflecting the emotional state of the protagonist. While she has previously been fascinated by Kay's home, she now seems repelled by it: "The room was suddenly much too bright - she could see its sadness too well. This was a room she never could have lived in. This was the last time she would stand here, her last view of the rented, indestructible furniture, the debris of Kay's life, the pictures Kay had tacked on the green wallpaper that she would not have chosen herself [...]" (J. Johnson 2014, 157) By contrast to the more dreamy and naive protagonist, Kay appears to have a very realistic assessment of situations: "Her face was very tired, as if she knew too much. [...] ,I've had a hundred afternoons like this', she said. ,No one doing anything- me, Anthony...I knew Peter wouldn't try for the fellowship, you know.'" (J. Johnson 2014, 71) Kay knows the reality of Beatness, and she knows that it is not the cure the protagonist is looking for. This is also why she interjects the protagonist's plans of canceling her trip to Paris. The character is neither portrayed as a heroine, nor as fully content with her situation. Repeatedly, she is described as showing symptoms of depression, such as missing work, sleeping during the day, a messy room, and a general sense of sorrow and indifference, claiming: "All the walls in my life are the same color!" (J. Johnson 2014, 157) It is indicated that Kay might regret some of the decisions she has made: "This room [...] this is my reality." (J. Johnson 2014, 117) Through sketches she draws of items in her room her limited cosmos is represented artistically. The character is aware that her freedom does not automatically account for her happiness, especially since her situation which forces her to take care of herself, limits her aspirations at the same

time. As a woman living in an emancipated life in a patriarchal capitalist society, she faces limits constantly. Further, Kay knows that her freedom is not absolute:

“I was dreaming when you came - a really crazy dream. All about learning that my parents were planning to lock me up in some kind of home for girls - sort of an army camp or prison - and running around trying to find out the rules of this place. You couldn't have sex or telephone calls or read. And there was something about never being able to leave because the place was supposed to be good for you.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 42)

The fear of getting institutionalized was a very realistic worry for a woman in the 1950s leading a non-conformist life and struggling with mental health issues. Through giving this threat an outlet, the author raises awareness for the realities many women who broke with societal norms had to face. By employing a female character like Kay to the story, the author is further able to depict a realistic model of a Beat woman who escaped the conformism of her middle class home and college sphere, but also to allude to the consequences which go along with such a decision. While the protagonist has a childlike naive idea of freedom, but is not able to be consequent with her plans, Kay is one step ahead and offers her a realistic image of what could happen if she chose the same path.

Male Beat Characters in *Come and Join the Dance*

Regarding the male Bohemian characters of *Come and Join the Dance*, the author applied various Beat clichés to their portrayal. While Peter is portrayed as a seasoned and cynical Beat character, Anthony represents a more pretentious and younger counterpart, who sees himself as an outlaw and revolutionary. According to Beat tradition, he is characterized as idealistic and disruptive to societal norms, impertinent and with a disapproval of conformists. Despite his first impudent flirting attempts with the protagonist, and his self-proclamation as experienced womanizer, it is him who is shy during their sexual encounter (which is the protagonist's first) and proclaims his love to her. Furthermore, he craves intimacy with the protagonist afterwards, and is disappointed when she rejects him. A male character left behind is reversing the gender code of the times. Overall, while in *On the Road* and other classic Beat texts the male characters clearly are the heroes, their portrayal in *Come and Join the Dance* is less glorifying: The

protagonist's love interest Peter is introduced to the text as someone who is wasting his days. It is indicated that he has been writing on his thesis for several years, while being supported by his parents. Unable to accept the process of getting older and possibly maturing, he self-ironically calls himself out for "trying to be a promising young man as long as possible" (J. Johnson 2014, 20). In the tradition of the typical Beat hero, he rejects all responsibility and prioritizes freedom and spontaneity (McNeil 187). When for instance Kay tries to get him to apply for a fellowship, he ignores her and ridicules her motherly ambitions. His reaction demonstrates that for him too, women are seen as a threat to freedom and eager to domesticate. It is revealed that Peter has been married before, which supports my previously made argument of Beat male characters not fully rejecting traditional 1950s norms. Although he recurrently makes allusions to his ex-wife, suggesting that he is not over her, he declares his displeasure with and incompatibility for a marital life to Susan: "I couldn't stand being married. Couldn't fall asleep at night. I'd get up, go out..." (J. Johnson 2014, 151) On several occasions, Peter is perceived as incredibly enigmatic and capturing, alluding to Beat heroes such as *On the Road's* Dean Moriarty: "They were all in his power that afternoon, he had made the car their only reality. [...] He was golden and they were golden." (J. Johnson 2014, 71-72) Throughout the novel, Peter's actions are characterized by masculine flight. His car is of big importance to him, as it is the vehicle that allows him to flee from responsibility: "Oh, I disappeared for a few days. I do that now and then." (J. Johnson 2014, 18) When his car breaks down and he has to decide whether he will repair it or wreck it, he compares the situation to a "Lone Ranger shooting his horse" (J. Johnson 2014, 164), reiterating the traditional trope of the hero of the Western frontier. He is unable to accept his vehicle's damage. The protagonist feels sorry for him, as she notices that a big part of the persona Peter has created for himself is inevitably tied to his car. On a metaphorical level, the mobility of the Beat hero breaks down with the mobility of his car and leaves him emasculated. His fear of intimacy is magnified (Belletto 2020, 320-321).

As in *On the Road*, the road is reserved primarily for the lonesome Beat male traveller. When the protagonist hypothetically inserts herself into his traveling fantasies, Peter reacts cold. This alludes to the circumstance that women were almost never allowed to travel with the male Beats in their stories. Instead, they functioned as a good pastime and were left behind. The protagonist tries to imagine what this signifies for the wives: "Suppose you wanted to go wandering with him and you knew that he would never take you along and night after night you watched him go - and you were never able to say: 'Take me with you!'" (J. Johnson 2014, 151)

Eventually, Peter's portrayal makes him appear as a caricature of a Beat hero, who idealizes and longs freedom and being on the road, but at the same time barely leaves his comfort zone. He, who is urging for liberty and emancipation, is dependent on other people, such as his parents or the protagonist who borrows him money. Through incorporating a male character, who features all values of a Beat hero, yet fails them, Joyce Johnson deconstructs the image of the traditional Beat hero. At the end of the novel, the female protagonist is the moving character continuing her quest, while the Beat man is the one left behind in stagnation, reversing traditional gender codes of the 1950s.

Through various comments by Peter, the protagonist discerns that he sees his ex-wife in her. However, she refuses this image imposed on her: „But who do you think I am?, she thought“ (J. Johnson 2014, 176) and exits the situation. On the final pages, the recurring theme of the protagonist's mirror image is revised: “There was a girl in the mirror with a clear-eyed, still look, who didn't smile this time.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 177) It seems that the protagonist has finally achieved the self-discovery she has been striving for, and as a result breaks up with traditional patterns in Beat literature as we have known them. The breaking of the protagonist's passivity is not only important in terms of her character development, but also regarding the revision of gender codes. Since female passivity is often used as a vehicle for the validation of male power - the man is the one who acts, the woman only reflects- a character breaking those prescribed functions emphasizes their status as a full subject, as Ronna C. Johnson suggests (R. Johnson 2002, 79). Eventually, the female protagonist achieves this status. Consciously, she decides to embark on a final nightly road trip with Peter, as she feels “very awake“ (J. Johnson 2014, 159). Following the Beat ethos of the never ending road, which foregrounds the journey over the destination, the protagonist travels with a previously unexperienced jauntiness: “The night had transfigured the road - now for her a road without end, without even landmarks.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 161) Eventually, the roles are reversed - the female protagonist experiences the Beat spirit of restlessness, adventure and endless possibility, while the Beat male is left behind.

Rejecting Domesticity in *Come and Join the Dance*

In *Come and Join the Dance*, the female characters are not trying to settle down, contrary to what they have been accused of in the male dominated Beat discourse. Quite the opposite, the

protagonist breaks up with her boyfriend as she does not want to marry him. With his traditional values he symbolizes a domesticity, which she rejects. He personifies everything she declines, but also everything she emerged from: stability, conformity, simplicity and rationality. Driving through the suburban avenues on one occasion, Peter mockingly predicts Susan's future: "You be a good girl, Susan, and they might let you live up here. You could have a living room with wall-to-wall carpeting and a dishwashing machine." (J. Johnson 2014, 75) The internal distance the protagonist feels to those notions symbolizes her disdain for those ideas. There is no occasion in the novel, in which the protagonist or her friend Kay crave a life as housewife and mother. Through distancing her female characters from those ideals, Joyce Johnson emphasizes that those were not necessarily the dreams and ideals of all 1950s women. The protagonist feels alienated from mainstream culture, but at the same time not fully included in Beat culture. However, this alienation regresses with her coming of age and process of taking responsibility and making her own decisions. In one of the final chapters, the protagonist feels to be in the right place at the right time for the first time, despite this place being a junkyard in the Bronx: "[...] and the only strangeness about it was that none of it seemed strange at all" (J. Johnson 2014,168). With regard to spaces, scholar Tatum Petrich further makes an interesting argument in her dissertation on how the protagonist develops her female subjectivity in public spaces, while it is constrained again in domestic spaces - spaces which are traditionally connoted as feminine (Petrich 94). At the end of the novel, the protagonist comes to acceptance with who she is, knows what she wants and is "no longer afraid" (J. Johnson 2014, 173). After her final night with Peter she resumes: "This was the end of something that had been completed." (J. Johnson 2014, 175) and leaves him behind without explanation as "words would have such a heaviness." (J. Johnson 2014, 175) Breaking with gender codes and establishing herself as a Beat character, the female protagonist is ready to further emancipate herself. While *Come and Join the Dance* is a fictionalized text depicting female agency in the Beat sphere for the first time, Joyce Johnson gave this topic another platform through other forms of life writing, as in her memoir *Minor Characters* which will be discussed next.

An Account of Female Beat Experience - *Minor Characters* (1983)

Minor Characters, published in 1983, recounts passages from Johnson's childhood, her entrance into the Bohemian world of New York City, epicenter of Beat culture, and the ensuing dichotomy between her middle class background and a new life on the fringes of society. Recollecting her encounters with Jack Kerouac, whom she dated for a while, and other male key figures of the Beat Generation, such as Allen Ginsberg, Joyce Johnson offers the public what most people probably bought her book for. Yet she also includes the life stories of some of her female Beat comrades, who have been omitted from the common perception of Beat history. Furthermore, *Minor Characters* is a reliable account of the reality of women of the 1950s who did not comply with societal conventions. It thematizes the difficulties of the narrator's emancipation process and the social stigma she and fellow women had to endure. Overall, *Minor Characters* provides a complex and nuanced view of gender in the Beat generation, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities for self-discovery and liberation for women during the 1950s.

In the beginning of the book the narrator remembers her own entrance into the Bohemian scene as a teenager, which she describes as a hopping between two worlds. Coming from a middle class background with a very sheltered and conservative upbringing, this new environment offers sex, nonconformity and adventure, and the narrator is highly fascinated by it. "This was not the life my parents lived, but one that was dramatic, unpredictable, possibly dangerous. Therefore real, infinitely more worth having." (J. Johnson 1999, 29-30) The narrator immerses herself in this world, but has trouble mediating between it and her background. Shifting between such contradictory settings results in questions of self-definition and belonging for the narrator. At first, she sees herself as an observer, as someone who is not quite part of Bohemian life. She writes: "Invisibility had become my unsatisfying resolution of the outside/inside problem." (J. Johnson 1999, 41) The self-perception as spectator also appears in her first writing attempts - exercises for her writing class, which do not center around herself, but rather portray people she observes in the Bohemian scene. There are many parallels between her and the protagonist of *Come and Join the Dance*, such as the attempt to perform as another person and construct a self. Mary Paniccia Carden analyses: "Johnson represents her younger self as an improvisational work in progress, a young woman trying on various models of identity, none of which fit her easily or completely." (Carden 148) As there was no premediated female Beat model, women found themselves in a space of ambiguity and experimentation regarding their "Beat-ness". Individualism was perceived as a "specifically male disposition" (Carden 16).

Therefore, as Mary Paniccia Carden suggests, the stories of female Beat writers also reflected the dissonance and dislocation they experienced (Carden 16). Those experiences are visible in the text in particular regarding Joyce, the artist. On one occasion, she refers to the Beats' notion of themselves as a 'boy gang' by juxtaposing it with: "The social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the girl gang. Why, everyone would agree, that's absolutely absurd!" (J. Johnson 1999, 81) This thought experiment shows how the supporting community of the Beat Generation was for the male author only while women writers had little to no space to support each other in their role. The possibility of a female-only artistic community was in public Beat opinion an absurd vision. Further, Johnson describes her first artistic ambitions and how much she enjoyed writing as a young girl as it gave her a vehicle to catalyze her experiences and reflect her life. Later on, one of her literature professors told the women in his class that they could not be real writers, as real writers were hopping freight trains and traveling the country. The purported adventurism of Beat authors like Kerouac left aspiring young women little room to compete as daring adventures, such as hitchhiking through the United States, were barely possible for them due to their gender. The narrator recounts the incident of the rape and murder of a young Beatnik girl, a so-called drifter. As the narrator remarks, in the media reports of the time, the woman was blamed for her fate as she chose this non-traditional way of life. "She got what she asked for," the narrator quotes other people, "Poor thing", they added as an afterthought" (J. Johnson 1999, 201) Through not considering the much bigger risks women had to face on the road, they were labeled by men as placid and domestic if they stayed in the same place. Men left behind their stable lives and had to live with the consequence of social marginalization, but women further had to take into account the violence of rape and murder.

The consequences of moving out of the parental home already were significantly bigger for 1950s unmarried women than than they were for men. In *Minor Characters*, the narrator admires her friend Elise for her braveness: "If you wished to live free, you could not also expect to live well. You entered a world were janitors refused to give you clean sheets and Puerto Rican hookers screamed in courtyards. You were in danger of celebrating Thanksgiving with a solitary Turkey special in Bickford's Cafeteria on Broadway." (J. Johnson, 1999, 63) By moving into their own place, women were socially marginalized, potentially estranged from their families, and often left in financial distress, as they had to maintain themselves. Regardless, the narrator herself decides to leave her parents home as 20 year old. Her moving out signifies for her the transition into adulthood and a newly available freedom: "With the first paychecks from my new job, I'd bought an unpainted rocking chair, a small desk, two sheets, and a poster of Picasso's

Blue Boy - the furnishings of my first freedom. I knew children did not own furniture.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 101) In order to maintain themselves, women like Joyce and Elise had to find jobs and go to work. They went from one mundane typing job to another to make money to pay the rent, as they feared ending up vulnerable on the street if they could not pay.

Being an emancipated and independent woman in the 1950s came with responsibilities, which they could not ignore for their own sake. This experience differs from the one of the male characters in the novel, who are constantly on the move, no matter their financial situation. In relation to her partaking in mainstream culture through her job in order to maintain her independence, the narrator voices concerns about her own Beat-ness: “How Beat could I actually be, holding down a steady office job and writing a novel about an ivy-league college girl on the verge of parting with her virginity?“ (J. Johnson 1999, 205) The common perception of Beat-ness, as well as the one ingrained into the community and the narrator herself, is one of constant mobility, of unsteadiness, of rebellion against the norm - a notion she does not (fully) fit into. Through including those realistic struggles and questions of self-constitution of Beat women in her book, Joyce Johnson adds a new perspective to the collective Beat struggle of defying conventions. Carden points out how she juxtaposes Kerouac’s moving across America with her own moving out from home and explorations of the bohemian scene, sexuality and creativity. Both of them move, both of them are on a spiritual quest, but in very different situations and very different spatial settings that are related to and determined by their gender (Carden 147). Thus, Johnson offers an authentic female Beat experience, which includes gender related struggle.

Beat Iconoclasm in *Minor Characters*

Regarding the male Beat characters mentioned in the memoir, such as Jack Kerouac or Allen Ginsberg, the narrator’s descriptions lead to a revision of Beat iconoclasm. While Kerouac was oftentimes read by the public as the epitome of the Beat Generation through embodying its “myth, spirit, faith, and social influence“ (Lawlor 2017, 28), his portrayal in *Minor Characters* shows his discontent, melancholy and restlessness. The narrator comments on his intense relationship with his mother, Memère, and on how much he craved a real home throughout all his travels: “Jack himself was never successfully rootless. His roots in fact were like iron in his soul, binding him to Memere for good“(J. Johnson 1999, 23-24). This description offers a new insight into a preconceived notion about a key Beat figure, and offers a new facet to his character. Especially after the overnight success of *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac is depicted as

unable to cope with the fame, and as fleeing into alcoholism: “Like a fugitive he hid out in the apartment, double-locking the door behind me when I went to work, keeping the phone off the hook. [...] When I come home in the evenings with my bag full of groceries, I’d find him lying in the darkness staring at nothing.” (J. Johnson 1999, 223) While the public’s perception of Kerouac was the one of an alpha male, Johnson’s accounts of him also allow fragility and self-doubt. In terms of recovering female-authored voice, the revision of Beat iconoclasm helps as it humanizes the often larger-than-life images of Beat icons, and thus offers the possibility that other, marginalized members of the Beat Generation could also be eligible and valid as icons. As Mary Paniccia Carden analyzes: “Virtually without exception, Beat-associated women autobiographers recast Beat iconoclasm as a gendered construct rooted in social norms regulating male and female behaviors and desires.” (Carden 19) This signifies that the female writers had no points of reference to express or create a female iconoclasm in their texts, and thus approached this topic individually. (Carden 19)

A crucial aspect to Johnson’s writing is for example the creation of space for stories of women of the Beat movement. One technique Joyce Johnsons uses in *Minor Characters* is the reimagining of popular Beat myths, “filling in blanks where minor characters reside and reimagining Beat legend and lore from the perspective of women who appear only as tangential figures in the dominant Beat narrative.” (Carden 144) For instance, the narrator imagines the last thoughts of Joan Vollmer before her husband, Beat writer William S. Burroughs, shot her, as Carden also points out (158). The narrator remarks that “Joan Vollmer Burroughs’s death is much more famous than she is.” (J. Johnson 1999, 5) Once again, this criticizes the fact that Beat women were solely read in relation to Beat men. The female character with the most recognition by the narrator is Johnson’s best friend, Elise Cowen. Steven Belletto claims that *Minor Characters* is the elegy to Elise Cowen, which *On the Road* is to Neal Cassady (Belletto 2020, 321). She is depicted as “brilliant, avowedly nonconformist woman prone to intense love affairs and deep depressions” (Belletto 2020, 321). Leaving her home at a young age, she struggles with severe mental health problems throughout her life. Her portrayal in the story features a restlessness, which is also visible in her male counterparts. While for the narrator, it is manageable to shift between the two spaces of her conformist work environment and the Beat Bohemia, Elise supposedly feels home in neither of them. Also in terms of her appearance, she is portrayed as a woman who does not conform to the contemporary beauty standards: “Her dark hair was ungraciously scraped back with a rubber band, and acne flared under the ragged bangs of her forehead.” (J. Johnson 1999, 51) Wearing unfit and shapeless clothes and experimenting

with her hairstyles, Elise does not seem concerned with other people's opinions regarding her appearance, and seemingly does not subordinate to the male gaze (Carden 156). Through the comments evaluating Elise's looks, it is however indicated that the narrator herself is aware of the contemporary feminine beauty ideals and conforms to them. When Jack Kerouac tells Joyce that he prefers brunettes over blondes, she is affected by his preference and admits to secretly wishing to be "one of his mysterious fellaheen woman" (J. Johnson 1999, 131) and considers dying her hair. Through this self-reflection, the narrator admits to subordinating herself to the male gaze and craving the male character's validation to a certain extent. Meanwhile, Elise puts herself actively into an oppositional stance countering the prevailing power structures of the society she lives in. According to Gillian Thomson, she thus represents the Other within the practice of gender performativity of other female Beats (Thomson 3-8). Her rebellion against the system leads her to a stay in a psychiatric hospital. The institutionalization, which the character Kay in *Come and Join the Dance* fears, was an unfortunate reality for Elise. Eventually, she commits suicide before turning thirty. This circumstance led to a sort of mystification of her person in Beat circles: "People passed her poems around for a while. Suicide made Elise mythic briefly." (J. Johnson 1999, 258) As in the case of Joan Vollmer, a tragic death was what formed the legend around Elise. In a mission to rediscover her work, *Minor Characters* also features some of Elise's poems, which center around depression, restlessness and alienation. They are protocols for a life as a female outcast in a restricted society. In the text, Elise functions as a figure of defiant Beat femininity (Carden 21), who could act as the previously non-existent female counterpart to the male Beat hero and his "defiant masculinity" (Carden 16, after Ehrenreich).

The "Code of Cool" (R. Johnson 2004, 23)

Through her impressions and portrayal of the Beat Generation, the narrator breaks the so called "code of cool" (R. Johnson 2004, 23). Ronna C. Johnson describes the code of cool as "a set of rules for comportment that mandates terse expression and withheld emotion, and thus defines the hipster while also signifying hipster status. It is a social code with literary ramifications that makes women de facto collaborators with their own oppression, because the essence of cool is the appearance of passivity, indifference, and lack of emotion" (R. Johnson 2004, 23-24). She argues that it brought along expectations for women to suppress their own emotions and needs

with the purpose of catering to men's desires (R. Johnson 2004, 24). The narrator of *Minor Characters* is definitely acting according to the code of cool, as she gives Jack Kerouac his desired freedom and the option to return to her whenever he pleased to do so, although she wishes for a stable romantic relationship with him (Carden 154). However, through the self-critical description of her own behavior, Joyce Johnson eventually breaks with the code of cool and in extension refutes the label of silent Beat chick. On the final pages of her memoir, she writes:

“I see the girl Joyce Glassman, twenty-two, with her hair hanging down below her shoulders, all in black like Masha in *The Seagull* - black stockings, black skirt, black sweater - but, unlike Masha, she's not in mourning for her life. How could she have been, with her seat at the table in the exact center of the universe, that midnight place where so much is converging, the only place in America that's alive? As a female, she's not quite part of this convergence. A fact she ignores, sitting in her excitement as the voices of the men, always the men, passionately rise and fall and their beer glasses collect and the smoke of their cigarettes rises towards the ceiling and the dead culture is surely being wakened. Merely being here, she tells herself, is enough.

What I refuse to relinquish is her expectancy.

It's only her silence that I wish finally to give up - and Elise's silence [...]“

(J. Johnson 1999, 261-262)

The quotation shows the author's motivation to break away from the silent margins, build an awareness for the lives of women participating in Beat culture, and recover the works of her female colleagues. The result is a newly created space for Beat femininity in texts, a new outlook on pre-existing Beat iconoclasm, and an important historical account of 1950s life for subcultural women.

Conclusion

In *Come and Join the Dance*, the journey is not literal, as it is in *On the Road*, it is metaphorical. The female protagonist breaks her passivity and matures towards female agency. By doing so, she breaks with the stereotype of the silent Beat chick. Joyce Johnson shows awareness of the various tropes in which female characters were depicted in male Beat writing, and deploys them on her own terms. In this way, the text reverses pre-existing gender codes - the male character ends up left behind and depressed, the female character leaves and happily emerges on a new journey. Women are portrayed in the pursuit of fulfillment of their own need for freedom and independence, their own aspirations. Thus, the novel “rejects the immaturity and passivity of the feminine mandated by the dominant culture.” (R. Johnson 2002, 75) A full female agency is in form, instead of one only defining itself in correlation to male characters. After her transformative process, the female Beat hero is depicted as a person who takes what she wants, has full agency, fulfills her sexual needs without repercussions and leaves behind responsibility. Eventually, it is proven that female characters can function as Beat heroines as well.

In *Minor Characters*, the creation of a female Beat subjectivity and female Beat iconoclasm takes place. Through the recount of her experiences in the Beat sphere, the narrator explores her own position and reinscribes other Beat women into the public consciousness. One of the issues Johnson incorporated into her discussion of womanhood in the Beat sphere was the depiction of emancipated female sexuality, which will be examined next.

3.2. Representations of Female Sexuality

One characteristic feature of Beat literature is the inclusion of the many facets of human sexuality, often in graphic detail. Notorious for the obscenity charges against Ginsberg and Burroughs in the 1950s, the Beat Generation had the public reputation of being very experimental and explicit regarding sexuality (Mackay 2017, 179). Their notion of sexual freedom acted as a harbinger of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. However, the focus in the key texts of Beat writing was predominantly on male desire and satisfaction. Apart from the fact that

the authors of those texts were men, the historical circumstances regarding the neglect of women's libido are important to consider. Female sexuality in the 1950s was still a highly discreet and stigmatized issue, which eventually gained some public attention through the publication of the Kinsey reports in 1953. For the first time, women had an opportunity to discuss their sexualities anonymously. By comparing their own sexual desires and practices to others who contributed to the report, female readers were enabled to engage with their sexuality. The Kinsey reports claimed that the number of women, who have had their first sexual experiences before marriage, was significantly higher than expected (Littauer 82-86). So, although the issue was heavily frowned upon publicly, many American women did indeed secretly engage in sexual practices outside the constraints of marriage. Yet, they were restricted in communicating those experiences due to the impending risk of public marginalization. Such sociocultural circumstances are reflected in both of Joyce Johnson's works discussed in this thesis, her novel *Come and Join the Dance* (1961) and her memoir *Minor Characters* (1983). As she writes in her memoir, sex in the 1950s was "a serious and anxious act" (J. Johnson 1999, 89). The seriousness and anxiety were, on the one hand, linked to the lack of available contraception and the resulting risk of unwanted pregnancy, but on the other hand to the public stigmatization a woman who actively explored her sexuality had to face. Through the inclusion of such topics in her works, I would further suggest Johnson's proto-feminist stance. Moreover, Joyce Johnson, like other female Beat writers, recognized the opportunity to use the trope of sexuality as a tool to upturn gender conformity (Mackay 2017, 186).

In the tradition of a coming of age story, *Come and Join the Dance's* protagonist Susan makes her first sexual experiences in the course of the novel. It is indicated in the beginning that she has been reluctant to have sex with her boyfriend. However, she later on has a moment of revelation when she realizes that her best friend Kay is already sexually active. Determined to also gain sexual experiences, the protagonist seduces a younger boy, Anthony, who has a romantic interest in her. The whole scene is quite awkward, since both are not very experienced. Afterwards, the protagonist realizes the power her action held, and is caught again, however, in her prevailing passivity. Blaming herself for her partner's hurt ego, it takes time for her to recover and process her emancipation. In the end of the novel, the protagonist consciously chooses to have another sexual experience with Peter, who is her older and more experienced romantic interest in the novel. This sexual encounter is described as more satisfying than the previous one, and represents a key moment for the protagonist. Remarkably, in both instances the

otherwise passive protagonist acts as the initiator of sexual activity, which is opposed to the cliché of the passive woman. Critic Ronna C. Johnson comments on the reversal of gender politics in *Come and Join the Dance*: “It depicts women’s transformation from culture’s objects to their own subjects by foregrounding them as sexual actors and consumers, attesting to Beat’s anticipation of the sixties women’s movement.” (R. Johnson 2002,70) Giving a female protagonist the ability to explore her sexuality on her own terms and experience desire and satisfaction, despite the restrictive environment she lives in, confirms the author's progressive approach and positions the novel at the advent of the sexual liberation of the 1960s. Johnson’s memoir *Minor Characters* on the other hand also points out the drawbacks of supposedly liberated sexuality, as it acts as an account of the perils and stigmata sexually emancipated bohemian women had to endure. Social experiences of Beat women, which have been kept quiet about in male literature, are recounted in Johnson’s recollections through the lens of female characters. Those experiences differ widely from the male Beat experience and cast some light on silenced issues such as contraception and sexual repression.

Reclaiming Sexuality

Reclaiming sexuality through taking agency is a major theme in *Minor Characters*: “Real life was sexual. Or rather, it often seemed to take the form of sex. [...] Sex was like a forbidden castle whose name could not even be spoken around the house, so feared was its power. Only with the utmost vigilance could you avoid being sucked into its magnetic field. The alternative was to break into the castle and take its power for yourself.” (J. Johnson 1999, 30) Sexuality holds significance for the protagonist despite her restricted environment. While it was withheld from her for the most part, she plots on actively reclaiming its power. There are several instances, in *Come and Join the Dance* as well as *Minor Characters*, where the protagonists take agency and re-work sexual politics in order to actively liberate themselves. This liberation comes from a groundwork of repressed and condemned sexuality, which was the norm for women in 1950s middle class society. In *Minor Characters*, Joyce Johnson stresses the taboo topic sexuality was in her childhood. Her pubic area had no other name than being called “down there“ by her mother, and when she got her period, there was no education on it. The whole attitude of her mother towards sexuality is described as prudish and restrained. This covert and stigmatized

approach regarding sexuality and nudity prohibited a healthy access for the protagonist to discovering her own sexuality. On the emancipation from that form of sexual repression which rooted in societal and parental stigma, Estibaliz Encarnacion-Pinedo comments that “to recognize their own body as something other than the object of male desire, or as means to reproduction, indicated significant progress toward female sexual freedom.” (Encarnacion-Pinedo 156)

While the protagonist in *Come and Join the Dance* is still sexually inexperienced, she assumes that people have a different view of her. Therefore, she adapts to this reputation by feigning experience, which functions as a protective shield from insignificance (R. Johnson 2002, 83). Female virginity in *Come and Join the Dance* is remarkably not read as some kind of holy grail, which is in need of preservation, but instead as “state of infantilization and passive spectatorship“ (R. Johnson 2002, 87), which needs to be overturned. This opinion is also represented in *Minor Characters* by the narrator Joyce (J. Johnson 1999, 84). Through this perspective, the protagonists position themselves against the societal norm, and express their annoyance with common contemporary opinions. Joyce Johnson comments on the social status of virginity in *Minor Characters*: “I’d learned myself by the age of sixteen that just as girls guarded their virginity, boys guarded something less tangible, which they called Themselves. They seemed to believe they had a mission in life, from which they could easily be deflected by being exposed to too much emotion.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 56) Instead of committing to a relationship at a young age, boys tended to cherish their personal freedom. This was a privilege girls did not have. The most acceptable and common way to explore their sexuality for young American women was to “go steady“, which meant to be in a steady relationship with a partner they would potentially marry in the future (Littauer 112). Experimenting with sex outside of a relationship was evidently more socially deemed for women. The phenomenon of going steady as safe space for sexual experiences is also recounted by Joyce Johnson in her memoir *Minor Characters* (J. Johnson 1999, 84). However, disregarding the social circumstances, neither the protagonist of *Come and Join the Dance*, Susan, nor her friend Kay perform their sexual liberation within a steady relationship, although at least Susan would have had the chance to do so with her (ex-) boyfriend Jerry.

Both sexual encounters in the novel are initiated on the female protagonist’s own terms, an approach which is defying traditional 1950s gender norms where men act as the sexual pursuers of women (Belletto 2020, 321). Through those reclamations of sexual agency, several reversals

of gender politics take place, which are ultimately also connected to power. The first change in power dynamics happens when the protagonist initiates sex with Anthony, who turns out to be not as experienced as he claims to be. After having sex, he breaks into tears and Susan has to comfort him, although she herself appears to be overwhelmed and confused. This moment is crucial in the protagonist's character formation, since it is one of the first instances where she breaks her passivity. Adhering to traditional gender norms, the male character would probably be the one comforting the emotional female after the loss of her virginity. It is indicated that the protagonist herself is surprised of the outcome of her first sexual experience: "She had always imagined a rape, an overwhelming of herself, the victim, never that she would be left with a starved, spent child and the guilty sense of her own heaviness." (J. Johnson 2014, 87) The occurring reversal of traditional gender codes is challenging and leaves her uneasy. A power dynamic shift from "victim" to "perpetrator" takes place in her mind. It is moreover a telling sign of the times how the protagonist imagined her first sexual experience to be: a man essentially taking advantage of her and leaving her powerless, instead of a balanced division of power. There are further divergences from traditional gender tropes in this scene. Apart from being the driving force, the protagonist is also the one who wants to keep the sexual encounter a singular, casual experience, while the male character apparently wants to pursue a romantic relationship. Categorizing the sexual act with Anthony as an "experiment" repositions the male actor from his conventional superiority to an object utilized by Susan in order to achieve her intentions (R. Johnson 2002, 88). The reversal from object to subject for the female character results in her uneasiness over her new role, which hereinafter leads to another relapse into her old passivity. The female protagonist subverts said passivity and domination when she initiates sex with both men, and leaves both of them afterwards. Furthermore, as Ronna C. Johnson suggests, she negates the Freudian notion of female sexual incapacity, as she is able to define her needs and fulfill her desires, and thus "joins the dance" (R. Johnson 2002, 91). Susan can experience lust, desire and experimentation outside of the constraints of guilt or unwanted pregnancy, acting as a moral punishment. In the end of the novel, she leaves for Paris sexually liberated and empowered instead of being abandoned (R. Johnson 2002, 75-76). Through reversing sexual politics, the protagonist seizes the opportunity to consciously make experiences, which encourage her sense of self-determination and self-confidence. Regarding sexual politics, I will continue with a digression on the special position the orgasm held in Beat culture.

Beat Obsession with Orgasm

Sexual politics within Beat culture ingrained a specific notion: Mutual orgasm was seen as crucial for a fulfilling sexual experience. As Erik Mortenson states, the Beats “seek to transcend the body in their search for new experience“ (Mortenson 84) - orgasm thereby offers the vessel. While closing the orgasm gap might sound like a progressive endeavor, it often led to anxiety and fear of misperformance, especially for women: “The new self-consciousness about coming or not coming - making it a man’s duty and a woman’s shame if she didn’t -brought dread to the question ‚Did you?‘“ (Johnson 1999, 89) This obsession with the female orgasm based partially on the controversial psychoanalytical theories of Wilhelm Reich, who declared the ability to orgasm as sign for a successfully completed psychoanalysis and thus a stable character (Brittanica 2021; Turner 2011). How influential Reichian theory was in the Beat milieu is visible in Norman Mailer’s essay *The White Negro* (1957), where he accounts for the orgasm as the therapy of a hipster prototype, who is constantly searching for more intense sexual climaxes (Mailer 9). In Jack Kerouac’s novel *The Subterraneans* (1958), there is a direct reference to Reichian theory by the protagonist Leo, who’s partner’s inability to orgasm is overshadowing their relationship: “[...] you can’t be healthy without normal sex love and orgasm - I won’t go into Reich’s theory since it is available in his own book [...]“ (Kerouac 1971, 163) A further account of Joyce Johnson confirms the relevance of Reich’s Orgon theory in Beat circles. The praise of Reich and other psychoanalytical notions, combined with the bohemian progressive and unconventional approach to sexuality, seeing it as a tool for liberation, led to the significance (female) orgasms had in Beat culture. Responding to the sign of the times, female pleasure is openly thematized in Johnson’s de- but novel. *Come and Join the Dance*’s protagonist Susan does not climax during her first sexual experience, resulting in disappointment on her end: “Where was the moment when everything became luminous and the earth shook?“ (J. Johnson 2014, 90) Her reaction shows the character’s familiarity with the notion of an orgasm as enlightening experience, which was perpetuated in Beat circles. However, eventually Joyce Johnson gives her female protagonist the opportunity to reach some kind of sexual satisfaction. When she sleeps with Peter, Susan is able to experience lust and pleasure. Her orgasm is not reached, but very close. Allusions of lucidity and floating are used to reflect her satisfaction with the experience. The female protagonist now knows that she is able to fully enjoy sex and

internalizes it: “Satisfaction of perspective takes the place of sexual gratification.” (R. Johnson 2002, 91) This experience reaffirms the female Beat character’s journey towards empowerment. Not only does this quest towards sexual satisfaction in its early beginnings reflect actual female experience, it also holds a deeper meaning connected to the change the protagonist goes through. She eventually does not need to orgasm in order to validate her sexual experience, which defies the Beat male and, on an extended level, Beat culture’s obsession with the female orgasm.

The Beat male’s obtrusive eagerness surrounding the female climax, which Joyce Johnson thematizes in *Minor Characters*, is further displayed by the characters Anthony and Peter in *Come and Join the Dance*. Anthony promises Susan: “Next time it’ll be better. Next time I’ll make you come!” (J. Johnson 2014,93) after an unfortunate sexual encounter, and also the more sexually mature Peter is disappointed that he did not make Susan orgasm. Her satisfaction does not seem to be genuine for him, since he does not have any proof of it, a notion further pointing out the problematical approach regarding the forced need to bring the female partner to orgasm. Priority is eventually the male’s confirmation that he is indeed able to satisfy a woman, which has culturally been read as a sign for masculinity. However, the female protagonist in this situation perseveringly follows her way and leaves no more time to comfort the hurt male ego. A different situation is described in *Minor Characters*, where the protagonist Joyce resorts to lying about her unreached climax, since her partner reads her inability to orgasm as a sign of her overbearing self-consciousness, and thus something negative. Yet again, this shows how women were being pressured into a role in the Beat sphere, by being expected to be fully sexually emancipated and empowered instantly, instead of leaving space for them to explore themselves. Female satisfaction is eventually only used as another method to empower men- if the woman is incapable to climax, it is her fault and she has not taken off the shackles hegemonic society put on her. The man hereby operates as the enlightener, as the liberator of the apparently frigid and restrained woman (see: Alex, Peter). Through her (apparent) sexual liberation, he himself can keep power over her. As determined by Ronna Johnson determines: Marked as inhibited, the woman is yet again put into a subservient position, until she is liberated (R. Johnson 2002, 87-88). This notion is problematic, which is why Joyce Johnson’s rebellion against traditional Beat approaches regarding the female orgasm can be read as proto-feminist and a reclamation of sexual power. Her character Susan does not need an orgasm in order to reach satisfaction and self-awareness. While orgasms were a recurring subject in male Beat literature, other issues were silenced, such as the risks sexual activity held particularly for women.

Sexuality as Risk for Women

Joyce Johnson's decision to write about sex in a direct, unconcealed manner and depict a sexually active independent woman of the 1950s in her work is a reclamation of power on her end. The less glamorous part of this reality were the serious risks an unconventional lifestyle held for women. A big factor for restrained female sexuality in the 1950s was the lack of available contraception and proper education on the subject matter. Joyce Johnson discusses this issue multiple times in her memoir *Minor Characters*. For instance, a diaphragm could only be purchased if a woman tricked the doctors into thinking that she was married. But with the ability to be in charge of contraception through a diaphragm and thus no dependency on the man to have/use condoms, power came along. This was true sexual emancipation, as is remarked in *Minor Characters*: "She's ready now. She has the key to everything." (J. Johnson 1999, 91)

Written in the advent of the rise of available birth control pills in the 1960s, this quote stresses the huge significance having access to contraception had for women. However, actually obtaining contraception was not the norm yet. About her early sexual experiences, Joyce Johnson writes: "[...] and nakedness and darkness and risk. Because I can never quite bring myself to go to Sheila's clinic. It's odd what you have courage for and what you don't." (J. Johnson 1999,93)

This depicts how immanent the public stigma was. While Joyce is courageous enough to turn her back on her parents and emancipate herself from them in order to explore her sexuality, she is putting herself at risk by having sex without protection. She does not have the courage to take the agency needed to get a hold of contraception. Johnson's comment on this contradiction shows how she had still been in the process of learning to take the responsibility needed to protect herself and her autonomy. While the female protagonist in *Come and Join the Dance* is spared from an unwanted pregnancy as punishing consequence of her sexual awakening, Joyce Johnson herself was not as lucky. She recounts the traumatic experience of getting pregnant by a casual affair and seeking an abortion all by herself in *Minor Characters*. It is described how difficult it was for a young woman to even have access to an abortion under the surveillance of a doctor. After her therapist denies her the option of a "therapeutic abortion" (J. Johnson 1999, 107), she has to visit a doctor who performs an abortion on her illegally, which is an incredibly painful and traumatic experience. Waiting on a man who would accompany her to her abortion appointment, the narrator is looking at a department store which she remembers from her childhood and imagines herself not surviving the abortion. This rapid mental leap could be interpreted as the

awareness that her childhood and therefore her innocence are now terminated, since she has to face a potentially lethal consequence for her actions. "Life was considered sacred. But independence could be punishable by death. The punishment for sex was, appropriately, sexual." (J. Johnson 1999, 107) In this statement, the narrator reflects the disparity which is still prevalent in American culture up to this day: the unborn life of the embryo is seen as more valuable than the autonomous life of the mother. Since an illegal abortion could be punished and oftentimes lead to death or mutilation, the danger for young women who wanted to keep their autonomy and decided against a child was imminent. This state is also reflected in the language which the narrator uses in order to speak of unwanted pregnancy and abortion: "sealed doom," "talismans to ward off disaster" and "secret information that could save you" (J. Johnson 1999, 106-107). The description of the scenery in the abortion passage of the novel aligns with the narrator's state of mind. While everything is grey and hazy before her appointment, everything becomes beautiful and vivid afterwards, "color seemed to have come back into the world." (J. Johnson 1999, 111) Despite the trauma and the pain, to her the world is now coming back to a place full of opportunities and new beginnings. Without support of the man who brought her in this situation, Joyce had to face the consequences for her actions herself.

An interesting aspect of Joyce's account is the female support. There is a mentioning of women who were in possession of lists with doctors performing illegal abortions, who would share those lists with women in need. Further, Joyce, 21 years old and financially unstable at the time of the abortion, is able to borrow the needed 500 dollars from a female friend, who herself also has to borrow this sum from a wealthy lover. Abortions were no rarity in Johnson's circle, which means that, although they were a highly discreet matter, solidarity and a common sense of understanding in the women's community was there. However, it was no topic that was discussed openly. Joyce remembers how her friend Elise Cowen had to go through an abortion in California, which she learned about only after it had already happened. Since Elise had a recorded history of mental health issues, she was permitted a legal abortion. Through a mutual friend, Joyce finds out that Elise has not only had an abortion, but instead a hysterectomy. It is not indicated in *Minor Characters* if Elise agreed to this measure, which was a common procedure derived from the eugenics movement and commonly forced on female mental health patients up until the 1950s (Stern 2005).

The powerlessness and fear reflected in those accounts of Johnson show how women responded and were determined by the subordinate position they still held in the 1950s. Although women like Joyce and Elise were sexually emancipated, they were in a powerless position when it came to complications. Without the possibility to obtain a legal abortion, they had to risk their lives and put themselves into debt in order to pay the price for their lifestyles. If they decided to keep the child, they were either on their own and thus even further stigmatized by society, or faced danger to slip into the traps of the feminine mystique. Either way, their independence was at stake. Meanwhile, men could live out their sexuality without constant risk or fear, and were able to uphold their self-sufficiency. Through thematizing taboo subjects such as fear of pregnancy and abortion, Johnson demonstrates how the lives of Beat men and women in the 1950s drastically differed. In her later novel, *In the Night Cafe* (1987), set in the early 1960s, Johnson further includes those issues as part of the female protagonist's lived reality. Her continuous attempts to show the different aspects of female sexuality in her work further manifest the author's (proto-) feminist stance.

Conclusion

Regarding the representations of female sexuality, Johnson introduces a multi-faceted approach in both *Come and Join the Dance* and *Minor Characters*. Marginalized topics, such as abortion, are openly discussed in her texts and offer a new female perspective to the superficial Beat discourse of sexuality. Further, Johnson critically comments on the Beat obsession with orgasms, as she questions its liberating qualities. Following up on this and with regard to the author's personal experiences, I want to offer a more detailed approach to life writing as genre, and the ways in which it was applied by Joyce Johnson and Jack Kerouac.

3.3. Life Writing and Autofiction: Beat Device and Feminist Strategy

As previously discussed, Beat literature was predominantly connoted with masculinity. Thus, the establishment of female authorship was a necessity for Beat women in order to claim space within that environment. Apart from revising gendered tropes in their literary texts, they used different forms of life writing as a proto-feminist approach to recount female experience in the Beat subculture and 1950s America. The three works discussed in this thesis come from different genres, however, there are several intersections, especially regarding the connections between the stories narrated and the authors' lived experiences. While *Minor Characters* classifies itself as a memoir, *On the Road* and *Come and Join the Dance* can be described as partially autofictional novels, as I would argue and will further elaborate in this chapter. Therefore, all three texts could be labeled as some form of life writing, which is a genre that covers different approaches of narrating one's life in a self-referential way, may they be fictionalized or not (Banerjee 336).

Beat Tradition of Life Writing

Critics are in accord about the importance life writing had in the Beat Generation. Beat fiction and poetry contained countless autobiographical references, establishing the incorporation of personal experience into literary work as a characteristic Beat device (Charter 439; Encarnacion-Pinedo 149). There were various reasons for this choice of subject matter. On the one hand, Beat authors were influenced by writers they considered their literary models, such as Thomas Wolfe, William Carlos Williams, or Arthur Rimbaud, who were known for valuing the form of autobiography. But, more importantly, the shared feeling of being excluded from society resulted in the urge to validate their own lived experience, and not adhere to the conventional norms of US society. This validation was possible through exploring it through writing. The accounts of events in the Beat Generation's literary work strengthened their own perception of 1950s America. Furthermore, many Beat writers believed in the 'literature of the common man', just like American poet Walt Whitman did previously, and thus followed the credo that everybody could be a writer. This is reflected in the encouragement to create, which was

prevalent within the group, and in how non-academic peers, such as Neal Cassady, were uplifted to write down their stories straight from their hearts (Charters 439-440). According to the Beats, personal experience as a literary subject-matter offered the possibility to be all-inclusive (Encarnacion-Pinedo 149). No academic training was necessary in order to write down one's own lived experience. In consequence, most Beat novels feature the literary processing of real life events, and the majority of characters in said novels was modeled after real life people from the Beat sphere, provided with new names. Examples therefore are the first Beat novel, *Go* (1952) by John Clellon Holmes, William S. Burroughs' novel *Junkie* (1953), and also Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). From a narratological point of view, most of those novels were written from a first person perspective, starting with „I“, as critic Steve Belletto remarks. Through those accounts told from a first person narrator, the reader gets an immediate account of the protagonists' often chaotic, unconventional lifestyles. Thus Beat novelists were able to create a sense of intimacy between the reader and the character (Belletto 2020, 59-60). Suggestively this intimacy also created the appeal Beat novels had especially on younger people, who did not share the prevalent cultural norms of the 1950s. They were able to identify with the characters, to feel part of the gang. I would argue, that through the textual proximity to events in the authors' real lives and the integration of people from the Beat cosmos as characters in text, most Beat novels could be labeled as autofictional to a certain degree.

Autofiction

Autofiction is a form of life writing which has been subject of various critical discussions and "requires continuous reconsideration" (Effe/Lawlor 2), as the definitions of the genre vary. Generally speaking, a text would be considered autofictional if it "purports to be both fictional and autobiographical, and thus represents a paradox in the traditional understanding of genre." (Gronemann 241) An autofictional text further acknowledges that the self can never be an objective truth, and offers the possibility to create a more intense exploration of the self in the text (Gronemann 241-245). Laura Marcus labels autofiction as a valuable concept as it gives writers the possibility to "represent complex, composite, and divided selves, creating the most appropriate vehicles for identities which can never be fully known." (Marcus 112)

It has been critically established that *On the Road* recounts many of Kerouac's experiences traveling through America in the 1940s and that most characters in the novel are modeled after

real life people, such as Neal Cassady (French 10-11; 35). Some parallels between protagonist and author can also be detected in Joyce Johnson's *Come and Join the Dance*, as comes to mind after reading her memoir *Minor Characters* - both come from a similar background regarding family and class, both have similar events happening to them, such as a failed college graduation, both experience feelings of wishing to be a part of Bohemian life, yet not quite belonging. While the novel's protagonist Susan feels like an impostor amongst her Beat friends - "Susan was just a spy, a sneak thief who lived in a room with pink walls in her mother's house." (J. Johnson 2014, 52) - Joyce Johnson describes her feelings as a young adult, who at that point had not fully emerged in the Beat sphere, in a similar manner: "To know what life was like. Real life. My very name seemed a metaphor for what I saw at seventeen as my unique apartness. Glassman, Glassgirl." (J. Johnson 1999, 69) Suggestively, her first novel offered Johnson the possibility to process those feelings. However, the novel lacks an important criteria of autofiction regarding the narrative situation. The 'autobiographical pact', a concept coined by Philippe Lejeune, states that author, narrator and protagonist are all the same person (Saunders 776). Thus, also in autofiction, the use of the first person (,I') as well as the author's proper name, in order to connect the author with the narrator, are very common (Marcus 121). While this is the case in *Minor Characters* - which is the only of the three works that self-proclaims as a form of life writing- it is different in *On the Road* and *Come and Join the Dance*. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* does feature a first person narrator, but his name is Sal, in Joyce Johnson's novel there is a separation between narrator and protagonist, and moreover, the protagonist has a different name. Through the third person narrative, a certain distance to the protagonist Susan is created - a distance which allows to comment and reflect. For instance, the recount of Susan's thoughts regarding her father's behavior after her failed graduation through an external perspective shows her disproportionate and immature reaction: "She wanted to run from the table, she wanted to weep. Why was her father doing this to her? Was it because he knew he had won?" (J. Johnson 2014, 140) In her later novels, *Bad Connections* (1978) and *In the Night Café* (1987), which both also incorporate autobiographical elements, Johnson moves towards the ,I' as narrative form, which could suggest a more intimate examination with the literary processing of real events. Regarding the issue of naming, Laura Marcus proposes that there can be the possibility of omitting or changing names in autofictional texts, for instance in order to protect the privacy of oneself or others (Marcus 116-121). As earlier mentioned, in the Beat Generation, and primarily in Kerouac's writing, it was a tradition to use code names for real life people in literary texts, Neal Cassady for example was called Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*

(Charters 8-10). As Joyce Johnson was familiar with Kerouac's texts, she was aware of this technique. In *Minor Characters*, she recounts the writing process of *Come and Join the Dance* and claims that her friend Elise and her affair Alex would be characters in it, confirming that some of her characters were modeled after real life people. It can be argued that she, as well as Kerouac, applied this technique in an attempt to keep up the anonymity of their characters.

Further, it is also important to discuss the correlation between autofiction and real life existence. Claudia Gronemann states: "Writing becomes an integral part of existence, a never ending process of producing subjectivity through language. The referential self conceives of itself – in the fabric of the text – as part of a fiction, because no author can claim to know the real meaning of his or her own story." (Gronemann 245) Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf supports this by claiming "autofiction produces real-life effects" (Wagner-Egelhaaf 30), meaning that the acts of living and writing cannot be divided. This reflects in Beat writing, as the existence as writer is a major theme in the work of Johnson and other Beat authors - including the creative strategies, successes and struggles which come along with it.

"I worked on the novel about Barnard I'd begun in Hiram Haydn's workshop. Elise and Alex were characters in it. By making Alex a character, I took away his power to hurt me. Just like me, my heroine would have an affair with the Alex character and end up alone. But in my fictional rearrangement of life, it was she who was going to leave him after their one and only night together. I rewarded her with a trip to Paris. I typed forty letters a day and dreamed of taking off myself." (J. Johnson 1999, 117)

Johnson's reflection on the writing process of her first novel shows how writing down and fictionalizing occurring events in her life turned out to be therapeutic to her. Through only incorporating fragments of her experience, and altering parts, she was in power to create a literary self which ended up in a better place than her real self. Of course, this altering of experience raises questions of truth versus reality and fiction making. One of the definitions of autofiction declares that truth cannot be objective as the act of writing down an event is already an altering of truth (Gronemann 244). Different models of truth can be observed regularly in Beat canon literature, as we often have several real life incidents recounted from different perspectives, in different manners, in different novels, emphasizing the fact that there is not one objective truth. An example therefore is the incident Neal Cassidy hit his underage girlfriend Luanne Henderson, which is recounted in Kerouac's *On the Road* from a very different perspective than by John Clellon Holmes in his novel *Go* (Belletto 2020, 59-61). *Minor*

Characters also features those fictionalized truths, as Joyce Johnson incorporates various passages which present her imagination of real life events she did not take part in herself - for instance an account of the time Kerouac spent on Desolation Peak, an experience which he himself later processed in his novel *Desolation Angels* (1965). Johnson offers an insight into his consciousness, which has to be regarded as fictional: "There were no conclusive answers to his questions. Like a prisoner he counted off the days til his descent. Looking into a mirror, he saw the bleary, unshaven face of boredom. A man who desired an ice cream cone more than love." (J. Johnson 1999, 114) Through the technique of adding those fictional passages, the author has the opportunity to add dimension to the characters in her own life narrative, which eventually helps in representing the multiplicity of selves - not only in herself but in others as well.

Overall, I would attest most novels of the Beat Generation autofictional qualities to a certain extent, as it is the case with *On the Road* and *Come and Join the Dance*. Through the interwoven accounts of real-life experiences and the proximity to Beat figures, the reader is able to view the narration through a Beat lens and experience what feels like a very first hand account of things. This reading implies that we know everything about the Beat sphere. However, this is dangerous as truth is omitted, and certain characters only exist in the shadows. How could their truth be rediscovered, if it was forgotten in the first part? I would argue that this is one of the reasons Joyce Johnson applied autofictional elements to her novels. Not only did she align with Beat traditions and values, she also created a female Beat subjectivity which mirrored her own life experience and thus created awareness for the situation of 1950s Bohemian women. Another way, in which women's truth was rediscovered, was through various other forms of life writing by female Beat authors.

Feminist Practice of Life Writing

Some decades after the Beat Generation's prime era, there was a trend of women aligned with the movement - writers, poets, but also companions - who published their memoirs in the 1980s in order to retell their experiences within the Beat margins. Amongst them were the poet Diane Di Prima, Joyce Johnson, writer and former girlfriend of Jack Kerouac, poet Lenore Kandel, Bonnie Bremser, Hettie Jones, and the infamous Carolyn Cassady, wife of Neal Cassady. Their writing was deeply personal, critically well acclaimed and for many of them the most successful

work of their careers, regarding sales figures (Carden 2-8). It is important to analyze what motivated women to publish their life writing and why they primarily chose the genre of memoir, as well as determine the forms in which they produced those memoirs, in order to draw a conclusion how this movement affects the pre-existing narrative of the Beat Generation. Speaking from a historical point of view, the focus of literary studies was on male autobiographies for a long time, foregrounding solely male experience by not addressing the gender aspect of those single minded historical accounts (Schaser 289). Only within the past 40 years, there has been an interest in female life writing and its takes on women's position in history, agency, power, experience, subjectivity, sexuality and gender (Schaser 290-291). As of today, life writing is viewed as "a social and cultural practice in which writers develop concepts of the person, represent biographies, and articulate and judge norms and values in the context of social power relations." (Schaser 290) Thus, the genre offers valuable insights into the sociocultural context of the time represented, and is therefore a fruitful source for feminist cultural studies and historians.

One of the motivations for Beat women to write memoirs was breaking their own silence. Mary Paniccia Carden, who has contributed an extensive study about female Beat life writing, argues that the labeling of the Beat woman was both pre-textual, as in generated in other texts, and pretextual, as shaped by clichés and stereotypes (Carden 16). This means that through their previous textualization, or, inscription in the work of male Beat authors, as well as the public reception of Beat women, there already was a pre-existing notion about their personas. Mary Paniccia Carden stresses: "In this context, it is important to acknowledge that women composing narratives about their Beat experiences necessarily enter into self-conscious exchange with densely permeated narrative networks and already-known literacy, cultural, and historical intertexts in which they appear primarily as minor characters in men's stories." (Carden 7) The vessel of life writing gave them the opportunity to comment on and correct those impressions. It was an act of reclaiming their voices and changing the narrative. Further, through the public's interest in the lives of renown Beat heroes such as Jack Kerouac or Neal Cassady, the women were able to draw attention to their own artistic work. As previously mentioned, in *Minor Characters* Joyce Johnson writes about the formation process of her own debut novel, which had received only limited critical attention. She moreover integrates poems by the early deceased Elise Cowen, who was an almost forgotten member of the Beat Generation. Thematically, their texts not only discuss their lives as women of the 1950s, but also as artists. Through life writing,

Beat women were actively creating a sociopolitical context, in which their experience could be understood. Their memoirs feature several reoccurring themes, such as expression and repression of the female body, gender roles and the relations between motherhood, art and independence (Encarnacion-Pinedo 155-164).

The choice of memoir as the preferred vehicle was not arbitrary. Being one of the most popular forms of life writing, memoirs traditionally focus only on a particular time span of the author's life, which they consider crucial for their development and self-understanding. Moreover, memoirs tend to feature "density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process" (Smith/Watson 4), which establish the author as a professional and the memoir as a work of art (Smith/Watson 4). Instead of retelling the past in a straightforward way, they are mostly literary experiments occurring in various forms (Charters 440). It can be assumed that the form of memoir writing offered the Beat women writers creative variety, since the genre does not have the same strict rules as autobiography (Mlakar 21). Furthermore, as Estibaliz Encarnacion-Pinedo remarks, the establishment as professional author reinforced their claims to be active participators of artistic Beat life. As male Beat writers tended to publish their life writing in the form of journals and autobiographies, besides their already deeply autofictional work, it can be argued that memoirs potentially offered women a chance for a genre of their own. The dissociation from masculine connoted forms further gave them the chance to explore more creatively. Finally, a factor which cannot be neglected is the economic success of memoirs. We have to consider that many of those women did not have the commercial success of their male counterparts, and thus had to draw into account how well their books would sell (Encarnacion-Pinedo 151-152).

The varieties in which Beat women produced their forms of life writing is extensive. Often, they refer to and integrate Beat discourse and pre-existing Beat texts, in which they were featured. Through the inter- and crosstextuality, they take position as both subjects and objects in their writing, Mary Paniccia Carden argues. In *Minor Characters*, Joyce Johnson reconstructs her past through a sample of memorized acts, which feature her process of learning and coming-of-age. With regard to technique, she interweaves multiple text samples with her memories - her own texts, such as journal entries, or early writing exercises, but also letters from Elise Cowen or Jack Kerouac (Carden 15-18). In this journal entry for instance, she wrote down her thoughts regarding Kerouac's alcoholism: "At five o'clock in the morning in one of those endless nights a kind of panic comes over me... I do not know why this is. [...] but now I insist in tones of

outrage that ,it is time to go home‘ even though I do not really want to go there and will probably not be able to sleep [...]“ (J. Johnson 1999, 193) Johnson leaves this uncommented, her younger self’s words offer the reader with an unaltered witness of her emotional state at the time. Through the inclusion of her letters and poems, the omitted voice of Elise Cowen is recovered. Also, Johnson makes references to and quotes various influential Beat texts in order to (critically) comment on them. Thus, this offers her the possibility to engage with the ways in which she has been literary represented in the Beat discourse - and investigate how she fits into those categories. Johnson acknowledges that the opinions of others had an impact on her identity, however insists that those limited representations do not define her (Carden 18). “Where am I in all those funny categories?“ (Johnson 1999, 128), she comments on Kerouac’s cryptic and vague description of her in his novel *Desolation Angels* (1965), implying the fatuousness of her representation. The revision of and critical engagement with Beat texts in women writers’ memoirs challenges history through the inclusion and visibility of previously omitted female experience, as Estibaliz Encarnacion-Pinedo rightfully concludes (Encarnacion-Pinedo 165-166). In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac briefly depicts the last night before his passage by ship to Europe where his girlfriend Joyce, who is called Alyce in the novel, accompanies him to the dockyards. His account portrays her as a woman who is sad that he does not take her overseas with him, and focuses on his own restlessness. In *Minor Characters* however, Joyce recounts the same instance, but her most defining memory is experiencing the dockyards in the middle of the night - something that would have been much too dangerous for a woman to do by herself: “I’d never seen anything like it before. It was strange to think that because of my sex I’d probably never see any of this again, and probably wouldn’t have seen any of it at all if it hadn’t been for Jack.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 138-139) Through contrasting male experience with female experience in her texts, social inequalities are pointed out and new female perspectives are offered.

Briefly, I would also like to make an argument regarding the concept of relationality in female life writing. Traditionally, identity models in autobiographies used to be centered around individualism - this changed through feminist critics, such as Mary Mason, who determined this model as not suitable for women (Eakin 47). She claims:

„On the contrary, [...] the self- discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some "other." This recognition of another consciousness—and I emphasize recognition rather than deference—this grounding of identity through

relation to the chosen other, seems [...] to enable women to write openly about themselves.“ (Mason 210)

Her theory of the relational self thus states that women write their identities in relation to others, and not from an autonomous, individualistic point of view, as is the case in male life writing. This theory definitely corresponds to Joyce Johnson's forms of life writing, I would argue. Both her female protagonist in *Come and Join the Dance*, and the narrator in *Minor Characters* see themselves and create their identities in relation to others, which is different from the protagonist/narrator of *On the Road*. According to Helen McNeil, the masculinity idolized in Beat culture was generally connoted with individualism (McNeil 187). To Susan, her friend Kay functions as a primary point of reference, whom she consults and imitates when she is in an identity crisis: “But she has always secretly watched the wild girls, wanted to be one of them, never daring: eighth-grade Marjorie who had flunked history with a total lack of concern and had tagged after all the cigarette-smoking boys in high school; and now there was Kay.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 64) In her process of identity finding, Susan regularly evaluates her own identity with others. In *Minor Characters*, the same tendencies are visible. A young Joyce, coming from a sheltered home, is fascinated by the older Bohemian girls in Greenwich Village: “I admire the daring of these girls tremendously, their whole style, in fact - dark clothes and long earrings, the cigarettes they smoke illicitly, the many cups of coffee they say they require to keep them going.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 26) In order to fit in with her role models, Joyce starts copying their style and seeks their company. Within their community and through the interaction with them, her sense of self progresses: “I've fallen in love with them all. It's as though a longing I've carried inside of myself has suddenly crystallized. To be lonely within a camaraderie of loneliness.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 27)

Conclusion

The re-writing of the past can be considered a feminist strategy, as it uncovers gender related struggle and power imbalances, reconstitutes female identities, and creates space for women in a narrative which has been almost exclusively shaped by men. In conclusion, producing memoirs and other life writing offered Beat women the possibility to share their experience and open people's eyes to new perspectives, rewrite images of themselves, actively insert themselves into

the Beat canon, establish themselves as serious writers, not only muses of a generation, and overall emerge from the previously silent margins of Beat culture. Authors like Joyce Johnson inserted an awareness of relationality into Beat life writing, which stresses the impact of communities and human relationships on the self. Furthermore, through the help of the model of autofiction, female Beat experience as portrayed in *Come and Join the Dance* can be read as a literary processed reflection of the author's experiences. Johnson applies a traditional Beat device, further positioning herself in the Beat sphere, while at the same time having the possibility to fictionalize and alter parts of her personal experience. Following up, I want to offer the socio-historical context in which Beat women produced their writing, by consulting one of the most important texts of second wave feminism.

3.4. Parallels with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)

Joyce Johnson's novel *Come and Join the Dance* (1961) as well as her memoir *Minor Characters* (1983) are set in the 1950s and depict parts of her lived reality as a woman at that time. Her novel has been labeled by critics as "proto-feminist" (R. Johnson 2002, 70). In the context of female Beat writing, proto-feminist means that it was produced before the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, and already shows feminist tendencies, however those are not yet fully developed in the text (R. Johnson 2002, 70). In order to gather a better understanding of those texts, especially with regard to those proto-feminist notions, it is important to read them in a historical frame of reference, as Carden proposes by relating the works of female Beat autobiographers to the classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan (Carden 19), which is a groundbreaking study for a feminist reading of the 1950s and 1960s from a historical point of view. In an interview in 2004, Joyce Johnson also acknowledged the influence of Friedan's work on her re-reading of the past (J. Johnson 2004, 195). While critics such as Steven Belletto or Mary Carden have linked the works of Joyce Johnson to concepts and ideas of *The Feminine Mystique* in their research, their elaboration has not been very extensive (Belletto 2020, 319; Carden 19). My aim is to continue this approach and offer a more detailed investigation of the ways in which Johnson's books and *The Feminine Mystique* correlate.

It is however important to consider the temporal frame of the works. *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, two years after *Come and Join the Dance*, alas the novel cannot be directly influenced by Betty Friedan's theories. *Minor Characters* on the other hand was published 20 years later, and while Joyce Johnson was familiar with *The Feminine Mystique* (J. Johnson 2004, 195), there are no direct allusions to the text in her memoir. Furthermore, the feminist discourse had already evolved and progressed in the 1980s. Nevertheless, most of the research Friedan conducted for *The Feminine Mystique* took place in the 1950s (Whitaker 32) and represents the reality of many white middle-class women in the USA, who were pushed into a traditional role model as housewife and mother. Joyce Johnson, on the other hand, writes in *Come and Join the Dance* and her other novels *Bad Connections* (1978) and *In the Night Café* (1987) as well as her memoir *Minor Characters* (1983) about women emerging from the same background, who actively resist those ideas and put themselves into oppositional stances. As Beat and Bohemian women, they rebel against the traditional gender roles that confine them to the domestic sphere and limit their opportunities outside the home. I hypothesize that in their rebellion against the system, those female characters escape the "feminine mystique" (Friedan 15). Further, I suggest that Johnson incorporated awareness of the consequences of the "feminine mystique" (Friedan 15) in *Come and Join the Dance*, in the form of harbingers of the female protagonist's fate should she conform to traditional roles. In order to better understand Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, I will first offer a brief summary of the text's key ideas.

***The Feminine Mystique* (1963)**

By the 1950s, white women in the USA had almost fully accomplished legally equal rights to men, but their lived reality still adhered to traditional conventions: the husband as contributing member of the workforce and patriarchal provider for the family and the wife as mistress over kitchen and household, oftentimes raising multiple children. Furthermore, women's autonomy was still severely restricted, for instance by the lack of legal abortions, or gender-based prejudice on the work market. Paralleling the Civil Rights Movement, women in the United States and Europe yet again took the streets in order to fight for equality (Whitaker 28-29). One of the most notable activists of those times was the American journalist Betty Friedan. In her study *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, she investigates the position which American women inhabited in society from the 1950s onwards and examines its origins, construction, and

consequences. After the war, which for the first time caused endorsement and praise of women in the workforce, American women seemed to voluntarily retreat back into the domestic sphere. This retreat was however heavily influenced by the media, in particular women's magazines, and their creation of the public image of the American housewife, as Friedan argues. Being a supportive wife, mother and housewife was culturally defined the ultimate definition of femininity, anything besides this role model was deprecated and deemed un-feminine (Friedan 16). In equalizing femininity with masculinity, the phenomenon of the feminine mystique was created and eradicated all potential revolt of women against the male oppressor, argues Friedan. Yet, by positioning women only in spaces which apparently were true to their nature, such as motherhood or the domestic sphere, their potential could not unfold and their destiny was prescribed (Friedan 18-26). Women's happiness essentially depended on their contentment within the restrictions imposed on them by society, Friedan deduces (Friedan 43).

A term Friedan regularly applies is 'identity'. To her, it is crucial for American women to find their own identities, instead of defining themselves through identities which society and the media impose on them. Concluding her study, she offers a guideline for women in order to change their future, including the abolishment of the image of the housewife as role model and the glorification of marriage and motherhood, and most importantly, the need for women to seek jobs that mentally challenge them and gave them the chance to "grow as part of society" (Friedan 345).

Critically reading *The Feminine Mystique*, one has to acknowledge that the personal responsibility of men for women's discontented status in society is relatively neglected by Friedan. As Elizabeth Whitaker rightfully states, this is paradoxical regarding her appeal for women to liberate themselves independently from the burden of the feminine mystique, factoring out all the obstacles men might put in their ways. Therefore, Whitaker attests Friedan an accommodating attitude towards men (Whitaker 73). Another valuable critic of *The Feminine Mystique* is the feminist Afroamerican scholar bell hooks, who assesses Friedan's study as highly selective, since it only includes accounts of white upper and middle class women and does not engage with questions of race and class. Thus, a significant percentage of the female American population is ignored. bell hooks argues for an intersectional feminism instead, which acknowledges a diversity of experiences (hooks 1-5). Therefore, it is also important to keep hooks' arguments in mind when analyzing the accounts of female Beat writers. Despite their marginalized experience in a subculture and the social stigma they had to endure, they are mostly also white women from a middle class or upper middle class background. Their experience does

not speak for women of color or lower classes, who were affiliated with the Beat milieu, such as Irene May, who was later portrayed by Kerouac as the character Mardou Fox in his 1958 published novel *The Subterraneans* (J. Johnson 1999, 226). The proto-feminist stance of Beat women thus does not include intersectionality, but is rather a subjective approach.

The public reception of *The Feminine Mystique* was enormous. The book quickly became a bestseller, selling 3 million copies from 1963 to 1966 (Whitaker 12). Its readership consisted of academics and housewives alike, and its content was discussed broadly in the media and public sphere. Likewise, most Beat women writers were familiar with *The Feminine Mystique*. Betty Friedan herself briefly addresses Beat culture in the study (Friedan 285). However, she did not attest the movement revolutionary quality regarding gender discourse and thus criticized participation of women in the Beat movement as - as Ronna C. Johnson summarizes- “the defeat of a fifties woman by patriarchal culture“ (R. Johnson 2004, 13). Despite the claims made by Betty Friedan I would suggest an awareness of Beat women writers with the space they operated in, as well as a resistance against it which is reflected in their writing.

Women’s Identity Crisis

In *Come and Join the Dance* (1961), Joyce Johnson places her female protagonist Susan in a relatively conservative environment for a 1950s middle class woman. The college graduate is given the prospect to follow the traditional path for young women, as she has a boyfriend who values dominant cultural norms and wants to marry her. However, the protagonist does not appear to be content with this future: “The terrifying thing about Jerry is that he was someone she could marry - she could marry him and never go alone to Paris- he was only waiting for a signal.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 8) An inexplicable, depressing feeling haunts her when she thinks of her relationship to Jerry and her life in general. She experiences feelings of emptiness, disembodiment and apathy in the text, as visible in those passages: “She had become frozen into a deadly laziness. If she moved she would shatter like glass.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 3) and: “The listlessness of the afternoon settled heavily upon her again, and she knew she could be neither gay, nor kind, nor cruel - only blank, a spectator of herself, immensely bored.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 27) There is no explanation for her feelings and it appears as if the protagonist does not know herself what is happening and why she is acting either apathetic or impulsively and out of order.

One could argue that her complicated emotional state corresponds with regards to content and time to “the problem that has no name“ (Friedan 15). In the beginning of her study, Friedan surveyed several women in the United States, who were struggling with an unknown mental health issue. Attempting to express this indescribable, undefined state of emotions, affected women claimed to feel as if they were empty, incomplete or non-existent in their accounts (Friedan 20). Although it is not disclaimed in the text, the protagonist Susan seems to be aware that being an unhappy housewife and mother will also be her fate if she adheres to society’s conventions, and she dreads this idea. Potentially triggered by this, she finds the courage to eventually break up with her conservative boyfriend . This occasion, although it is tentative, is one of the first acts of the protagonist breaking her passivity and starting to reclaim her agency. One could hypothesize that her symptoms are a precipitated response to the lack of (desired) perspectives in her life. In this context, Steven Belletto points out the correlations between *Come and Join the Dance* (1961) and Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), which is set in the same place and time and also features a white middle class female protagonist. Protagonist Esther suffers just like Susan from the depressing reality for an ambitious educated young woman in the 1950s, in her case ending in institutionalization (Belletto 2020, 319). In both novels, “proto-feminist writers held out for public scrutiny those norms that dictated what they could or could not do“ (Belletto 2020, 319). Watching her peers from college on graduation day, Susan thinks: “[...]these pastel girls with the sunlight falling on them coming to get their orchids, their perfect, pleased children’s smiles, the engagement rings protecting them.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 109) Her observations parallel Betty Friedan’s study of college girls in the 1950s naively seeking fulfillment in their relationships. Being engaged by the time you were graduating was seen by society as a safe deposit for a promising future (Friedan 154-167). Although the protagonist could have also had this security through maintaining a relationship with her boyfriend, she rejects it. In this particular scene, she actively dissociates herself from the other girls, as she identifies herself as “the odd one“ (J. Johnson 2014, 109), who does not quite fit in. By rejecting the ideals set by mainstream culture, the protagonist reinforces her Beat label.

One of Betty Friedan's arguments is that "the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity- a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique [...] as the Victorian culture did not permit women to accept or gratify their basic sexual needs, our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role." (Friedan 77) While men's search for identity always played a vital key role in the

American school of thought, women's identity crisis was simply ignored (Friedan 78-79). This idea resonates in Beat culture - while the male Beat hero's eternal spiritual quest was idolized (Hemmer 113), there was little to no room for women in Beat texts to explore their own identities. Joyce Johnson and other female Beat writers challenged this lack in their work. An example therefore is how she recounts her transition to college in *Minor Characters*: "Exhausted by my efforts to lead a double life that would not be detected by my parents, I was giving up Bohemianism, which I now saw as childish. I believed I was ready for an instant transformation in which I would become 'collegiate'. I did not at all want to be perceived as odd." (J. Johnson 1999, 47) Playfully the narrator tries out different forms of self-expression, which signify her yet not fixed sense of identity.

The memoir further explores Johnson's experiences as young woman in the male-dominated Beat scene of the 1950s and the constraints placed on her by societal expectations of femininity. Through her account, it is conveyed that many traditional gender roles were kept up in Beat life, such as the responsibility of women regarding all tasks of domestic life. How did this compare to the society-formed ideal for American women, the "happy housewife heroine" (Friedan 33) which Friedan illustrates in *The Feminine Mystique*?

The Ideal of the "Happy Housewife Heroine" (Friedan 33)

The women Beat figures in *Minor Characters* are cleaning and cooking for the men, all while working jobs to sustain themselves and pursuing their writing careers - a circumstance which is portrayed but not critically investigated by the narrator. Domesticity was still seen as a valued skill for women - also in Beat circles. Joyce describes the wife of a befriended couple as follows: "To Jack, Cessa was a goddess of domesticity, second only to Memere. It meant a lot to me to have her acceptance." (J. Johnson 1999, 196) Kerouac's admiration for Cessa's domestic qualities puts her on a pedestal for Joyce, who craves his validation. Further, unable to fulfill Kerouac's fetish for 'fellaheen' women, she attempts to at least represent the image of a nurturing, caring woman: "I was everydayness, bacon and eggs in the middle of the morning or the middle of the night, which I learned to cook just the way he liked [...]" (J. Johnson 1999, 131). Joyce attempts to provide the restless Kerouac with a home, the home he subconsciously

craves but at the same time rejects, and eventually accepts her failure in domesticating him: “There was no room for me in his house, because his aloneness would include his mother [...]” (J. Johnson 1999, 153). While the “happy housewife heroine” (Friedan 33) supposedly should be the archenemy of the male Beat hero, since she represents conformism and subjugates to capitalist ideals, *Minor Characters* ironically depicts how valued traditionally feminine qualities really were in the Beat cosmos.

Another allusion to the “happy housewife heroine” (Friedan 33) as role model for 1950s women is made in *Come and Join the Dance*, when Peter mocks Susan on a drive through the suburbs: “,You be a good girl, Susan, and they might let you live up here. You could have a living room with wall-to-wall carpeting and a dishwashing machine.” (J. Johnson 2014, 75) The female protagonist immediately opposes this notion: “,I don’t want to be a good girl!” (J. Johnson 2014, 75) Those accounts show the female characters’ awareness of the gender roles and expectations of their time. However, while they might sometimes play along with them, they never fully embrace them- the dreams and hopes of Johnson’s female characters are not new washing machines or happy families. Their dreams are connected to making art, being independent and living an emancipated life. Of course, this emancipated life also included self-determined exploration of their own sexuality within the prudish sexual climate of the 1950s.

Intersections between Sexuality and Identity

Disregarding the cultural taboo, Joyce Johnson vowed to herself to unapologetically write about her life as a young woman emancipating herself, also sexually, and thus to bend sociocultural norms. She states: “I would make it my business to write about young women quite different from the ones portrayed weekly in the pages of *The New Yorker*. I would write about furnished rooms and sex. Sex had to be approached critically, I thought. I would not succumb to the ladylike stratagem of shimmering my way towards discreet fadeouts.” (J. Johnson 1999, 148) Johnson made a very conscious decision against one of the principles of the feminine mystique, which expected women to be covert about sexual topics in public. Attempting to include female consciousness and acknowledging the role sexuality plays in a woman’s identity formation, she made it her mission to address sex without condemnation, cliché or vagueness, but instead with all its facets (R. Johnson 2002, 74).

Female sexuality from a contemporary perspective is also point of research in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she examines the link between female sexuality and identity formation. Observing an increasingly active sexuality in women, Friedan comments critically. A whole chapter is devoted to the so-called "sex-seekers" (Friedan 258), women consumed and constrained by the discontent resulting from the effect of the feminine mystique, who search for a feeling of fulfillment through excessive sexual activity and extramarital affairs. Sex is described as "the only frontier open" (Friedan 261) for women from this perspective. She however argues that those women's increased sex lives do not give them satisfaction since they lack a sense of personal purpose (Friedan 260-261). As Friedan also interviewed several unmarried sexually active women, parallels between Johnson's characters and Friedan's sociocultural findings can be drawn. In those young women, Friedan detected a similar pattern, which she analyzes as using sex "to erase their lack of identity" (Friedan 277). The sexual partner becomes irrelevant and sex thus becomes fully depersonalized. However, she further criticizes using sex as a method to progress female identity formation (Friedan 277-278). Certainly, those evaluations have to be read critically from today's perspective and the progress within the feminist movement regarding a self-authorized and positively connoted exploration of sexuality. Nevertheless, they are an important contemporary report as they engaged with hushed-up tendencies in society.

As a responsible factor for women's changed sexual attitude, Friedan blames the American society of the 1950s, which she perceives as over sexualized, as reflected in contemporary movies and advertisements. This tendency highlights the prevailing ambiguity of sexuality: Women were on the one hand socially pressured into creating a look, which was appealing to men, as the booming cosmetics and fashion industries show. However, on the other hand they were expected to uphold their virginity until marriage, while young men were encouraged to seek sexual experience.

The feeling of being desired, of using their sexual powers, gives women a temporary sense of satisfaction, but it will never replace actual personal fulfillment, argues Friedan (Friedan 262-266). She claims: "A woman who is herself only a sexual object, lives finally in a world of objects, unable to touch in others the individual identity she lacks herself." (Friedan 266) The accounts of the female protagonist's sexual experiences in *Come and Join the Dance* support Friedan's argument to some extent. Friedan claims that the symbiosis between a healthy sexuality and feeling of identity is undeniable, but engaging in sexual acts solely as validation of one's womanhood is dangerously counterproductive: "Sex without self, enshrined by the

feminine mystique, casts an ever-darkening shadow over man's image of woman and woman's image of herself." (Friedan 281) Sexual activity thus cannot be used as a gate-opener in order to achieve personal happiness and a sense of fulfillment. Remarkably for its times, the romanticized cultural ideal of a memorable and significant first sexual experience is displayed in the novel only partially. The protagonist Susan rejects her boyfriend Jerry on various occasions, since she does not want him to be her first sexual partner. However, she voices her discontent in graduating from college sexually inexperienced, since this goes against "her principles" (J. Johnson 2014, 47). Those principles are not clearer defined in the novel, but they could signify the protagonist's wish to adhere to Beat conventions. Her virginity is perceived as a burden, as she links it to immaturity and exclusion: "She was sick of being a child, sick of being only a member of the audience. It was time for her to move into the Southwick Arms Hotel." (J. Johnson 2014, 47) To the protagonist, the Southwick Arms Hotel symbolizes a place for young women without the constraints of 1950s society, a place where experiences are possible, which will potentially serve her with the answers to her questions of identity that she is looking for. When the protagonist, rather by coincidence, has the opportunity to have sex for the first time, she makes a very conscious decision to follow through with it. Although there is initial hesitation, she makes up her mind irrespective of her partner's opinion: "She began to laugh because it was all inevitable, all decided now, and he didn't know it. The outlaws were about to welcome a new member." (J. Johnson 2014, 84) Losing one's virginity, a highly held value for girls in the 1950s, acts almost as a rite of passage, which gives the protagonist the opportunity to fit in with the sexually more experienced Beat characters of the novel. She ends up taking this opportunity. The protagonist feigns spontaneity and carelessness regarding her sexual activity, and thereby emulates Beat value. Wishing she could progress her identity formation through making sexual experiences, and therefore being knowledgeable about the mystery of sex, she arbitrarily chooses her first partner, Anthony: "She felt nothing but an immense curiosity about what was going to happen next [...] - but Anthony didn't necessarily have to be there at all; it wouldn't make any difference who was with her." (J. Johnson 2014, 85) The lines indicate that the protagonist expects some revelation from this encounter, some sort of eye opening. Further, this scene corresponds to Friedan's opinion that sex becomes increasingly depersonalized if it is used in order to achieve something bigger from it (Friedan 277).

During the event itself, the protagonist is fully aware of every detail, the sounds and movements, as is described in the text. Yet, she appears to feel somehow dissociated from her body, as there are no indications of feelings of pleasure nor pain mentioned. Afterwards, she

finds herself disappointed with the experience, as she does not feel the change she hoped for: “She wanted to be alone - alone with her body and her emptiness and the unchanged face she had seen in the bathroom mirror.” (J. Johnson 2014, 89) A feeling of alienation, of dissatisfaction is described, which points back to the notion of sex without self. At this point in the novel, the female protagonist is still in the midst of her identity building process, she expects revelation from this event in her life, which cannot be fulfilled. When her expectations are disappointed, the same old feeling of emptiness and disconnection haunts her which she feels throughout the novel. The description of the event resonates with one of the author’s own first sexual experiences, which she recounts in *Minor Characters*. After an encounter which is described as consensual and not necessarily unpleasant, the narrator, nevertheless, is left with the thought: “Was this all there was?” (J. Johnson 1999, 85) Presumably, she had ascribed a higher meaning to sexual life before actually participating in it.

However, the second sexual experience of the protagonist in *Come and Join the Dance* clearly differs from the first one. Again, it is initiated on her own terms, but this time with a man she is romantically interested in and shares some sort of connection with. She describes the feeling of being with him with having a certain “rightness“ (J. Johnson 2014,176), indicating that the uncertainty of her first time dissolved. In contrast to the protagonist’s first sexual encounter, this experience appears to be somehow liberating to her and is accompanied by some sort of eye opener: “The world was returning to her - coming in through the open window.“ (J. Johnson 2014,175) After the sex, Susan gets ready to leave, watching herself and her partner in the mirror, a reference to her first encounter with Anthony which occurred in the same room: “There was a girl in the mirror with a clear-eyed, still look, who didn’t smile this time.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 177) In a moment of observation and reflection, the protagonist experiences clarity and composure, she is aware of her emotions and motifs. She packs her things and embarks on her adventure to Paris. However, she still gives Peter some role in playing a part in her emancipation, as she sees him as the one who had “given her a different face“. (J. Johnson 2014,177) The sexual liberation is portrayed as not solely carried out by the female character.

In *Come and Join the Dance*, the protagonist does use sex as a tool to accelerate her emancipation in the first instance. The encounter is, as previously mentioned, not necessarily pleasant and leaves her feeling emotionally empty. However, once her character development has progressed, as she has stood up for herself and faced consequences for her actions, she is able to experience a sexually fulfilled moment. Since the protagonist already broke her passivity in the second occasion, she is able to be more conscious of the situation and the role she has in it. Sex

is not used in order to achieve something bigger, it is merely performed to fulfill the character's autonomous sexual needs. Sexuality also concerns nakedness and being comfortable with one's own naked body. Especially in the Puritan climate of 1950s society, where nudity was avoided as it was seen as inherently sexual, this was the case. While in *Come and Join the Dance* the more experienced Kay casually undresses in front of her friend, Susan is perceived to be uncomfortable with this situation and seems almost disturbed by Kay's behavior: "After all, Susan thought, Kay wasn't a virgin. Perhaps once you had irrevocably gone to bed, you took your body for granted - you knew, which was different than knowing about." (J. Johnson 2014, 47) This is yet again an indicator that sexuality is, to the female protagonist, deeply connected to a sense of self, an opportunity to discover one's identity. The gateway to this new feeling can be, in her mind, opened through sexual experience. During her first sexual experience, the act of being naked with somebody else is perceived as bewildering: "How odd to be naked with a stranger!" (J. Johnson 2014, 86) However, when Susan has sex for the second time, there is a naturalness going along with her nudity. It can further be hypothesized that an interaction between the protagonist's enhanced sense of self and her sexual confidence took place. While the representation of female sexuality in Johnson's work cannot solely be analyzed with Friedan's theories, there are still some interferences. Another feminist theoretical framework which has been suggested by Partoéns in order to analyze female sexuality in Johnson's texts is Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (Partoéns 43). An aspect which is equally as significant the correlations of sexuality and identity, is the depiction of female education, which will be discussed next.

Gender-Biased Education

Both *Come and Join the Dance* and *Minor Characters* feature the spatial setting of an all-girls-college, a location reflecting the author's personal experience. Thereby, Johnson critically examines her education and the approach of some educators. While a lot of the plot in *Come and Join the Dance* is centered around the protagonist's planned graduation, both her and her friend Kay repeatedly show anti-academic stances. For instance, Susan walks out of her final exam because: "Melville was unimportant and all the other questions were unimportant and had nothing to do with what was really going to happen." (J. Johnson 2014, 4) One of Friedan's most

crucial critiques is directed towards the American education system. In *The Feminine Mystique* she investigates how gender-based education influenced women's career paths. There was a discrepancy in the rising numbers of female college students compared to the actual quota of women in professional careers. Friedan explained this with a lack of motivation in young white middle class women to actually pursue a career after their graduation. Education had the prejudice of "defeminizing" American women, which later resulted in their unhappiness as housewives (Friedan 157). Therefore, the curriculum was adapted for young women as much as possible in order to train them for their future role in the family. Instead of sciences, women were pushed into "feminized higher education" (Friedan 160) which consisted of subjects like sociology, anthropology or psychology. In *Come and Join the Dance*, Susan for instance takes a class in English literature. Furthermore, so called marriage classes were offered, in which women were taught to adjust into the role society had reserved for them. Oftentimes, the college campus was seen as a functioning marriage mart, and the sole purpose for a woman to attend college was to find a husband and fill the interval between high school and starting a family (Friedan, 166-170). Although the protagonist's planned graduation as mark for a new chapter in her life is a central event in the novel, there are no indications what she aspires to achieve in terms of a career. It appears as if college was more a matter of social prestige to her, a place where she, coming from the suburbs, hoped for change and excitement - and eventually ended up disappointed: „New York was to become hers when she started college. [...] She hadn't known that her New York would be even smaller than Cedarhurst - six blocks that had no scenic interest.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 12)

Regarding career opportunities, Friedan also detected certain patterns in her research: Women who were working usually had occupations with little chance of moving up the job ladder, such as typists or secretaries. (Friedan 17) The protagonist seems to be aware of those limited career options for women, as her comment regarding her classmates' wardrobe on graduation day shows: „How dressed up everyone was, adult, already vaguely secretarial.“ (J. Johnson, 2014, 104) Joyce Johnson herself was indeed very familiar with uncreative office work, as she recounts in *Minor Characters*, where after college she works in various jobs as secretary and typist in order to financially sustain herself while writing on her first novel. Just like her protagonist, Joyce also did not complete her Bachelor's degree. Throughout *Minor Characters*, her increasing defiance towards the traditional education is shown. She describes her first excursions into the Bohemian scene of Greenwich Village at age 13 as her entrance into the real world: “Real life was not to be found in the streets around my house, or anywhere on the

Upper West Side, for that matter, or in my school of girls grabbing joylessly for marks, hysterical about geometry exams and Latin homework [...]“ (J. Johnson 1999, 30). Instead of the rule-abiding environment of school, the Greenwich Village offers her a place where she can develop freely. From the Bohemians, she learns about political issues such as the racial segregation in the South, but also about the cultural codes of the scene, for example that “going crazy is not something frowned upon in the Village but sort of respected if done by artists.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 31) All those life lessons are for the coming-of-age Joyce much more important than any education she can get in school. About her college Barnard, she later remarks: “It was the era of the ivory tower - and Barnard provided its maiden version.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 48) The school is described in the text as traditionalist and confining, despite its liberal-arts curriculum. In her college education, sexist stereotypes are perpetuated. She recalls for example how in one of her writing classes, a renown male professor mocked the female students for not traveling the country like other writers of the time. Johnson comments the resulting discouragement of the aspiring female writers as: “The young would-be writers in this room have understood instantly that of course there is no hope.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 81) Through the prevalent sexism in education, women were not taken seriously in their pursuit of serious careers or artistic endeavors. However, the education of their daughters often times held a special significance for the mothers, as will be further evaluated next.

Mothers and Daughters

A generation gap between the protagonists and their parents, specifically their mothers, is addressed in both works by Johnson. The protagonist Susan, as well as the narrator Joyce, come from sheltered middle class backgrounds, growing up as only child with big expectancies of their parents on them, which further complicates the emancipation from their families. Feminist historian Ruth Rosen poses the question: “What did it mean to a daughter to reject the world of her mother—or to live out her dreams?“ (Rosen 316) According to Betty Friedan’s theory, many mothers suffered from a loss of their own identity through the feminine mystique and thus compensated it by living through the lives of their children (Friedan 300-306). The protagonist of *Come and Join the Dance* for instance avoids telling her parents about her failed graduation for a long time, as she is aware that she is expected to be the first one to graduate from college: “Her

mother had already created the graduation, had insured it in advance at the department stores.“ (J. Johnson 2014, 123) As expected, her mother’s reaction to her failed graduation is enraged and despaired. She laments that her daughter’s graduation was supposed to be the happiest day of her life. This could be because, as Betty Friedan suggests, the mother has eclipsed her own identity so much that she defines herself only in terms of being a mother and, by extension, her daughter. As a result, her daughter’s failures are her own. In *Minor Characters*, Joyce remembers similar experiences. Her mother, who wanted to become a concert singer but instead married her father, wishes for her daughter to be a musical child prodigy: “In any case, it isn’t her plan for me to be a mere pianist. I’m to be something more exalted - a great woman composer. An eminence I’m to achieve if possible before I’m twenty-one or before I throw it all away on marriage - a state she hopes I’ll avoid as long as possible.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 15) Not being able to pursue her dreams as young woman, Joyce’s mother wants something different for her daughter in order to soothe her own identity crisis: “She is living her second life. [...] She recognizes no boundaries between our separate beings.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 15-16) The mother’s keen aspirations regarding her daughter result in conflict, as Joyce feels pressured to adhere to an image her mother created. This pressure increasingly leads to the alienation of mother and daughter. When Joyce rebels by quitting her piano lessons, her mother’s reaction is defeated: “My mother took all the music I had ever written and wrapped it in plastic and put it away in the locked drawer where she kept things that were important to her. [...] She seemed to believe that some day I’d ask her to open the drawer, but I knew I never would.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 97)

Another point of conflict between mother and daughter is, of course, Joyce’s moving out of the parental home and relationship with Alex, an older, divorced man. Her mother is aware of the social implications of young women moving out of home, and is worried about the family’s reputation. Joyce states: “Everyone knew in the 1950s why a girl from a nice family left home. The meaning of her theft of herself from her parents was clear to all - as well as what she’d be up to in this room of her own.“ (J. Johnson 1999, 102) In *Minor Characters*, this emancipation process and the generational conflict between her and her mother are depicted out of Joyce’s perspective, including the consequences of estrangement and alienation with her familial background. Both her and the protagonist of *Come and Join the Dance* experience feelings of guilt connected to this dilemma. But, regardless, they refrain from following into their mother’s footsteps and instead attempt to explore themselves.

Exploring Identity through Community and Art

It was crucial for 1950s women to create an identity which was not just formed within the bounds of domesticity: "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.'" (Friedan 32) However, in their identity finding process, those women lacked female role models. Often, this led to an attempt at modeling themselves after their male peers, which brought along further complications and contradictions (Rosen 316). Living in solidarity with like-minded female individuals could help women in creating independent identities. For Joyce, this is for instance found in the community with her friend Elise: "At last we were roommates. And weren't we like *New Yorker* girls now that we'd achieved such propriety, scrubbing our worn-out underwear in the kitchen sink while Lady Day sang 'I Cover the Waterfront' to us from the photograph." (J. Johnson 1999, 249) She experiences a sense of belonging and contentment. Joyce finds female role models in the Beat community, such as for instance the befriended artist Mary Frank, whom she admires for always prioritizing her work. However, Mary is also depicted as struggling with her own creative development and the care work she is responsible for: "She'd been working on the piece, but then the children had gotten mischievous and impossible, and then it had been time to slice the vegetables. Oh how she despaired of producing anything under these conditions! A place of her own was what she needed." (J. Johnson 1999, 242) This raises issues of unfairly distributed domestic work within Bohemian families, which magnified the battles of Beat female artists and showed how the inequity can also take place within the homes they created.

One of the suggestions Betty Friedan offers to women in order to overcome the problematics of the feminine mystique is to find creative work which fulfills them (Friedan 344). Friedan did not exclusively mean artistic work and other professions in order to become successful, but rather to help women partake in social life, as explained by Levine (Levine 43). In *Minor Characters*, for example, Joyce and Elise sometimes read their texts to each other, creating a small female artistic community. On various occasions, Joyce describes the process of writing as healing and therapeutic. When Elise goes missing for a while, she writes a poem in order to cope with her absence, when her lover Alex breaks up with her, she transforms him into a character in a novel: "By making Alex into a character, I took away his power to hurt me." (J. Johnson 1999,

117) I would argue that Beat women attempted to achieve self-fulfillment through their writing, as it gave them the chance to tell and reflect on their experience and to experiment creatively with content and style. They left behind traditional gender norms of the time by not solely being mothers and housewives, financially dependent on their husbands, and instead led emancipated lives pursuing their artistic endeavors as much as it was possible.

Conclusion

Overall, I would argue that *The Feminine Mystique* and Johnson's books work in synergy. *Come and Join the Dance* offers a perspective of a young woman breaking with the feminine mystique society wants to impose on her by going through a self-determined identity quest and confronting early onsets of "the problem that has no name" (Friedan 15). In *Minor Characters*, the Beat women oppose the feminine mystique, as they do not comply with traditional role images of the time, emancipate themselves from their parents, criticize education and express themselves creatively through their art. It could further be argued, referring to my argument made in the previous chapter, that the identity formation in Johnson's texts not only takes place through singular actions of the characters, but in the characters' relations to others. Inspired and influenced by other women, the female characters gather the courage to start their self-realization.

4. Conclusion

I have demonstrated that the proto-feminist approach of Johnson's writing takes place in a variety of examples: First of all, the traditional and sexist gendered tropes female characters inhabit in male Beat literature, as established by Helen McNeil, are countered and revised in her texts. While male Beat authors were able to create writing without presuppositions, female authors like Joyce Johnson had to actively write against pre-existing stereotypes of women. As those gendered Beat tropes aligned with the gender roles of the time, Johnson's disagreement with them can be labeled as proto-feminist. Secondly, Joyce Johnson employs round female

characters with nuanced personalities as active agents to her texts, who make choices and take actions that affect the plot and challenge gender codes. Like this, she creates new female agency in Beat texts. Through the first introduction of a female Beat protagonist in *Come and Join the Dance*, who breaks her passivity and emerges from spectator to participant, the trope of the silent Beat chick is countered, and the existence of a Beat heroine is authorized (R. Johnson 2002, 91-92). The predominately male Beat experience is thus expanded by a female perspective. I would definitely consider this implementation of female consciousness into a primarily male genre as proto-feminist. Thirdly, Johnson takes part in the recovering of female-authored voice to reflect experience in autobiographical and autofictional writing. Beat women were positioned in the margins of an already marginalized space. In their own texts, Johnson and others demonstrate what this means for them, and thus also offer new insights into the Beat Generation, and the life as a woman in the 1950s. Through their life writing, women further position themselves as Beat authors in the literary sphere in an act of reclamation (Encarnacion-Pinedo, 151-152). Finally, Johnson's texts examine struggles of young white middle class women in 1950s America, and thus feature multiple parallels to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Beat women actively opposed the cultural dogma of the 1950s and rejected the feminine mystique, and therefore offer an alternate model of female identity to the prevalent role model of female identity.

Apart from further elaborating the research of Ronna C. Johnson and Mary Paniccia Carden on Joyce Johnson's revisions of gendered Beat tropes and Beat iconoclasm, I have examined the representation of female sexuality in *Come and Join the Dance* and *Minor Characters* in greater detail. I conclude that Johnson describes the anticipation of the sexual revolution from her point of view - including the perils sexually emancipated women had to face, such as social stigma and unwanted pregnancy. Female sexuality further functions in her texts as an experimental playground to explore identity. Moreover, I argue for a rebellion against problematic Beat notions surrounding consciousness and female orgasm in *Come and Join the Dance*. In order to further add to the discourse of women Beats' life writing, I have briefly examined Johnson's texts with regard to autofictionality, and suggest that they have autofictional qualities, which opens up the field for more research in order to determine to which extent other female Beat texts qualify as autofictional. Eventually, I have determined various correlations between Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Johnson's writing. The female identity crisis examined in Friedan also exists in Johnson's writing, however it is overcome autonomously, through adapting different modes of self-expression. There is an awareness of contemporary gender roles at the time in Johnson's texts, and even approval to a certain extent - however, her female Beat

characters oppose the contemporary role model for women. Friedan's argument for a fulfilled sexuality with a stable sense of self is reflected in *Come And Join the Dance*. Further, the exploring of identity through artistic work, which Friedan suggests in order to defy the feminine mystique, is deeply ingrained in female Beat culture and is experienced as such by Johnson and her colleagues.

It is important to take into consideration that the research scope of this thesis is limited to the representation and experience of white Beat women from a middle class background. Future research should be devoted to intersections of race, class and gender within a Beat context, especially regarding the representation of Jack Kerouac's 'fellaheen' women. Some valuable research in this field has already been conducted by Nancy McCampbell Grace and Eftychia Mikelli. Moreover, I like to suggest a comprehensive and in-depth examination of whiteness in Beat writings by female as well as male authors.

Word Count: 32 513

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Appendix: Abstract

Joyce Johnson is one of many female writers, who stayed in the margins of the predominantly male Beat Generation. Her novel *Come and Join the Dance* (1961) and her memoir *Minor Characters* (1983) reflect on events in her life and describe the Beat experience from a new female perspective.

This thesis investigates the position of women in the Beat Generation and in 1950s society and analyzes the proto-feminist qualities of Johnson's writing. The thesis contains a close reading of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), a Beat key text, which through its portrayal of female characters created several gendered Beat tropes. Further, it will be analyzed how Joyce Johnson responded to those tropes in her texts, how she revised Beat iconoclasms through her life writing, how she depicted the female subcultural experience in 1950s society, and the ways in which her texts correspond to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The analysis comes to the result that Joyce Johnson's texts can be labeled as proto-feminist, as they revise pre-existing Beat tropes, implement female Beat protagonists, recover a female-authored voice and critically engage with the problems women faced in the conservative culture of the 1950s.

Joyce Johnson ist eine von vielen Schriftstellerinnen, die im Schatten der männlich geprägten Beat Generation standen. Ihr Roman *Come and Join the Dance* (1961) und ihre Memoiren *Minor Characters* (1983) reflektieren Ereignisse aus ihrem Leben und beschreiben Erfahrungen in der Beat-Subkultur aus einer neuen, weiblichen Perspektive. Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht die Stellung der Frau in der Beat Generation, sowie in der Gesellschaft der 1950er Jahre, und analysiert die profeministischen Qualitäten von Johnsons Werk. Die Arbeit enthält eine Analyse und Diskussion von Jack Kerouacs *On the Road* (1957), einem Schlüsseltext der Beat Generation, der durch die Darstellung weiblicher Charaktere verschiedene Beat-Tropen kreiert hat. Von dieser Basis ausgehend wird untersucht, in welcher Art Joyce Johnson in ihren Texten auf diese Tropen reagiert und wie sie die Ikonoklasmen der Beat-Bewegung durch ihre autobiographische Schreibweise überarbeitet. Außerdem wird behandelt, wie Joyce Johnson die weibliche subkulturelle Erfahrung in der Gesellschaft der 1950er Jahre darstellt und inwiefern ihre Texte mit Betty Friedans *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) korrespondieren. Die Analyse

kommt zu dem Ergebnis, dass Joyce Johnsons Texte als profeministisch bezeichnet werden können, da sie bereits bestehende Beat-Tropen überarbeiten, weibliche Beat-Protagonistinnen integrieren, die weibliche Autorenstimme wiederfinden und stärken, und sich kritisch mit der Problematik auseinandersetzen, mit der Frauen in der konservativen Leitkultur der 1950er Jahre konfrontiert waren.