

Hettie Jones: On Becoming Something, Anything, Whatever That Means

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In *Women of the Beat Generation*, author Brenda Knight writes that it was not easy for women of the Beats to vocally and artistically decry American materialism and conformity: “To be unmarried, a poet, an artist, to bear biracial children, to go on the road was doubly shocking for a woman, and social condemnation was high (Knight, 2000). In her anthology, Knight offers profiles of numerous women of the Beat generation who have in common “a reaction to and rebellion against rigidity.” Who is the wife of LeRoi Jones, Hettie Cohen Jones, a female Beat writer? Does her life demonstrate Knight’s claims? The cultural backdrop to my exploration looks at the influence of her 1950’s family life on some aesthetic principles that inform her work and lifestyle, and that generate her art which responds to the world she finds herself in.

Cultural backdrop of Hettie’s world

Women of the 1950s were bound by highly defined gender roles, typically that of housewife and mother. They lived as troubled characters—driven, desperate, fighting against the constraints of culture, family, education and often dwelling in the twilight of a “great” man’s personality or career (Knight, 2000). These roles didn’t allow room for individual artistic urges that took women out of the home, away from family duties. Hettie Cohen grew up in a middle-class Jewish home in Queens, New York. Her mother, Lottie Lewis, sewed like a master tailor but was barely a journeyman’s cook (Jones, H., 2000). She loved to fanaticize about having more material things by paging through *House Beautiful*, and loved to dress up in her amethysts and mink and take the train into Manhattan to meet Oscar, Hettie’s father, where he worked.

Though Hettie says she loved her mother, she did not share her aesthetic style of dress, and instead wore plain brown jumpers and later, all black outfits. Their communication was stilted, especially about topics important to Hettie like female body changes, menstruation, sex, and marriage (Jones, H., 1990). Hettie considered herself joined at the heart with her father, but separated at the head. There were only a couple of books in their house, “which he’d never read, nor any others, and wouldn’t. Once, catching me at it, he pointed to the pages in my hand and said, ‘You won’t find life there’ (Jones, H. 1990). The Cohens had moved from Brooklyn to Laurelton, Queens, which Hettie described as,

...there wasn’t much for me—no Negroes, Hispanics, Italians, only some Anglos and Irish who couldn’t afford to move away from the Jews...There was a firm inevitability in this; you just didn’t mix, exactly the way you didn’t serve milk with meat (Jones, H., 1990).

Living inside the cultural box of her Jewish family in Queens, Hettie’s aesthetic of wanting to be free to use her body sexually or through artistic performance, and communicate the way she wanted to whether as an actress, singer, or writer, was controlled by her parent’s authority (until she left). Hettie was not expected to become an artist or entrepreneur like the men of the time, much less mix with people of other ethnic groups or races, nor was she prepared to do so. Though her parents only spoke Yiddish to hide things, and the Jewish milk/meat rule was all that remained of their kosher laws in their home, the Cohen household held firm to traditions of Jews marrying Jews, whites marrying whites, and women only did what women were supposed to do—be a wife and mother. Interestingly, these gender roles actually provided Hettie’s aesthetics because of what she had to do to break out of her roles. With the human body being in part a sensory apparatus, women’s aesthetics—the beautiful and the terrible—are tied to the female body: curves, the look of the skin, hair, facial features. Included in this are biological

issues like menstruation, pregnancies and menopause, each of which affects women's appearance and their perceived beauty. Other physical aspects of aesthetics tied to the body include grammar, diction, and syntax or the arrangement of words. A beautiful use of words in the time of Hettie Jones, especially when used to describe the body, would have included acceptable language (for the time) that came through education and civilized use (like breast, buttocks) versus slang, street talk, or vernacular curse words (like tits, ass) which represented an ugly aesthetic in her time. Hettie's mother would not talk with her about menstruation, as if it was an embarrassing topic and saw it as a conflict, suggesting an ugly aesthetic through stilted use of words and lack of understanding between them. Viewing freedom and independence as beauty and a desirable way to live, Hettie's rebellion against her parent's restrictions caused her inner beauty to emerge. Through Hettie's choices of non-conformity, the changing of her roles and her artistic works emerged.

Hettie's attempts at finding her own identity outside of her parent's expectations began early. A passage in her memoir reveals how as a child she'd escape through secret make-believe in the city, a place of mystique which beckoned to her desire for independence, foreshadowing her eventual exodus from life in Queens to New York City:

“At night, in my narrow maple bed, under the starched, white, ruffled, pink-ribbon-threaded spread my mother had made, I'd make up stories with myself as the hero of great, seafaring adventures. The only hint I ever had of my future was on our every other Sunday trip to Newark, to visit my mother's family...and stop for a sandwich...I cared less for the food than for the long, mysterious reach of Houston Street, the way it seemed to hold, river to river, some secret old New York that hadn't ceased to exist, not the way you were led to think. Laurelton never spoke of that place, just as they never would see my return to it. But I could see, from our round gray 1946 Chrysler, some streets I would have liked to set foot on. I could even have caught a quick piece of the Village before we cut a sharp left and left it all behind at the Holland Tunnel (Jones, H. 1990).

At 14, Hettie's artistic abilities as a pianist won her the first ticket to independence, when she passed the audition for Music and Art High School in Manhattan by playing "Malaguena." Her parents modified that plan by making her attend Rockaway High, closer to home. When practicing piano and improvising something "atonal" which she thought of as "modern," her mother would comment that her music didn't sound like practicing. She would have been happier if Hettie had played Bach. Hettie's aesthetic of expressive communication was very stilted at home in other ways. She had been warned toward silence by her mother who said men didn't like an outspoken woman. Hettie says she balanced the scales of dealing with her mother's suffocating domination by hanging out with boys who talked anarchy in the school lunchroom. The climate at home illustrated how she called 1951 "the year we were labeled the Silent Generation (Jones, H., 1990). This time marked a pivotal point for Hettie who, although she learned to shut her mouth at home, decided to expect from herself,

...that by force of will, I will assume a new shape in the future. Unlike any woman in my family or anyone I'd ever actually known, I was going to *become*—something, anything, whatever that means (Jones, H. 1990).

Emergence of Hettie's art through aesthetics of nonconformity

"Assuming a new shape" was to come to fruition in more aesthetic ways than one—her physical body form, her hairstyle, how she used her body to perform in theatre, how she used it sexually, the way she dressed, how she stepped out of her conservative ethnic form where white Jews mingled with white Jews, all added up to the lifestyle she chose to live. First, she managed to go away to the University of Virginia, which, although a conservative woman's college in the South, was less expensive though less snobbish than her first choice, Vassar. As a drama major, she learned theatre performing arts including acting, carpentry and electricity. She sang and

played the piano, wrote class shows, had a radio program, and published poems in the university's literary magazine. She restyled her appearance by taking a razor to her thick black locks, cut her hair into a pointed fringe, and called herself a mutation. She also befriended a black girl, Linda, with whom she went on to graduate school at Columbia University. Through Linda, she met more black friends, who included her in their views about black skin being comedic, and had her first experience of holding a black hand, like she was being let into a world never open to her before (Jones, H., 1990). Thus began the ongoing string of experiences Hettie would have with blacks, and her revolt against her white Jewish traditions of exclusivity.

Graduation from Columbia led to Hettie's official move out of Laurelton and into Manhattan, including taking along her single bed mattress that made its way through Hettie's entire memoir and every apartment she lived in even as a married woman. This signified her ongoing lack of interest in material things, contrary to the kind of nice furniture with which her parents would have loved to see her furnish her home as a married woman and college graduate.

Hettie Cohen becomes Hettie Jones

Hettie worked for New York jazz magazine *Record Changer* in 1957, longing to make art when she met and then married the young black critic and poet LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka). Their interracial marriage broke tabooed ground, and their Village flat became not only a place where racial boundaries seemed to diminish in importance but also where hip young poets, painters, and musicians came to hang out and create a new American literary scene, including Jack Kerouac and Joyce Johnson, Allen Ginsberg, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Diane DiPrima, and William S. Burroughs. LeRoi loved John Coltrane because he took white man's music and inverted it into black jazz. In *Jazz and the White Critic*, LeRoi wrote:

Jazz...and its sources were secret as far as the rest of America was concerned, in much the same sense that the actual life of the black man in America was secret to the White American...And Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made (Jones, L. 1963).

Hettie shared her husband's aesthetic views but there's more to it than that. The next excerpt is an example of one of the music critiques LeRoi wrote while Hettie supported him and to which I respond about Hettie:

Anyone who witnessed the transformation that playing with Monk sent John Coltrane through must understand the deepness and musical completeness that can come to a performer under the Monk influence. When Monk opened at the Five Spot, the owners said he would be there as long as he wanted...I don't think the truism about success being more difficult to handle than failure is entirely useless...within the precincts of American Jazz, some artist who, once he had made it safely to the 'top,' either stopped putting out or began to imitate themselves so dreadfully that early records began to have more value than new records...there are hosts of men like this in America. It is one of this country's specialties (Jones, L. 1963).

This excerpt is significant to Hettie's aesthetics and life in several ways. Hettie frequented the Five Spot nearly as much as LeRoi did, and loved Coltrane, though LeRoi's writings seem to be exclusively male. Sharing her husband's feeling about Trane was just one example of how women were surrounded by society's idea of how to treat her man—agree with what he likes, do what he does. She supported LeRoi by working one or two jobs while he wrote as a music critic, another example of the way she chose to communicate and use her physical energy. In her memoir, she walks us through her frequently acerbic relationship with LeRoi, cultural reactions against their biracial daughter, along with poisonous racist experiences that she endured as well as the powerful idealism and aesthetics they shared as they lived and moved around the city from Chelsea to Greenwich Village to the Lower East Side. Norman Mailer's views in his article,

“The White Negro,” provide a context for their relationship and gives insight into both Hettie and LeRoi:

The cameos of security for the average white: mother and the home, job and the family, are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible. The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could...he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks...and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of job, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm...So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro (Mailer, 1957).

Hettie could be considered an example of Mailer's white Negro. Hettie's following the desires of her body, blending with LeRoi following the need of his, exemplified a key aesthetic of living in the present, with their freedom of expression crossing all barriers. Their marriage, and then the pregnancy of their biracial children, also pushed against another terrible aspect in her life—her parents' disagreements and prejudice, which led her parents to disown her. A Beat critic's views about the “Know-Nothing Bohemians” were representative of non-Beat society's views:

Sex has always played a very important role in Bohemianism; sleeping around was the Bohemian's most dramatic demonstration of this freedom from conventional moral standards, and a defiant denial of the idea that sex was permissible only in marriage and then only for the sake of a family...Here again the contrast with Beat Generation Bohemianism is sharp...very primitive, very spontaneous, very elemental, very beat... For the new Bohemians interracial friendships and love affairs apparently play the same role of social defiance that sex used to play in other Bohemian circles. Negroes and whites associate freely on a basis of complete equality and without a trace of social hostility (Podheratz, 1958).

Podheratz failed to perceive the aesthetics of the Beats, though he did express a fairly accurate description of their defiance. Also representative of her parents' views, their refusal to accept

what she thought was aesthetically beautiful—her love for this black man, the act of overriding a cultural taboo, and the birth of a child—urged her to pursue her passions even more fervently in pursuit of her own identity. In essence, her social defiance became an aesthetic in itself, against that which she thought was terrible.

Another author (name unknown) adds to the understanding about Hettie and LeRoi's biracial marriage, significant to seeing the black/white conflict despite their attempts to blend. The author did a study in 2006 on the autobiographical writings of interracial literary families for whom names are a particularly fraught site of identity politics and struggle in the 1950s-60s context, in order to historicize white American identity shifts relative to shifts in African American and biracial American identities. He put Amiri Baraka's 1984 autobiography in dialogue with Hettie Jones' 1990 work and their daughter Lisa Jones' 1994 autobiography. This paper explains why Hettie does not fit in with his conclusion. He also theorizes about their biracial relationship, and starts in the context of describing LeRoi as,

...perhaps best known as the author of the 1964 play *Dutchman*, in which a white woman symbolically rapes and literally murders a black man. The play dramatically captured the cultural moment of a radical shift in black identity and politics, and in interracial relations, in the U.S. The autobiographies, in my reading, historicize these shifts differently. The late 1950s and early 1960s, as documented by LeRoi's and Hettie's autobiographies, were a time when interracial relationships shifted in the U.S. cultural imagination from being radical and progressive to being reactionary and regressive. It was a time when black-white relations could have created identities of difference (rather than assimilation or appropriation) but failed, and instead re-segregation became inevitable. Both black and white identities were in crisis in this decade, but, as they re-segregated from each other, black identities went in the direction of hyper-change, while white identities retreated into stagnation. The autobiographies document the failure, on the level of the U.S. cultural imagination, to reinvent white identity, to bring that other way of being white into existence, at a time when its possibility and need to be named was palpable (FindArticles.com, accessed 2006)

Hettie's memoir, and her subsequent works, suggests her to be radical and progressive rather than reactionary and regressive, and highly active in establishing her own identity, even though her arts took a back seat while married to LeRoi. This happened largely because she was taking care of babies and supporting their household. She tells of working one to two jobs while LeRoi developed his writing and work as a music critic, along with his escapades away from home in jazz clubs and affairs with other women, despite Hettie's support of Him. LeRoi, highly involved in the black power movement of separatism, wrote the political play, *Dutchman*, after which he was criticized for not being with a woman of his own color. He divorced Hettie in 1966 after eight years of marriage and the birth of two daughters, because she was not black (Knight, 2000). Before and after her divorce from LeRoi, she was productive in music and literary arts. Hettie and LeRoi started *Yugen*, a literary journal that claimed to be a new consciousness in art and letters. Hettie's contacts through *The Partisan Review*, where she started as a subscription manager after *The Record Changer* closed and then as managing editor, were instrumental in the publication of *Yugen* from 1957-1963. Without her talents as typist, typesetter, editor and designer, the little journal would never have made it into print. *Yugen* published poetry and writings by Burroughs, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and others. She also launched Totem Press, which published poets such as Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Frank O'Hara, Edward Dorn, and Gary Snyder. From 1957 to 1961, she authored many short stories and poems as well as several books for adolescents, including *The Trees Stand Shining: Poetry of the North American Indians*, *Big Star Fallin' Mama: Five Women in Black Music*, and *I Hate to Talk About Your Mother*.

While living in the Village with LeRoi, she also developed a strong friendship with Joyce Johnson (Johnson, 2000), supporting each other through "pregnancies, divorces, deaths--and celebrating the sheer exhilaration of being part of a world on the brink of radical change (Jones, H., 1990). For Johnson, this was the first interracial couple she had ever known. Joyce even took over Hettie's job at *Partisan Review* when Hettie took off to have her baby in 1959 (Johnson, 2000). After Kerouac's fame exploded from *On the Road*, and he spent many drunken nights on stages being King of the Beats, Hettie saw how distraught this left Joyce and told her to "harden her heart (Johnson, 2000). Clearly, the Beat women's aesthetics of communication flowed freely between each other but not as freely around their men, as shown in another common denominator Joyce Johnson and Hettie Jones shared. In Hettie's life with LeRoi and Joyce's life with Jack Kerouac, neither of the women would get up and read their works live, though in college Hettie flourished in performing arts of all kinds and even led 1000 women in song (Jones, 1990). Joyce Johnson's words from *Door Wide Open* echo Hettie's actions:

"At the coffee-shop poetry readings I began going to, all the avant-garde readers, with the exception of Diane DiPrima, were men. I wouldn't have dreamed of standing up to read a chapter of my "college novel," which felt less and less relevant to the cultural revolution that seemed to be flourishing all around me, although in spirit, I knew it was Beat. Except for Jack's continued encouragement, I felt very alone with my work (Johnson, 2000).

Though Hettie's aesthetics included freedom of oral and written expression and the use of her body in performance to express herself either on stage or at the piano, even in the Beat culture, women took a back seat to men, or melded their views with their husband's, like an example of the aesthetic presence of the beautiful and terrible together. To Hettie and other Beat women, being a part of the Beat movement meant playing out their gender roles, being silent, being part of the scenery--staying on the sidelines of the great, big literary game being played out

all around them. Her memoir includes comment reflects on those years recognizing Beat women of her time:

We'd been more than black stockings on spread legs...we'd danced, painted, acted, and, yes, there were writers among us. And some who weren't writing--or if writing not publishing--did eventually write and publish. And others remained in the business of publishing, continuing a love of literature that had, in the first place, brought them to the scene (Jones, H., 1990).

Thanks to Knight's and Jones' books, we can see that there were indeed women involved who were much more than girlfriends, wives, or muses of Beat males. They were artists and writers themselves--poets, novelists, playwrights, editors--individuals who have thought quite seriously about what it meant to be Beat and whose aesthetics informed their work. Hettie's memoir stands in contrast to the major works of the Beats, (like Kerouac's *On the Road*, *Dharma Bums*, Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*), which mostly seem to speak only from and about white male experiences, for the most part rendering invisible the experiences of white women and people of color. Around 1985, after Hettie began teaching, she ran into a lot of young women who had no idea of the female Beat history, or what the women involved had done. And, LeRoi had published his book. This made her feel she had to set the record straight about the situation of women, which launched the beginning of writing her memoir. Hettie felt that young women at the time had no concept of the fact that prior to the women's movement, there were women like her who had removed themselves from general cultural expectations, during the '50s especially. True to her aesthetics, Hettie told interviewer Nancy Grace:

I really wanted to show that we had started the whole process, and not enough attention had been paid to the fact that we were there and that we had made a change in women's lives. But here they were later all out there getting their own apartments and taking off their bras and girdles, without realizing that there were women who had already left home like we did and had to suffer for it (Grace, 1999).

Hettie told Grace that she and other Beat women contributed to the women's movement by physically taking a stand, more so than intellectually or any particular writing at that time, simply by saying,

"Okay, I'm going to live on my own. I'm going to acknowledge that I am a sexual being and I'm going to have sex and I'm going to practice birth control. I'm going to be a responsible person comparable to a man--I'm going to live what is generally regarded as a man's life. I'm going to have my own apartment and I'm going to have a job and I'm going to be self-supporting. Even among the young women I knew who were slightly younger than I, all this was really considered an accomplishment. You just weren't supposed to leave home until you got married and already lived under another man's hand (Grace, 1999).

Hettie's group also freed women from physically restraining clothing like girdles and bras, which had kept women trapped within a physical aesthetic perceived as beauty, having a well-shaped body caused largely through physical constraints:

"Ah! To be able to think and walk and move without feeling blistered all the time. To acknowledge that you could have an ass. And to wear pants! At college they made us wear men's garage mechanic uniforms, like monkey suits. Just the idea that women could move freely! I ditched the high heels when I first came to New York and bought flats, like old ladies shoes that were so comfortable. And to stop carrying pocketbooks and start carrying shoulder bags so you could have your hands free!"

Hettie's passion for teaching has also taken her into the prisons; she has conducted writing workshops at the New York Correctional Facility and at Sing Sing. In 1997, she edited *Aliens at the Border* (Segue Books), a collection of poetry written by female prisoners at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Her first collection of poems, *Drive*, published by Hanging Loose Press in 1997, was selected received the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America. In 1984, she was elected to PEN, with which she is still involved through the American Center's Prison Writing committee and runs a writing workshop at the New York State Correctional Facility for Women at Bedford Hills. Hettie authored her memoir *How I Became*

Hettie Jones in 1990. She also helped Rita Marley write *No Woman No Cry: My Life with Bob Marley*. She currently lives in New York City, where she writes and teaches (Poets.org, accessed 11/19/2006).

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To conclude this exploration into Hettie Jones' life, this next excerpt from a 1999 interview tells of her plans planned to continue writing non-fiction, especially children's books and poetry. Her comment reveals her ongoing spontaneous nature, still representative of her as a Beat generation writer:

I would like to continue to do that as long as I have a thought in my head. It's very important because I still have the feelings required for poetry. And I still have political opinions, and those need to go into poems to... I've never planned what I was going to do next. It just sort of happens. But maybe a little planning would be good at this stage, because when you're going to be 65, which I am going to be soon, you have to sit back and say, like my poem "Song at Sixty:" "If you want to know me / you better hurry." I don't feel that what I have to say is no longer valuable just because I'm older-maybe because I was a late bloomer. And maybe I'm still blooming. You never know (Grace, 1999).

How I Became Hettie Jones illustrates her aesthetics in a mix of the beautiful and the terrible, in that her memoir is really a work of art about her life, a discussion of the ebb and flow of 1950s sexuality, her personal aesthetic of non-conformity contrasting with her conformity to her husband, ethnic and gender roles and stereotyping, race, art, parenting, love, and literature, the elements that contribute to her discovering her full beauty in becoming Hettie Jones. Her aesthetics, her memoir, her teaching, and other artistic contributions to not only the Beat movement, but to the women's movement and to subsequent changes in American culture, created a lasting effect that continues blooming in the lives of women.

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