

**A REVOLUTION WITHIN A REVOLUTION: AFRICAN
AMERICAN AND WOMEN BEAT POETS**

A Senior Scholars Thesis

by

OLIVIA ABERNETHY

Submitted to the Office of Undergraduate Research
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

April 2008

Major: English

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Approved by:

Research Advisor:
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ABSTRACT

A Revolution within a Revolution: African American and Women Beat Poets
(April 2008)

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The objective of this research was to shed light on African Americans and Women poets influenced by the Beat Generation. I chose LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Diane di Prima and Bob Kaufman. I researched each poet's background, poetics, published works and criticisms so I could determine the impact of their poetry. I determined his/her connection and reaction to society through their poetry. Di Prima wrote as a woman, mother and poet in a time when women were struggling to establish their own poetics; Jones/Baraka wrote to find his identity as an African American in society; and Kaufman wrote in the margin against conformity and effacement. Along with their own opinions and point of views, each poet brings a fresh and invigorating look at poetry that definitely stands the test of time to influence generations today.

DEDICATION

To those who have refused the status quo.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
 CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION: THE BEGINNING OF THE REVOLUTION	1
II LEROI JONES/ AMIRI BARAKA	6
His poetry	8
Conclusion.....	19
III BOB KAUFMAN	21
His poetry	23
Conclusion.....	31
IV DIANE DI PRIMA.....	32
Her poetry.....	35
Conclusion.....	40
V CONCLUSIONS.....	43
ENDNOTES.....	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY	47
CONTACT INFORMATION	49

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE BEGINNING OF THE REVOLUTION

In my undergraduate study of poetry, I have studied the major movements from classicism to romanticism to imagism. One characteristic of poetry shared for centuries up until modernism in the 20th century was the use of formal structure including rhyme and meter. Structure was the driving force of the poem. For example, the writers John Keats, T.S. Eliot, and Percy Bysshe Shelley all emphasize form as the focus of the imagery. These men have had substantial influence on poetry with their poetics and without them, literature would not be the same.

Since formalism required such strict attention to rhyme and meter, this limited the scope of the poem and made it difficult to encompass the reality of the times. Formalistic verse such as Dylan Thomas' *Rage Against the Dying of the Light* had a more realistic outlook on society with its call to fight against giving up, but his imagery is still limited to the confines of each line. This poem, in particular, is a villanelle, which follows a

This thesis follows the style of *American Literature*.

complicated rhyme scheme throughout the poem. Regardless of the subject matter, the imagery is required to sacrifice its integrity to fit in the poem. The Beat movement was a rejection of formalism for spontaneous or "in the moment" creativity expressed by various line lengths and rhythms. This new style of writing emerged during the late 40's and exploded onto a society immersed in its own battle against conformity. The atmosphere surrounding society during this time included the sexual revolution following World War II, the accessibility of the automobile and paved roads, Einstein's Theory of Relativity, the development of atomic bombs, and the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union. Other movements in the US that occurred simultaneously included the San Francisco Renaissance, The New York School, and the Black Mountain poets. The focus of this research is the Beat Movement and its influence on three self-defining poets: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman and Diane di Prima. The Beat movement itself revolved around the poets Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady and William S. Burroughs, an all male cast.

The Beat movement was spurred by a demand for poetry that was realistic and encompassed more than the mainstream perspective. It aimed at "shocking people and stirring things up."¹ Form was random and rhymes practically non-existent. Rhythm depended on one's breath and own ingenuity to make the poem cohere and flow. The focus was no longer on exact rhyme and meter but on the thought, image and subject. A huge influence of the Beat poets was jazz music. Most of the poetry written during this

time was written with music or at least with it in mind, which contributed to the natural rhythm and flow of the poem.

These men "protested against what they saw as the blandness, conformity and lack of cultural purpose of middle-class life in America."² They were a mix of radicalism, open sexuality, drugs, alcohol and spontaneous creativity. Tired of conformity, they created a niche, calling for unscrewing the "locks from their precisionist jamps."³ *Howl*, by Allen Ginsberg, is seen as the beginning of this movement, but did not fully characterize the influence of the beats. These poets did not have a cohesive philosophy or life, yet, oftentimes, drew from the same inspirations. The backgrounds of these poets range from a political conservative (Kerouac), a gay Jew (Ginsberg), a suave con artist that didn't publish anything during his lifetime (Cassady), and a drug addicted blue blood from a famous family who ended up accidentally killing his wife (Burroughs). It was their attitude and "aesthetic-direction"⁴ that coalesced into one ideology. Their influences range from movies, comic books, radio, and jazz music of the 30's and 40's. The main concern was how did verse fit such a lifestyle centered on pleasure instead of formality? "Charles Olson wrote, dismantling Eliot's 'classicism' in a sentence, 'Verse, now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.'"⁵ This movement championed all of the so-called mutterings of the unknown and ignored, a part of America very much alive and kicking despite the lack of representation in literature. The influence of the Beat Generation to those in

around and after it empowered other artist to make their voice heard regardless of the restraints.

Even with such an opening in literature, not all of the beats were as open-minded as one might think. Jack Kerouac was well known for his offensive language towards black and Jews.⁶ The '50s and '60s encompassed an intense time of change in the civil rights movement, resulting in major changes within society. And poetry still maintained a white perspective. Within the Beat movement, poetry became a means to bring attention to certain issues, such as racism, and the African American poets that emerged at this time, took full advantage of it. Two such poets I believe have made use of poetry in this way are Amiri Baraka (aka LeRoi Jones) and Bob Kaufman. Both are known for their African American influence and emphasis in and outside of society. The foundation in their poetry was jazz and blues music, which carried the African American culture, influence and perspective into a wider audience. Scat, or "jazz singing in which improvised, meaningless syllables are sung to a melody"⁷, is used by both Kaufman and Baraka to place stress African American heritage in the white mainstream perspective.

Plus, women, as a whole, were not seen as viable writers of their own or having strength to live like a man in the Beat movement. Diane di Prima relates in her book, *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, that there was an air that men knew how to do everything and even if they accepted her into their circle, she would never quite be equal because she was a woman.⁸ While men like Kerouac and Ginsberg had the spotlight,

their wives, girlfriends, lovers, and muses were often ignored as artists in her own right. However, during this time, some women were beginning to branch out of the home and into other areas of society such as the fashion business, women's magazines, teachers, nurses, secretaries, and writers in. Their role in the movement as muses to the classic beats gave them a chance to become "co-creators and advisors, as well as sources of both happiness and angst,"⁹ but their role as creator, alongside men, opened up avenues historically denied to women. An awakening of the female mind, body, and spirit was in full force, and this dynamic relationship between the men and women played out into some of the best writing of that movement. As women became more engrossed by the movement, they not only exhibited the ability to cope with the lifestyle, but to make it into their own. Diane di Prima is a great example of this. She not only proved her genius as a poet in the competitive atmosphere of a male dominated vocation, but managed to raise five children alone, on her terms despite the disapproval and criticism of others. It wasn't a woman's inability to cope that made her vulnerable, as di Prima would prove, but the men who wouldn't or couldn't recognize their artistic talent as individuals because of their sex.¹⁰

This research is vital to the future of poetry because of its influence within our culture. The three poets I have chosen: Diane di Prima, Bob Kaufman, and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) each have a unique perspective but are not exclusive of each other. They all actively engage life and society through poetry— a medium more conducive to self expression than most. Dana Gioia comments on the poetry of today: "the energy of

American poetry, which was once directed outward, is now increasingly focused inward"¹¹, meaning that poetry is no longer viewed as a national pastime worthy of attention. And because of this lack of attention, poetry has lost its influence and importance within the public eye. Leroi Jones/ Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman, Diane di Prima concentrate on their connection (inward) and the effects on society (outward) with their poetry, hence their importance in poetry and literature today.

CHAPTER II

LEROI JONES/AMIRI BARAKA

Everett Leroy Jones was born on October 7, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey, to a low- to middle-class family. Throughout his career, Jones/ Baraka went through two name changes; Leroy to LeRoi during his Beat period and LeRoi to Imamu Amiri Baraka during his Nationalist Period. Now he goes by Amiri Baraka. The changes in his name are a reflection of the changes in his development as a person and poet in regards to society. Within his development, it is possible to see the ever-inquiring, wide-eyed observance of the little boy Jones writes of in his autobiography turn into the politically active and aware poet of today. The transitions Jones made throughout his life from Bohemian Intellectual to Black Nationalist to Third World Marxist all encompass and reflect these changes within society and himself. His revolution within the Beat movement brought the focus of American poetry outward once again with numerous plays, novels, and anthologies. His work as a writer chronicles the growth of society and his own identity.

A recurring theme in Jones' writings, whether it be autobiographical, fiction, nonfiction, poetry, or prose, is the relation of the individual to society and vice versa. Growing up, Jones recognized the distinctions of class in race whether it was among blacks or between blacks and whites. Chapter two of his autobiography, titled "Black Brown Yellow White", best relates his viewpoint on this distinction. The colors, black, brown, yellow, and white, are in reference to a person's status or ideology within society. Black,

for example, refers to "the fundamental black life, the life of blues people, the real and the solid and the strong and the beautiful;" the brown was "my family and me, half real and half lodged in dream and shadow. The connected to reality by emotion (and logic)"; the "yellow, the artificial, the well-to-do, the middle class really. Described by a term like petty bourgeoisie with steel precision"; "and white, of course, referred to Caucasians."¹²

The constant reference to subtle shades of blue in one's blackness reveals the mark of "being left behind...left out...disregarded...abandoned" and found "drunk, disorderly...babbling...put down and laughed at,"¹³ hence the importance of blues and jazz music to Jones throughout his life and poetry. Blues music taught him about the world with its intricacies between individuals, men and women, black and white.¹⁴

More importantly, Jones saw his color, brown as being caught between a rock and a hard place: on one side were the petty bourgeoisie (yellow or white) and, on the other, the harshest reality of being an outsider (black). From this viewpoint, Jones constantly struggled to balance this mixture in regards to himself and what he wanted to achieve through writing. His constant thirst for knowledge and consciousness of his position in society left him bereft and grasping at how he fit in society, so he turned to the Air Force in order to regroup his thoughts as to what he wanted to do with himself.

While in the Air Force, Jones began to write poetry and read voraciously. His attitude towards school beforehand had been ambivalent when he attended Howard University

and lamented the fact that he didn't take his studies seriously enough. This newfound appreciation for prose and poetry grew out of the isolation he felt from society and his identity and took advantage of the books available to him during his service. "I was at least trying to put down what I knew or everything I thought I felt. Straining for big words and deep emotional registration, as abstract as my understanding of my life."¹⁵ He "realized that there was something in me so out, so unconnected...that what was in me that wanted to come out as poetry would never come out...and be my poetry."¹⁶ Staying true to himself was more important than conforming to the style/viewpoint of the poetry he admired because life could not be "spelled out by those tidy words."¹⁷ The "tidy words" he read refer to the formalistic style prominent in poetry at the time. So, he actively began to write from his own perspective as a person, an African American, a reader, and a critic and eventually dismissed the 'academic' intellectualism of his own influences to embrace his own poetics. With this approach, Jones developed a highly unique style of poetry and solidified his identity within his poetry as well as society.

His poetry

The Beat period

The first book of poetry Jones published was *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. The opening poem, titled *This Book is Hetties*, immediately opens up to the reader, exposing the vulnerability of the author and sets the tone for the proceeding poems. Jones writes with a colloquial jaunt, hip to the street, never quite letting you in on the whole secret but just enough to get catch the reader's attention. In *Hymn for Lanie Poo*,

Jones opens the reader to his wide-eyed view of the world with biting metaphors and blunt criticism, which will characterize his poetry for the rest of his career:

They laught,
 and religion was something
 he fount in coffee shops, by God.
 It's not that I got enything
 against cotton, nosiree, by God
 It's just that....
 Man lookatthatblonde
 whewee!

I think they are not treating us like
 Mr. Lincun said they should
 or Mr. Ghandi

For that matter. By God.

ZEN

is a bitch! Like "Bird" was,
 Café Olay
 for me, Miss.

But white cats can't swing...

Or the way this guy kept patronizing me-
 like he was Bach or somebody
 Oh, I knew

John Kasper when he hung around with shades...

She's a painter, Man.

It's just that it's such a drag to go

He reveals the blatantly obvious racial tensions in the destructive natures of black/white relations in musically influenced imagery that forces the reader to question their own perceptions of one another. Life is not a black and white battleground. Instead, it is covered with subtle shades of difference that influence or hinder progress for either side. His poems flow like thoughts fresh from his mouth, including the irregular banter between his conscience and his heart. The turmoil of 'fitting' into society comes out on the page as disillusionment and bitterness towards society, yet tied to the reader more closely than he realizes. *Look for You Yesterday, here You Come Today* is a great example of this. Jones blends memories from childhood with the present time, concentrating on the hopes dashed or lost along the way:

terrible poems come in the mail. Descriptions of celibate parties
torn trousers: Great Poets dying
with their strophes on. & me
incapable of a simple straight-
forward anger.

It's so diffuse
being alive. Suddenly one is aware
that nobody really gives a damn.
My wife is pregnant with *her* child.
"It means nothing to me", sez Strindberg²¹

In a sense, this poem works as a way for Jones to release the pent up anger and confusion with regards to his lack of identity. On the other hand, this poem consciously acknowledges the apathetic nature of society. At the age of 27, Jones was coming of age in a movement that demanded the destruction of boundaries. His crisis was the lack of direction within the Beat movement when he was trying to figure out how society affected him. For example, the racial tensions of the civil rights movement greatly

influenced his perception and drive in poetry. *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* was the beginning of a conscious effort by Jones to make a difference with his poetry and carve out a place for himself within society. This led to the Transitional Period before his career as a Black Nationalist where he advocated a focus on the African American influence.

Transitional period

If the Beat movement was the shirking of formalism for something more hip, more real, then how would Jones' poetics reflect this opening in literature? Would the drugs, alcohol, sex, and refusal to participate in politics suffice to explain all of the nuances of a reality not yet fully realized? Tired of taking the hands-off approach, Jones opted for a more proactive role in society. "The artist and the political activist are one. They are both shapers of the future reality. Both understand and manipulate the collective myths of the race."²² As he drifted away from the bohemian influence, Jones focused on the deconstruction of society based on the mainstream American viewpoint. The African American point of view replaces the previously idealized Western thought of integrationism as the key. "The Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society."²³ One poem from this period, *An Agony. As Now.*, published in *The Dead Lecturer* best shows his emergence from intellectual to black activist: "And that thing /screams"; that "thing" was the voice of African American's within the white mainstream perspective:

Cold air blown through narrow blind eyes. Flesh,
white hot metal. Blows as the day with its sun.
It is a human love, I live inside. A bony skeleton
you recognize as words simple feeling.

But it has no feeling. As the metal, is hot, it is not,
given to love.

It burns the thing
inside it. And that thing
screams.²⁴

The transformation seen in this excerpt of the poem hints at the subtle yet distinctive tinge of reproach Jones feels as an African American trapped inside of a predominantly white culture aesthetic ("white hot metal"). This perspective of America was not based on actuality or reason, but blind assumptions. Jones rails against the treatment of African Americans and their encasement as the inferior race with regard to popular thought. He has taken the poem *As Agony. As Now.* and used it to expose the confinement of African Americans in the white mainstream perspective.

Black Nationalist period

Throughout his transition period and career as a Black Nationalist, Baraka (changed his name in 1967 upon the death of Malcolm X) focused on the plight of African Americans in a society that did not understand their roots, heritage or influence in literature, music, and art or everyday reality. This focus took on a definite negative connotation towards white people and willingness of some African Americans to lie low instead of demanding fair treatment. The first book of poetry Baraka published under this stance was *Black Magic*. In it he writes specifically for other African Americans, urging them

to become active and embittered against their current placement in society. Along with his characteristic style, Baraka uses the heavy influence of African American music, namely jazz and blues, to solidify the importance of their heritage and future as a people. In *Black Magic, Return of the Native* places Harlem as the center for African Americans, a home meant for them, made by them:

Harlem is vicious
modernism. BangClash.
Vicious the way its made.
Can you stand such beauty?
...
The place, and place
meant of
black people. Their heavy Egypt.²⁵

In *A Poem for Black Hearts*, Baraka eulogizes Malcolm X and his life's work. He lashes out against the untimely death of one who deserved so much more than the disrespect shown to him throughout his life and calls on other "black hearts" to avenge his death by continuing to advocate a separate black nation.

For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest
until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals
that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if
we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of
the earth.²⁶

This period is defined by the black exclusionist perspective of his poetry. However, his switch in emphasis from intellectualism to Black Nationalist still focuses on his development of his identity in society through poetry, which rejected the differences between being brown, yellow, or white and only focused on black individuals. Throughout his Beat period, Jones displayed a browner attitude toward himself. In other

words he remained close to his roots yet focused on knowledge more so than color. In his Transitional period, Jones shifted toward the other side of the spectrum: a focus on color. And in his Black Nationalist Period, advocated a strong black nation at the expense of others, especially whites. The poetry of this time and his Black Nationalism period are harsh, crude and draw from African American heritage, culture and perspective.

The poem that most embodies this aesthetic in *Black Magic* was *SOS*. It is a call to build an all black nation, emphasizing their separation with the repetition of "black people":

Calling black people
 Calling all black people, man woman child
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
 you, calling all black people
 calling all black people, come in, black people, come
 on in.²⁷

Finally, *Black Art* literally turns the poem into a physical force African Americans can use to support their art. He uses metaphors such as "Black poems to /smear", "Poems that wrestle cops into alleys /and take their weapons leaving them dead" and "Poems are bullshit unless they are /teeth or trees or lemons piled /on a step." The poem acts in place of the author. Baraka reacts with words and imagery forceful enough to hurt his target. The poem is no longer a cry against discrimination, but has become a living entity used to fight revolutions and empower the individual, namely the African

American. Baraka has redefined the use of the poem and created a tool for African Americans to use as a 'weapon' against the mainstream perspective. Baraka demands:

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD²⁸

The next book of poetry published during this period was *It's Nation Time*. The title of this book explains, in a nutshell, the theme of its poems: it's time for African Americans to build their own nation and separate from all that isn't African American. In his poetry, African Americans must realize their importance and significance because the mainstream perspective threatens to efface their influence. The evolution of his perspective actively engages the reader to make changes in society.

Time to get
together
time to be one strong fast black energy space
one pulsating positive magnetism, rising
time to get up and
be
come
be
come²⁹

As a result, Baraka delves deeper into the history, heritage, influence, music, and literature of African Americans with multiple essays and critiques, including one full-length novel in order to spread awareness throughout the African American population. He provided an in-depth examination of the origins of blues and jazz music via the interactions of Africans and Americans and exposed the mainstream perspective to these influences. A major point he makes about blues and jazz music is that Africans did not solely influence them. In contrast, the cohesion of the African and American, or African American, experience was combined to form this tradition. The same goes for their poetry. While African Americans can look back to their roots as an influence in their writing, their experiences as Americans color their writing as well. "More than any other black poet, however, he taught younger black poets of the generation past how to respond poetically to their lived experience, rather than to depend as artists on embalmed reputations and outmoded rhetorical strategies derived from a culture often substantially different from their own."³⁰ Baraka emphasizes a focus on the reaction of the poet to his past in regards to the future in order to facilitate progress towards a black nation, which evolves the focus of the bohemian ideal of spontaneous creativity to a more focused and conscious effort to make a difference in society.

Towards the early 70's, Baraka worked to form a cohesive structure that could support an exclusive African American society, but realized that exchanging an anti-white supremacy doctrine for an "exclusivist black supremacist doctrine"³¹ would not work. Working from one extreme to the other, Baraka experienced firsthand the entire passion

let loose from both sides. Race had always been an issue but now the violent, physical hatred on the streets and in homes spilled onto the page, staining the poem. Poetry was interlaced with Baraka's identity in regards to his personal views and public image. And, once again, evolved right along with him as he entered into his Third World Marxist Period.

Third World Marxist period

His work from this period not only encompassed the support for African American culture and aesthetics but uncovered the multinational background of America. In his first collection of Marxist poetry, *Hard Facts*, Baraka pulls into view the self-absorbed and destructive nature of a capitalistic society bent on pleasure above all else. In *When We'll Worship Jesus*, mainstream religion, specifically Christianity, is seen as a cover up of original and genuine thought:

we worship the life in us, and science, and knowledge, and
transformation
of the visible world
but we aint gonna worship no jesus
we aint gonna legitimize the witches an devils and spooks and
hobogoblins
the sensuous lies of the rulers to keep us chained to fantasy and
illusion³²

Here, Baraka advocates a genuine understanding of the self and one's surroundings in order to form an opinion and act accordingly. His style is still informal, calling on the natural pattern of speech and thought to carry the poem through, and his focus is on the individual and their own conscious, not the mainstream ideal. In this period, Baraka still

focuses on the destruction of the mainstream perspective, but focuses on the excess of society and not just racial tensions.

Another poem from this period, *A Poem for Deep Thinkers*, critiques the excess of society and urges the audience to rethink their priorities in regard to the battle against racism, discrimination, hatred, and stereotypes.

We need to use, to use all
the all the skills all the spills and thrills that we conjure, that we
construct, that we lay out and put together, to create life as
beautiful as we thought it could be, as we dreamed it could be,
as we desired it to be, as we knew it could be, before we took
off, before we split for the sky side, not to settle for endless
meaningless circles of celebration of this madness, this madness,
not to settle for this madness this madness madness, these yoyos
yoyos of the ancient minorities.³³

Baraka relies heavily on the influence of blues and jazz in repetition and rhythm, subtly imbibing a sing-song flow in the poem. This rhythm calls on the passion, struggle, and change rooted in the blues music he grew up with to reflect the changes within society as it progresses towards equal footing among its members.

Conclusion

The musically influenced poetry of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka first invites the reader to ramble along with the author in hopes of finding something interesting. But what he has to say isn't always nice. His blunt criticisms are meant to question what it is the reader truly believes in. Even today, Baraka is still in the forefront of society. In 2001, he was dismissed as Poet Laureate of New Jersey because of an anti-Semitic reference in his

poem *Somebody Blew Up America*. Yet his thirst for knowledge and truth never abated. The influence of the Beat movement still exists with him today. He gets into people's faces when no one else will because his poetics are a way of speaking out against aspects of society he does/does not agree with. After fifty years of writing, Baraka has found himself: on the page and in between the words of every poem he has written.

CHAPTER III

BOB KAUFMAN

In his essay, "In Memory of Bob Kaufman: A Son of Rue Miro 1925–1986," Henry Lacey goes straight to the heart of the poet by characterizing Kaufman as embodying the "Black American, his music, his language, and general sense of style" with a "racial and cultural blending... an interesting twist."³⁴ This 'interesting twist' was the influence of Kaufman's mixed heritage, personal experience, and his own uncanny way of thinking. Kaufman "works the poetic tension between socio-cultural visibility and invisibility to describe a polysemic alienation that culturally, emotionally, and physically threatens to annihilate the self with enforced silence."³⁵ He combines the societal and cultural tensions within the margin of society in order to distance himself while reaching beyond a physical experience. This physical distance from society also created an emotional separation from which others viewed and treated him like an outsider because he refused to conform. Kaufman's poetics maintained a detachment from society and increasingly criticized it for demanding conformity in a time of radical change.

As a Beat poet and an African American, Kaufman caught the double-edged sword of the "cultural, emotional, and physical aspects of white supremacy in society."³⁶ While in the Merchant Marines, Kaufman traveled around the country and became involved in politics as "an area director for Henry Wallace's [presidential] campaign in 1948" where he met fierce opposition within the police force and "was arrested many times, brutally treated, thrown into jail cells with no heat and freezing conditions and kept there for a

long time."³⁷ Kaufman's unusual perspective marked him as an outsider from the very beginning. The Beat movement, on one hand, allowed such an outsider to express himself to a certain extent. Even with its realistic outlook, the Beat movement still had its own mainstream perspective to overcome which race played a huge part in. He had to establish himself as a poet, but defend himself against racial and cultural discrimination, create an outlet for the African American experience, yet maintain a distance from a society bent on homogenization. Kaufman's legacy spurred on by the Beat movement was his emphasis of the poem as an outward expression meant to relate the harshness of reality.

The "devastating psychic loneliness that can come only from knowing so few people who share his perception"³⁸ combined with the alienation of society created the margin of reality that Kaufman existed in. He critiqued the prevailing white supremacist viewpoint of society and demanded that words, language, and poetry express themselves realistically. Kaufman's themes were rooted in "contempt for a conventional, materialistic and militaristic society"³⁹ and the influence of jazz and blues music helped create the mood, tone, and flow of his poetry. His love of jazz music embodied his poetics as a basis for spontaneity and a window into the ever-changing face of reality. Much like Baraka, Kaufman took refuge in the heady voices of blues music, like Billie Holiday, and soulful musings of jazz, like Charlie Parker. Jazz music was so much a part of Kaufman's life that he named his son Parker after Charlie "The Bird" Parker.

Because of this, poetry served as an outlet for Kaufman to escape the confines of a society full of misconceptions, preconceptions and hatred for the unknown. His influence on society can be seen through his poetry and general disregard for rules.

His poetry

The combination of alienation and separation from society allowed Kaufman to fully immerse himself within the poem. *The Poet* directly addresses his dedication:

"The blood of the Poet
Must flow in his poem,
so much so, that others
demand an explanation.
The Poet is not to be
explained. It is what it
is, the reality of the poem
cannot be denied".⁴⁰

Kaufman explains that the poem should exist not because of the poet but from the help of the poet. In fact, the poet exists because of the poem. The poet must release any previous conceptions in order to fully embrace the moment of the poem. A complete sacrifice of self must occur, "The blood of the Poet/ Must flow in his poem." Just like a woman carries a child, the poet must give part of himself in order for the poem to survive. Subsequently, the poet's identity involves the poem and views it as a reflection of himself as well as society.

With this understanding in mind, Kaufman viewed the physical body as little more than an effigy, "a double"⁴¹ of the soul. This "double" is temporary but the poem is not. In *Dolorous Echo*, Kaufman transcends the body to exist in the "secret graves" and the "secret trees" therefore creating a connection outside of himself that will last much longer than his own body:

The holey little holes
 In my skin,
 Millions of little
 Secret graves,
 Filled with dead
 Feelings
 That won't stay
 Dead.

The hairy little hairs
 On my head,
 Millions of little
 Secret trees,
 Filled with dead
 Birds,
 That won't stay
 Dead.

When I die,
 I won't stay
 Dead.⁴²

The words of this poem carry his poetics and image through the metaphors of holes of his skin as graves and hairs on his head as trees, which allow him to embrace an otherwise unrealistic circumstance. "Long after the physical body dies, another body still circulates in legends, in words, and in the larger, eternal corpus of poetry."⁴³ This eternal memory of Kaufman resides outside of conventionality where Kaufman can allow seemingly unrelated things exist together and relate to the reader on a deeper level.

This existence outside of conventionality was only possible because of his marginalization, which labeled him as crazy, controversial, and strange.

The mixture of alienation and marginality in Kaufman's poetry can best be seen in *Jail Poems*, which he wrote while in prison. The first poem connects Kaufman to the other prisoners through their similar experiences. He understands that society views him as a nuisance because of his lack of conformity. However, this refusal to exist as others see fit allowed Kaufman to connect with the audience in anyway imaginable, even in jail:

I am sitting in a cell with a view of evil parallels,
Waiting thunder to splinter me into a thousand me's.
It is not enough to be in one cage with one self;
I want to sit opposite every prisoner in every hole⁴⁴

The fact that he wants to "sit opposite every prisoner in every hole" shows his determination to stay outside of society's man-made conceptions, whether it be an ideal or physical place. This rejection of society and others pushes Kaufman further out into the margin and expands the alienation between him and society.

In the seventh poem of *Jail Poems*, Kaufman plays on his marginality and separation from society:

Someone whom I am is no one.
Something I have done is nothing.
Someplace I have been is nowhere.
I am not me.
What of the answers
I must find questions for?
All these strange streets
I must find cities for,
Thank God for beatniks.⁴⁵

Jeffrey Falla explores this poem of Kaufman's rather adroitly in his essay "Bob Kaufman and the (In)visible double." The duality of Kaufman's separation is due to "cultural isolation" and "artistic alienation."⁴⁶ In *Jail Poems*, Falla deconstructs the poem to prove that it "speaks of the marginalized...self manipulated by American socio-cultural and judicial racism...that demands invisibility and anonymity."⁴⁷ In "Someone whom I am is no one./ Something I have done is nothing./ Someplace I have been is nowhere.", Kaufman renounces any connection to a particular image or identity because society has already effaced the cultural, physical, and emotional aspects of his identity within the "white mainstream context."⁴⁸ Kaufman's negation of himself does not prove society's perception right. Instead, it makes the reader question who Kaufman really is and how he relates to the poem and the audience. "For Kaufman...the dissolution of self is not a self-destruction but a freeing from the socio-culturally influenced sense of self that imprisons everyone as social subjects through internalized images of normative identity (be it racial, gender, sexual, national, or psychological) and, indeed, internalized images of normalcy in general."⁴⁹

On the other side of the coin, Kaufman is also lashing out against the lack of voice he and other marginalized have had in the mainstream perspective. Because there was not any firm foundation of African American heritage, culture, and influence, Kaufman had to attack racism, discrimination, and disbelief as one in this negation of self. The separation from society helps, in this case, because it is not a part of him or the poetry.

Along with the fight against conformity, Kaufman fights against the constraints of his body. But, on a deeper level, he is also fighting against the "socio-cultural constraints" that demand he be invisible and anonymous.

Feeling the roots that bind me,
To this mere human tree
Thrashing to free myself,
Knowing the success
Of these burstings
Shall be measured
By the fury
Of the fall
To eternal peace
The end of All.⁵⁰

In this excerpt of *Private Sadness*, Kaufman's struggle with his identity and place in society is in contrast to how society views him. Being African American places him in the margin and his perspective pushes him even farther out. So these restraints, or "roots," are his tie to society when he what he really wants to do is go beyond the emotional, mental and physical attachments that hinder him.

His escape is through the poem where he can exist outside of preconception, so when he demands that "[t]he blood of the poet/ must flow in his poem,/ so much so, that others/ demand an explanation,"⁵¹ Kaufman is showing the reader how to break away from such conformity and stagnation by embodying the poem.

Another example of Kaufman's separation from society manifests in his buddhist vow of silence from 1963–1975 when JFK was assassinated. Maria Damon described this vow of silence as he "turns the tables on authority by *choosing*, as an iconic poet-shaman, the

silence of religious withdrawal and political disillusionment rather than *submitting* to the silence socially enforced on him as a Black person."⁵² Kaufman beats society by "choosing" to be silent, therefore refusing to allow society the chance to silence him. For twelve years, Kaufman did not speak or write anything. In 1975, "on the day the Vietnam War ended,"⁵³ Kaufman recited *All Those Ships that Never Sailed* thus breaking his silence and, once again, resurrects the voices of those who fought against the mainstream perspective.

The poems following *All Those Ships that Never Sailed* marked a change in Kaufman's interaction with society because he withdrew even more within his poetry than before his vow of silence. In a way, he incorporated the final tone of silence into his poetry by shifting the tone of each poem. In *I AM A CAMERA*, Kaufman recalls his silence as a period of scrutiny that sets the tone with short, hard lines which reflect the unwieldy nature of society. It sounds detached, but still catches the attention of the reader:

THE POET NAILED ON
THE HARD BONE OF THIS WORLD,
HIS SOUL DEDICATED TO SILENCE
IS A FISH WITH FROG'S EYES,
THE BLOOD OF A POET FLOWS
OUT WITH HIS POEMS, BACK
TO THE PYRAMID OF BONES
FROM WHICH HE IS THRUST
HIS DEATH IS A SAVING GRACE

CREATION IS PERFECT⁵⁴

Kaufman's short and terse lines render the imagery irrational and incomplete, yet a sense of finality permeates the poem. The poem is what is being "nailed on/ the hard bone of this world". His poetry is a declaration of his own existence outside of society because "the blood of a poet flows/ out with his poems." "His death is a saving grace" because the poet has shaken off the binding roots of his body or society. "Creation is perfect" because of the beauty in imperfection, improvisation, spontaneity and death. *I AM A CAMERA* is Kaufman capturing the perfection in the spontaneous creativity, of letting go of all worldly and bodily attachments. It is a celebration of his ability to withdraw enough to see that the time is temporary and "creation (of the poem) is perfect."

The American Sun, however, is harsher in tone and because Kaufman can no longer identify with the American point of view takes on a critically negative view of the American government:

THE AMERICAN FLAG IS THE
ONLY FLAG FLYING AT CRUCIFIXION
CALLED THE EARTH NOW IN THE
SKIES OF HEAVEN.
THE AMERICAN SUN IS NOT
PART OF ANY PEACE MOVEMENT.
THE AMERICAN SUN IS A
SUN OF WAR, THE DAYS OF
PEACE ARE DRAWING
TO AN END. THE ENEMIES OF
THE AMERICAN SUN ON THE
EARTH SHALL SOON BE ATTACKED
BY THE PURE POWERS OF THE
AMERICAN SUN.⁵⁵

This excerpt shows Kaufman's involvement in society as a voice against war. The difference in this poem, compared to earlier poems, is in his direct disapproval of the actions taken by the American government during the Vietnam War. Passive resistance has not worked, so as Kaufman embodies the poem in order to act against the "American Sun," he actively cries out but remains in the margin because of his dissent.

The underlying influence of his poetry, specifically jazz and blues. As mentioned earlier, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, and Thelonius Monk among others heavily influenced the style and rhythm of Kaufman's poems. "Walking Parker Home" is the most obvious use of jazz music as the underlying theme throughout his poetry:

In that Jazz corner of life
 Wrapped in a mist of sound
 His legacy, our Jazz-tinted dawn
 Wailing his triumphs of oddly begotten dreams
 Inviting the nerveless to feel once more
 That fierce dying of humans consumed
 In raging fires of Love.⁵⁶

The rhythm and syncopation feels natural when read aloud and the spontaneity creates a sense of improvisation, allowing the reader to clearly visualize Kaufman walking home during a sunrise. If the reader relaxes enough into the poem, one can hear the soft beats of music in the background while imagining Parker playing his saxophone. In this poem, Kaufman immortalizes Parker much in the same way he did himself in "Dolorous Echo." Parker's music connotes a new beginning just like the "Jazz tinted dawn" where anything can happen and hope is rekindled "In the raging fires of Love."

David Henderson characterizes Kaufman as "a jazz aficionado, he was one of the many who used jazz to blur racial and class lines."⁵⁷ But Kaufman himself admonishes jazz music for turning its back on its people and roots in "War Memoir" with "(Jazz is an African traitor.)." Kaufman does not 'blur racial and class lines' in his poetry. Instead, he sarcastically excuses one from listening to jazz because "What one-hundred-percent redblooded savage/ Wastes precious time listening to jazz/ With so much important killing to do?" Here, Kaufman criticizes the mainstream consumption of jazz and has been watered down because of this. Kaufman laments this effacement of jazz and influence of the African American and lashes out against the mindless and senseless degradation of his muse. More importantly, Kaufman brings "visiblity to African American cultural forms"⁵⁸ in the jazz influence of his poetry and recognizes how fatal this misunderstanding can be.

Conclusion

Zany yet evocatively fresh, Bob Kaufman left an enduring legacy in his poetry. He was a curious individual who lived outside of society, therefore maintaining a separate identity. However, his existence in the margin led him to experience life as it came, not weighted down with other perceptions and his Kaufman's biggest contribution to literature and society was in his determination to follow his own path regardless of the consequences. His own battle against conformity led to a revolution even within the revolution of the Beat movement.

CHAPTER IV

DIANE DI PRIMA

In their essay, "Recapturing the Skipped Beats," Ronna Johnson and Maria Damon shed light on Women Beat Poets and highlight women such as "Johnson, Jones, Lenore Kandell, di Prima, Bremser, Janine Pommy-Vega and Elise Cowen."⁵⁹ They emphasize the influences and contributions of these women within the male dominated career of writing. However, their opening remark, "Female Beat writers did not so much criticize mainstream American life as try to assert their places as artists and members of the Beat community,"⁶⁰ is not accurate. These women were just as critical of mainstream America as their male counterparts were. It was the overbearing influence of men in literature that overshadowed their influence. The Beat movement started with a group of men, namely Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady, and Burroughs, and despite their best efforts to break social barriers, women were still viewed inferior to men because of their 'lack' of experience or understanding. Diane di Prima proves that women can be creative, as a mother and a poet.

The general perspective regarding women during the 50's and 60's labeled their domain as the home and their vocation as homemaker. Yet, during this time, more and more women began to enter the workforce to take on a more active role in society other than caretaker, thus giving women a chance to impact society like never before. The publishing industry especially began to attract women because of its perceived openness and acceptability. Nonetheless, women were still looked down upon. In this light, I

researched Diane di Prima because of her involvement within the Beat movement. She embodied the bohemian ideal amid staunch criticism for her gender and maintained her own poetics despite society's expectations. Di Prima thoroughly criticized mainstream America while establishing her identity as a woman and a poet despite the male dominance in a revolution meant to shatter misconceptions.

Born to a second generation Italian immigrant family, Diane di Prima learned, at an early age, that men were not to be depended on but seen as "a luxury."⁶¹ "[I]t was the women, and there were many of them, who attended on all the practical aspects of life" and "men were peripheral to all this."⁶² From this viewpoint, di Prima recognized the need to be self-sufficient and practical in her life and career. What resulted was a highly independent and focused individual, which allowed her to pursue her career as a writer while raising a family as a single mother.

In 1953, di Prima stopped attending Swathmore College because she decided that a degree was not necessary to proclaim herself a writer and, instead, began to write and study on her own while maintaining odd jobs as a filer, model, and lab assistant to supplement her income. "To be an outcast, ourtrider was the calling. Not fame or publication."⁶³ Here her focus was immersing herself in language and exploring her need to create with words. Her identity as a woman and a poet had yet to be formed, but the primitive glow of awareness began to appear in these early years. The lack of conformity, disregard for rules and spontaneity that permeated the bohemian lifestyle fit

perfectly in with di Prima's own direction in life and poetry and naturally influenced her writing. The uninhibited force of the Beat movement helped shape the way di Prima saw poetry.

When asked to articulate a poetics for publication, di Prima could only write: "THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE IS THE FORM OF OUR ART."⁶⁴ The demands of life shape poetry. Di Prima's life centered on her children and writing first and foremost. Close to that, friends, family and lovers would command attention. "*To be available*, a woman's art I saw as a discipline, a spiritual path. To be available, but stay on course somehow. Self-defined in the midst of it all: my work, my life."⁶⁵ The goal was not to lose focus on her work but still tend to the needs of others. So when she says "The requirements of our life is the form of our art," she is referring to the influence of others and, in turn, her reaction, which takes the form of a poem. Her revolution was the deconstruction of the image of a woman. A woman was no longer anyone else's property but her own.

The revolutionary aspect about di Prima's poetry is that she manages to be a mother and a poet without sacrificing herself to the opinions of others. Once Kerouac reprimanded her for leaving a party early one evening because the babysitter would not stay: "DI PRIMA, UNLESS YOU FORGET ABOUT YOUR BABYSITTER, YOU'RE NEVER GOING TO BE A WRITER."⁶⁶ What di Prima realized though was that because she did leave to relieve the babysitter, she stayed just as determined to stick with writing later on

instead of giving into others. If she had stayed and forgotten about the babysitter, she would not only have let down a friend, but also weakened her drive to pursue writing because of what others perceive to be the best course of action for her. Di Prima did not need conformation as a writer from other writers and, as a result, did not need or want their opinion on how to live life. Her existence as a poet and a mother was based solely on her determination to do what she knew she could do and that was make words "march or dance" regardless of the circumstances.⁶⁷

Her poetry

Her first book of poetry, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*, immediately marked her poetry as different and unique, hence the unconventional image of a bird flying backwards. Before the reader even opens the book, the title sets tone by directing attention to the fact that she does not write like others, namely other men. It embodies a distinct voice, which carried her unique perspective as a woman, mother, and poet. The delicate blending of these qualities emphasize her ability to cope with the lifestyle men had claimed women could not tolerate. But more importantly, it showed that she, as a woman, had something to say.

In this book, she explores the dynamics of her identity and solidifies her voice in the multitude of men. *More or Less Love Poems* reveals the ever-changing face of love and relationships in a short but stunning stanza:

damn you
lovely

you come and go
 like rivers
 which makes it hard
 on rocks⁶⁸

This style leaves the reader just as breathless as the poet. In six lines, di Prima manages to convey the utter sense of loss and inability to control love in such a way that even if the reader cannot completely understand the imagery, he/she can still relate. In an interview with Peter Warshall, di Prima explains her treatment of the metaphor as "some apprehension of correspondences that makes everything richer, constantly richer....So that in a good poem, you don't even know why you're taken."⁶⁹

This subtle uncovering can also be seen in another poem within *More or Less Love*

Poems:

shuddering the dark
 rocks us both in her arms
 from her tongue red flowers spring
 from between her thighs
 the white gull flies, he moans, we spill aside
 his highboned chest cuts
 forward
 finds its rhythm
 he pins with amorous wing the struggling
 moon⁷⁰

In this poem, di Prima keeps the reader off guard with the catch in rhythm. Instead of reading it as "shuddering the dark," the reader should see it as "shuddering (line break) the dark/ rocks us" The same goes for the next two lines. "[F]rom her tongue (line break) red flowers spring/ from between her thighs." Di Prima uses the unbalanced

rhythm of two individuals making love to keep the reader off guard so that it completely takes over the poem. A climax or resolution is kept at arm's length within the poem which keeps the reader aware at all times.

In her second book, *Revolutionary Letters*, di Prima voices critical review of American history and the mainstream perspective. The importance of *Revolutionary Letters* lies within its context. These poems, or letters, are dialogues with the audience with which di Prima rants, raves, pleads, suggests, informs, and talks to her audience. The claim that female Beat poets did not necessarily criticize mainstream America can be refuted in this one book. Throughout every poem, di Prima calls in to question the morals and ethics of a society so focused on pleasure that it will pay any cost. She expresses contempt for the "mainstream American perspective" and advocates love, not war.

Revolutionary Letter #1 acknowledges the sacrifices she has had to make in order to pursue writing as an independent woman. "I have just realized that the stakes are myself/ I have no other/ ransom money, nothing to break or barter but my life."⁷¹ Just like Kaufman, di Prima recognized the need to fully immerse herself within her art in order to fully connect with her surroundings as an observer and creator. She has to risk everything in order to make a difference in her life and in the way she is perceived.

Revolutionary Letter #8 criticizes the very revolution she herself is apart of: "Everytime you pick the spot for a be-in/ a demonstration, a march, a rally, you are choosing the

ground/ for a potential battle."⁷² Di Prima's practicality comes through in her choice of words which convey actions must be thought out; words must be carefully chosen; and organization is key in gathering one thoughts, feelings, and desires. Without these things in mind, chaos ensues. This attitude also negates the pervading image of the beatnik as lazy, uninformed, and unwilling. By advocating a cohesive effort to protest, di Prima manages to show how it is possible to get one's voice heard simply by understanding the consequences.

The distinct tone of di Prima's poetry then culminates in her epic, book-length poem *LOBA*. Published over a 15-year period, *LOBA* includes sixteen books, which tie together the experiences of women in society through the imagery of a wolf embodying the different characteristics of womanhood to create an image that evolves over time. This book of poetry combines her image as a mother, poet and woman into one poem and elaborates on the complexity of her poetics. Di Prima relates that

[t]he poem began as words in my head. ...I would begin with collaging. I was making these collages of wild animals, or animals and women, or women in improbable wild scenery. Eventually the poems would start....You suddenly find two things are adjacent to each other and you say, Oh that's what I want, or that somehow is satisfying.⁷³

Di Prima's goal in writing *LOBA* was not to abstractly connect femininity to the image of a wolf, but reveal the intricate and detailed aspects of womanhood through poetry. She calls on the mythology surrounding women to support or refute the modern image of

woman as creator of man, seductress, or equal to man. This understanding of di Prima's poem is crucial otherwise the relevance and meaning of the imagery is lost.

In *SOME LIES ABOUT THE LOBA*, she dispels the popular belief that women are static, unchanging, and describable. Di Prima uses the figure of Loba to represent women and in the poem proceeds to refute any claims that negatively affect the image of a woman:

that she is eternal, that she sings
that she is star-born, that she gathers crystal
that she can be confused with Isis
that she is the goal
that she knows her name, that she swims
in the purple sky, that her fingers are pale & strong

that she is black, that she is white
that you always know who she is
when she appears
that she strides on battlements, that she sifts
like stones in the sea
that you can hear her approach, that her jewelled feet
tread any particular measure

that there is anything about her
which cannot be said
that she relishes tombstones, falls
down marble stairs
that she is ground only, that she is not ground
that you can remember the first time you met
that she is always with you
that she can be seen without grace

that there is anything to say of her
which is not truth⁷⁴

This repetition of "that she is" establishes a cadence within the poem that forces the reader to examine each claim. And by doing this, she gives the reader a chance to see

the multi-dimensionality without viewing them as fickle or deceptive. This poem is essential to di Prima's poetics because it exemplifies her position and voice within as an important presence in society in regard to a woman's influence. Here, di Prima has set the foundation for understanding.

THE LOBA ADDRESSES THE GODDESS specifically turns its attention to the domination of the male perspective upon women. "Is it not in yr service that I wear myself out/ running ragged among these hills, driving children/ to forgotten movies?"⁷⁵ The art of making oneself available has run its toll on di Prima and shows through in the tedious and necessary demands of others: "And we wear exhaustion like a painted robe/ I & my sisters/ wresting the goods from the niggardly/ dying fathers/ healing each other w/ water & bitter herbs."⁷⁶ The art of making herself available has lost its attraction and pervades as a 'robe,' that covers her features. The fight against silence can be seen and felt within this poem along with her determination to express herself despite the constraints.

Conclusion

The dedication to writing allowed di Prima to explore herself as a woman within her poetry. Music, art history and personal experience influenced her art but, most of all, her determination to treat the poem as an extension of self is her biggest influence within the revolution. She has shown that women of the Beat generation were not only carving their own place in the Beat movement, but also actively participating as members of

society. She criticized the "mainstream American perspective" and maintained a distinct voice with a feminine perspective in regards to issues of the time within her poetry and prose. Existing as a mother and poet solidified di Prima's poetics as a study of the multiple layers of womanhood in regards to society and poetry, which have given a voice to other women forced to keep silent over the years.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Each poet's body of work has transformed throughout the years starting out in crucial time of change within society during the 60's to the present, where change is still the ultimate goal. Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman, and Diane di Prima have each, in their own way, shown how these changes within society have not only affected their lives but the mainstream perspective as well. The revolution of the Beat movement, which opened up a broader viewpoint of society and its constituents, was the foundation for the revolution of these poets/activists. Baraka, Kaufman, and di Prima each functioned as filters for the actions and reactions of society within their poetry and personal lives.

Amiri Baraka questions the established perspectives of society while emphasizing his own heritage as an African American. Bob Kaufman expanded upon the ideals of the Beat movement by creating an existence outside of any perspective within his poetry. And Diane di Prima exposed the public to another side of femininity that had been misunderstood and ignored. In her poetry, di Prima revolutionized the role of a woman in the creative process, therefore changing the influence of men and women at the same time.

My conclusions from this research include each poet's influence in society along with their personal experience and perspective which have helped reform the poetry and perspective of modern society. But the most important aspect of these poets was and is

their tenacious determination to absorb, reflect, and challenge different aspects of society. Without this, poetry and America would not be the same.

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37. Kaufman, *Cranial Guitar*, pg 9.
38. Christian, "Whatever Happened to Bob Kaufman", pg 111.
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52. Damon, *The Dark End of the Street*, pg 42.
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