

# CONTROLLING

## JOYCE JOHNSON AND SELF-DEFINITION IN WOMEN'S BEAT LITERATURE

BY GLORIA RUSSELL

Recounting her 1962 trip to India with Gary Snyder and Peter Orlovsky, Beat poet Joanne Kyger writes, “Here I am reading about your trip to India/with Gary Snyder and Peter Orlovsky. Period./Who took the picture of you three/With smart Himalayan backdrop/The bear?” (R. Johnson). In this poem, Kyger complains about Ginsberg’s refusal to acknowledge her involvement in their trip to India and, in writing the poem, she inserts herself back into a narrative from which she had been erased (R. Johnson). The patriarchal structure within the Beat movement created a means to silence many women’s narratives, something which prompted many of those women to write and publish memoirs years after the fact. This paper analyzes how Jack Kerouac attempts to control or subdue Joyce Johnson’s narrative, as portrayed in her memoir, *Minor Characters*, and how this control manifests in her novel, *Come and Join the Dance*.

# THE NARRATIVE

Recounting her 1962 trip to India with Gary Snyder and Peter Orlovsky, Beat poet Joanne Kyger writes, “Here I am reading about your trip to India/with Gary Snyder and Peter Orlovsky. Period./Who took the picture of you three/With smart Himalayan backdrop/The bear?” (R. Johnson 20). In this poem, Kyger complains about Ginsberg’s refusal to acknowledge her involvement in their trip to India and, in writing the poem, she inserts herself back into a narrative from which she had been erased (20).

The Beat movement was a literary counterculture from the 1950s which often rebelled against post-World War II capitalism-driven expectations of a suburban, materialistic lifestyle. While the men of the Beat movement, namely Jack Kerouac, have become iconic figures, the women of the Beat movement have been obscured by time. Joyce Johnson, a woman Beat writer, discusses the struggles Beat women faced both in her memoir, *Minor Characters*, and in the novel loosely based on her own experiences, *Come and Join the Dance*. The patriarchal structure within the Beat movement created a means to silence many women’s narratives, something which prompted many of those women to write and publish memoirs years after the fact. This paper analyzes how Jack Kerouac attempts to control or subdue Joyce Johnson’s narrative, as portrayed in her memoir, *Minor Characters*, and how this control manifests in *Come and Join the Dance*.

## Beat Women as Caretakers

Johnson took on the conventional woman’s role in her relationship with Kerouac during his ascent to fame, putting her own art on hold to sustain his. In *Minor Characters*, she

notes the common Beat character type, the artist’s wife, when discussing her relationship with Fee Dawson, one of the young artists in the Beat circle. She considers becoming his ‘old lady,’ which would involve straightening him out, cleaning up his workspace, and effectively achieving “old-ladyhood, [becoming] the mainstay of someone else’s self-destructive genius” (*Minor Characters* 170). In her relationship with Kerouac, though, Johnson describes a life very similar to that which she rejects in pursuing a relationship with Fee. When Kerouac visits New York, she cooks him food the way he likes (132); he uses her home as a shelter from the storm of publicity arising from new fame (191); and to do so, puts her own art on hold: towards the end of the memoir, she writes “I could never manage to write anything when Jack was with me. I always wanted to be with him more than I wanted to be at the typewriter” (243). In doing this, she becomes subservient to Kerouac and fulfills gender norm expectations by acting as his caretaker.

Outsiders also view Joyce as Kerouac’s personal caretaker. Johnson recounts one of Kerouac’s editors taking her hands and saying, “take care of this man” (*Minor Characters* 186). This insinuates that her role is primarily to take care of Kerouac because as a woman, her own identity ought to exist to serve the male, and in this case, the woman ought to exist to sustain the male artist. Within the context of the 1950s, to be a woman was to be a domestic servant in subordination to one’s husband. In her relationship with Kerouac, she becomes his old lady, stunting her own growth as an individual to serve the self-destructive genius she loves, remaining overlooked as an artist and treated more as a caretaker for Kerouac, a woman as defined by mainstream society, than anything else.

One possible read of this relationship might be that Kerouac forced Johnson into a submissive, traditional role that she did not want to fill, effectively halting her ability to evolve as an individual. However, this only works if Kerouac forced her into this role. While Johnson finds herself subservient to Kerouac, she finds herself there due to her own conscious decisions, even though those decisions are made from a deeply complicated context. In an interview with Nancy Grace, Johnson discussed her time with Kerouac as an enlightening and positive experience. She described that while she would not or could not work on her own art when he was around, she found that in retrospect, he had, overall, a positive impact on her art. She said he encouraged her to take her art seriously, writing being something important that they shared, and her written correspondence with him inspired her own writer-ly voice, “writing up, writing in a looser way, writing with breath” (Grace 123). Although there may be some subtext here regarding Kerouac’s male voice entering Johnson’s artistic voice, the implication seems to be that overall, she believed he helped, rather than hindered, her art.

As for her domestic and subservient position, Kerouac did not force her to remain subservient to him. Johnson did express feelings of oppression in her later relationship with Peter Pinchbeck, saying that “there was just no possibility, no space in [her] life for any work of [her] own” (Grace 125), but in the same interview painted Kerouac as encouraging. “He felt I should follow his path,” she says, “but for course, that was impossible...for me...I was good at taking care of myself and I wasn’t going to jump off the deep end” (Grace 123). Johnson did not want to go on the road. She chose to stay away from the road due to her own fear. This is not to suggest that she failed to rebel in any significant way—she left her neighborhood; engaged in sex out of wedlock, which at one point led to an abortion; and failed to graduate college, to name a few transgressions

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against the mainstream. Like all Beat women, Johnson had to determine what it meant to be a woman in a liminal space created by the patriarchal counterculture. In this space, she seeks a relationship with Kerouac, who fits comfortably in the male-dominated Beat space and does not want to be pulled out of it. In pursuing this relationship, Johnson searches for something that fits neither the conventions of the Beat lifestyle nor those of the middle class she’s trying to escape, and there’s no model that exists on which to base such a relationship (Carden 154).

## Beat Women In Domesticity

In Johnson’s 1961 coming-of-age novel *Come and Join the Dance*, a young woman named Susan begins spending time with two men named Peter and Anthony while waiting to go to Paris, where she hopes to be shocked and enlightened by the culture. Johnson frees her protagonist Susan from the domestic sphere, and by killing Peter’s car and sending Susan to Paris, Johnson reverses the patriarchal dynamic enforced by the Beat movement. Understanding how Johnson gives Susan the road requires an understanding of how Johnson takes the road away from Peter, and by extension, how Peter’s car is used to symbolize the male Beat split from domesticity. In *Come and Join the Dance*, Peter’s car is “the place where he really [lives]—he merely [inhabits] his apartment” (*Come and Join the Dance* 73). In an urban space like New York City, not everyone can drive, let

alone own a car, so the car represents Peter’s unique freedom within his context. Further, the car represents the male Beat’s escape of the urban and domestic. Society enforces domesticity upon women and labor on men, coding the workforce masculine (Kozlovsky 44).

The men are expected to enter the workforce and start a family to support the female domestic structure.

To challenge this, Kerouac uses the car and highway as an “alternative spatial system to

a postwar domesticity centered on the nuclear family and consumer economy” (Kozlovsky 36). Kerouac celebrates the car for its function of travel and works to refute the idea of the car as a status symbol, refuting the middle-class focus on buying and possessing expensive worldly goods. The car is instead purely utilitarian: “the final goal of driving was to steer towards its mechanical destruction” (Kozlovsky 38). So, the car represents men escaping the feminine domestic and societal expectations, all without glorifying the car as a status symbol. Peter echoes this fatalistic perspective—“this car is going to shake itself to pieces one of these days!’ he called out cheerfully” (*Come and Join the Dance* 73)—and uses the car to drive away from attempting to get a fellowship to further his graduate studies (*Come and Join the Dance* 70), refusing to fulfill the expectation of becoming a conventionally productive member of society by finishing his thesis.

With this understanding, the death of Peter’s car takes on special significance within the context of *Come and Join the Dance* and, to an extent, *Minor Characters*. Peter drives the car until the rattling grows worse and worse, and eventually the transmission is shot and the car dies. While Peter laughs at the idea of the death of the car being something significant, “like a Lone Ranger shooting his horse” (*Come and Join the Dance* 164), Susan understands that the car represents Peter’s freedom and ability to maintain his unconventional lifestyle: “she was thinking about how it would be for Peter now, how he would wake up in his apartment at noon each day...how he would drift up and down Broadway until he was tired enough to sleep again” (164). This directly parallels Susan’s behavior at the beginning of the novel, traveling up and down the same six blocks during her time at Barnard. By placing this parallel here, Johnson insinuates that the death of Peter’s car is the death of his means to the road, and even representative of the unsustainability of the lifestyle supported by the male Beats.

The death of his car leaves Peter stranded in the domestic realm. After Peter’s car dies, he

and Susan have sex, which serves as the means through which Susan gains agency from Peter, and at this point it is implied that she goes to Paris. If we accept the reading that Susan goes to Paris, then she is given “the Beat road and [leaves] hipster men mired in the clutter of domestic life,

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reversing the gender roles Beat culture subscribed to” (R. Johnson 23). If the reader accepts that Peter is a version of Kerouac, and Susan is based on Johnson, then this conclusion to her novel suggests something of a vengeful reading where Johnson implies Kerouac reverts to the position Johnson finds herself in the beginning of the novel, locked into place in the domestic sphere and without the means to leave it because of the inevitably self-destructive nature of his lifestyle. Johnson, on the other hand, gains her agency from Kerouac and goes to France in a move reminiscent of how men in literature leave their domestic spheres in search of enlightenment (Kozlovsky 44). This suggests that, despite her insistence she did not want to go on the road, Johnson wanted to wander, but not under the inescapably patriarchal terms that accompanied that journey.

## Relabeling Beat Women In *Minor Characters*

In *Minor Characters*, Johnson describes how Kerouac categorizes her, inventing names and niches for him to fit her into, which makes it difficult for her to assert her individuality. Johnson describes reading Kerouac’s novel *Desolation Angels*, where she is described as a “Jewess, elegant middleclass sad... Polish as hell,” and asks herself: “where am I in all those categories” (*Minor Characters* 128)? Kerouac imposes titles and categories upon her in multiple places throughout

*Minor Characters*. He literally renames her “Joycey” at one point, a name she says no one else calls her, briefly after renaming her cat Ti Gris, to which Johnson’s reaction is to say that he “[seems] to like renaming things” (130). However, Kerouac pushes ideas with his labels. In giving Johnson and her cat new names, and in categorizing her the way he sees fit, Kerouac is imperialistic in his relationship with Johnson and overwrites her identity with characteristics he thinks better fit her. We see other men in the memoir use this approach towards women. Johnson describes that Lucien Carr calls her friend Elise Cowen either ‘Ellipse’ or ‘Eclipse,’ even after learning her real name, and plays it off as a joke (125).

In the instance of Kerouac’s labelling, Johnson has her own desires overshadowed so as not to disrupt the narrative Kerouac has constructed around her. She writes that he insists she only wants babies, because as a woman, she must want babies, even if she thinks she wants to be an artist (*Minor Characters* 136). Kerouac insists

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on putting Johnson’s title of ‘woman,’ which for him means a person who wants babies, ahead of her title of aspiring novelist, ignoring first that woman and novelist are not incompatible ideas, and second, the reality that Johnson wants no part in that categorization. By ignoring his own inaccuracy, Kerouac silences her by reducing “the complexities of Johnson’s experience to caricatures of femininity, caricatures with which she struggles as both constituting and obscuring her identity” (Carden 149) and pretending that femininity in and of itself is a simple thing. This phenomenon is made metaphor in the term “Silent Generation,” applied to the young adults of the fifties, a label that ignores the radical subcultures that were neither silent nor negligible.

Although Johnson expresses justifiable irritation at Kerouac’s inability to realize her as an individual as complex as himself—this ultimately drives them to split up—she benefits intellectually and artistically from the experience. Because the men in the Beat movement “deliberately and inaccurately [restrict] women to ‘everyday practices’” (R. Johnson 20), the women are overlooked, and with this comes a certain level of underestimation. They exist in a liminal space, and liminal spaces serve as fertile grounds for artistic endeavors. Their perception by society as silent hipster women and as merely women by the men within their movement “provided cover for them to develop despite prejudices against female literary expression” (12). As mentioned previously, some of the titles pushed onto these women meant that they had little time for art, as in Johnson’s statement about her life with Peter Pinchbeck. However, their actions within the space still constitute a contribution to the movement: “the roles they [perform]—wife, mother, lover, muse—obscure them as artists; nevertheless...their writing contains, engages, and modifies ‘beat’” (21).

This is not to insinuate that liminality is a pleasant or healthy experience—evidence to the contrary is everywhere. Bonnie Frazer, author of the Beat memoir *Troia*, endures horrible mistreatment during her time as a prostitute, which drives her to suicidal thoughts. Elise Cowen commits suicide.

Recognizing this cost, Johnson supplements *Minor Characters* with “an elegy for the lost and the missing in the wild recklessness of 1950’s Greenwich Village” (Friedman 238). I instead mean to suggest that if any benefit can be reaped from their liminality, it can be reaped in the art, when these women find time to make it, and in the growth of the individual. Johnson comes to a better sense of who she is because of her constant need to redefine herself. She defines herself first in opposition to the mainstream, rebelling against the expectation that she get an M-R-S degree by failing to graduate from Barnard altogether, then alongside the terms the male-dominated Beat space imposes upon her (R. Johnson 29).

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## Relabeling Women In *Come and Join the Dance*

In *Come and Join the Dance*, male characters force labels and narratives onto Susan and Kay despite their protest. Johnson sets up the theme of Susan attempting to find her identity early on: in one scene, Susan says that the face looking back at her in the glass is not her own and asks what others see when they look at her (*Come and Join the Dance* 10). However, she refuses to accept identities forced upon her, instead pursuing one that she invents entirely on her own. In a conversation with Jerry the night they break up, Susan tells him she'd love to live in a sewer. He tells her that she would not, and she tells him, "maybe I'll do anything I want to," but he assures her that she would "be glad to come back here in the end" (35). She rejects his version of her as someone bound to return to the familiar, and later in the scene, rejects him along with it, and by symbolic extension the values of the middle class. Her refusal to graduate further distances her from the middle class.

The men in the countercultural movement are no less generous with the titles they give. When the reader first meets Anthony in *Come and Join the Dance*, he calls Susan's friend Kay "motherly," and even though she rejects that label, he again insists she is, in fact, motherly (*Come and Join the Dance* 53). This happens because Kay expressed concern for Peter's well-being, and because of her femaleness, concern is coded as maternal in Anthony's gaze. Kay refutes this by saying that her work is just living, implying that from her own perspective, her experiences cannot be so easily pinned down under the guise of "female." To Anthony, who views her from the perspective

of a man in a patriarchal society, her actions cannot be divorced from her femaleness because her femaleness, or his simplistic version of her femaleness, is her identity.

Anthony also imposes an identity onto Susan early in the novel, deciding first that she's a weird chick and then that she's a member of the counterculture club: "That's not true!" Susan protests (*Come and Join the Dance* 58). Although an identity within the "club" would put her in direct opposition to the mainstream she has worked so hard to rebel against, accepting an identity from Anthony is still accepting an identity rather than forming it herself. The face looking back at her in the glass would still not belong to her; it would merely belong to someone different. This serves as an excellent metaphor for the patriarchal structure of the Beat generation and how it creates a liminal space for Johnson who, as previously stated, must define herself within the context of both the mainstream and the counterculture, "a subversion from within" (R. Johnson 22).

Peter also attempts to categorize Susan, telling her she looks like his ex-wife, which implies he wants to associate her with the traditional domestic life that he fled (*Come and Join the Dance* 150). This is a moment of hypocrisy. Up to this point, Peter has tried to act as a catalyst for Susan's self-actualization, challenging the things she says and trying to get her to decide whether she means what she says or regurgitates a script handed to her by her upbringing: "Are you being polite when you say that, or don't you care?" he asks her (17). Later, he relates Susan to his ex-wife, Carol, mentioning that not only does Susan look like Carol, but she behaves like Carol, and he orders her a drink the way he would order one for Carol (152). In doing this, he places her in the domestic sphere he's tried so hard to escape. He cannot both

act as a catalyst for her individualization while also taking away her individuality by typifying her as his ex-wife.

Because this happens late in the novel, when Susan is much farther along the route to self-discovery, Peter's sudden categorization might be a reaction to her growth as an individual, a last-ditch attempt to put her in a box he recognizes. In the same section, Peter typifies her as a woman, insisting that she must expect him to take her away to celebrate because "women always expect that from a man" (*Come and Join the Dance* 152). Peter remains limited by the confines of the patriarchal society in which he exists, so that while he knows to prod Susan to question herself, he cannot realize a woman as being an individual as complex as himself. Susan can be Beat, but she is a woman, and to Peter, she is a woman first and foremost. The Beat generation's patriarchal core disrespects the art and intelligence of women within the group, even as it enables that art and intelligence to thrive (Johnson 15).

And it does enable that art and intelligence to thrive. One noteworthy difference, or perhaps the noteworthy difference between Jerry and Peter resides in that throw-away comment Peter gives Susan: "do whatever you want" (*Come and Join the Dance* 77). In the novel, this is something of a backhanded remark. Susan is a woman in the fifties and doing whatever she wants has terrifying implications. Kerouac says something similar—"you do what you wanna do"—to Johnson, and the effect is similar (*Minor Characters* 253). Johnson hears it as patronizing, an order to do something that she cannot do because of her gender. However, in *Come and Join the Dance*, Peter's suggestion that Susan do whatever she wants mirrors the conversation she has with Jerry earlier in the novel where she tells him, "Maybe I'll do whatever I want" (*Come and Join the Dance* 35). Here, she senses her own ability to become a stronger individual and break free from the narrative imposed upon her by her context. She threatens to individualize herself, to go against the norm, and her first step in going against that norm is to break up with middle-class Jerry. Peter's and Kerouac's statements can certainly be read as patronizing, easier-said-than-done suggestions,

as off-handed remarks to smirk at the women in their lives. But while their advice is simplistic—again, *Minor Characters* contains a catalogue of women who have died because they could not find a place in this liminal space—receiving no advice forces Susan and Johnson to come up with their own answers. And as Susan knows early on, she cannot simply take an identity from someone else.

Johnson's strong aversion to Kerouac's non-advice hints at a bitterness towards, maybe, how easy he makes it all sound. Johnson cannot go on the road, or at least she would rather not, and a reader can hardly blame her when considering the fatal or tragic cases of women who have tried. Again, it becomes apparent that Johnson did not want to go on the road, possibly because of the implicit danger or possibly because she wishes she did not have to go on the male-defined road to establish her own individuality. In looking at how Kerouac controlled Johnson's narrative in *Minor Characters* and using that insight to offer a context for *Come and Join the Dance*, we see the immense difficulty that Beat women had in defining themselves in an extremely liminal space. With that comes a sense of the complexities surrounding a time where concepts like gender, race, family, and home were all being challenged alongside mainstream society. Johnson certainly comes across as particularly timid when compared to someone like Bonnie Frazer, who does go on the road and suffers greatly at the hands of men who mistreat her during her time as a prostitute; or Hettie Jones, who fills in Johnson's racial blind spots with a heartbreaking recollection of an interracial marriage that broke under the strain of the charged political atmosphere of the Civil Rights movement. Regardless of how Johnson comes across, her struggle, as well as the struggle of her arguably braver peers, is aggravated by her liminality. And as dangerous as that liminality is, it also functions as a particularly productive place, so that Beat culture is "somehow hospitable to women in the artistic and cultural avant-garde, even if it [does] not promote women's agency in an intentional, protofeminist sense" (R. Johnson 16).

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