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A Black Vision in a White America?: The Beat Poetry, Art and Illustration of Ted Joans

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Introduction

Studies of the culture of the Beat Generation have emphasized two specific facets of this movement. First, that the Beats placed emphasis on the literary in order to promote their particular vision of the post-1945 world which ran counter to the dominant discourse of the time. Second, as A. Robert Lee has explained, that despite the role which African Americans played in providing the cultural material for the Beat vision, "the Beat phenomenon rarely seemed to speak other than from, or to, white America" (Lee 305). That is, African Americans' only position within this culture was to offer up their space and identity in order to allow the Beats to create work based on African American culture for white consumption, in a sense, to sell their cultural capital to whites who desired it. Lee and most commentators on Beat writing and culture argue that within this discourse there could be no place for African Americans as Beat writers or artists; I will argue that this was not always the case.

There was the potential for the creation of an African American literary or artistic space but not the cultural or linguistic base to do so in the immediate postwar period. W. E. B. Du Bois labeled this lack of a separate and distinct African American consciousness which could be translated into an African American voice or vision, *double consciousness*. The inner battle between an African American self-identity and seeing oneself through the eyes of white America according to Du Bois, threatened to destroy the African American intellectual. While this is a harsh indictment of racial identity in America, his statement that it should be possible to see oneself as both an "African American" (Du Bois uses the term "Negro") and an American is plausible and would be at least partly realized in the period after the Beats when African American artists and writers began to speak amongst themselves and to others in the African American community under the rubric of the Black Arts Movement (Du Bois 3). This double consciousness can be seen as transgressive such as when Ted Joans combined his training in European art and his knowledge of African American culture, speaking in a "white" voice while engaging with African American lived

experience. While he could not achieve the "authentic" African American voice Du Bois and others were searching for, he was able to challenge racial norms and carve out a space for himself as a Beat artist and poet on his own terms. This is in essence, I argue, what Paul Gilroy is illustrating in his work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness:* that it is possible to merge a vibrant African, in this case American culture, with an existing white framework and view the two as part of one larger culture or vision (Gilroy 3).

A. Robert Lee's articles discuss the lives and impact of all three major African American Beat poets, LeRoi Jones, Ted Joans, and Bob Kaufman. For our purposes, I will focus here on Ted Joans, who blended his poetry with his training in art and thereby created a visual rendering of black identity in postwar America. Joans also bridges the two periods of Beat activity from 1948 to 1957 (he came to New York in 1950) and 1957 to 1960 (after the publication of *On the Road*) and was an active part of the Beat Generation until his exodus from New York to Europe and eventually Africa in 1961.

For those unfamiliar with both Joans and the work of the Beat Generation, I am referring to those writers, poets, artists, musicians and their compatriots who formed a distinct cultural subgroup within post-world war II American society. This group created a literary and social space for those who shared their criticism of postwar culture, economy, politics and morality. They connected with others either physically within these social spaces, usually in the large urban centers of America, or intellectually by reading the novels, poems and viewing the polemical pieces of its artists. I connect Ted Joans to this group because he was physically and intellectually a part of it. But more importantly, as I have stated above, African Americans as a whole have been marginalized within Beat culture by those who have documented the lives and writings of the Beats. In documenting Joans' life and work I wish to show how not only as an African American, but as an artist and poet, he took part in building a culture of resistance that challenged not only the hegemonic social order that came after the war in the name of fighting communism. Pushing that challenge further he called not only those in power but many of the Beats themselves to account for the racist nature of American society in the 1950s.

Joans' involvement in the Beat Generation has been noted in many of the major works on the Beats, yet it has always only been in the form of a footnote or reference to his being part of the group. Ironically, his absence has been explained away by the claim that not enough has been written about him. In addition to the two entries in the volumes of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* for both African American Poets and the Beat Generation, only four articles

have been written about Joans. Two have been by the same author, A. Robert Lee, one is an interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr., and the last a study of why his work is not considered canonical. Few of the publications delve deeply into his position as a writer and none cover his art in any great detail. In one of the few books that shows artwork by Joans and photographs of him, not only does it not actively engage with his work, it does not even mention him by name except within the confines of the photo captions (Phillips 158 and 160). By examining Joans' life, his poetry and his art, focusing on the illustrations he included in his books of poetry, I will argue that Joans was more than just a member of the Beats. Through his art and poetry, Ted Joans made a unique and significant contribution to the challenging of postwar cultural norms that formed the foundation of Beat thought in the twenty years after 1945.

The Early Life of Ted Joans: 1928-1961

The main sources of the life of Ted Joans, the two Dictionary of Literary Biography entries under "Afro-American Poets since 1955" and "The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America," give contradictory accounts of his early years. The Beat entry explains that Joans was born on a riverboat the son of a gambler/entertainer who at the age of twelve put a horn in Joans' hand and sent him off into the world (Miller). While there is evidence that Joans himself did spread this rumor, his father was, in fact, a riverboat entertainer. However, Joans was actually born in Cairo, Illinois in 1928, attending primary and secondary school in Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky, in the limited and segregated space of the African American education system, something Joans later spends time on in his poetry. During this period he suffered one of the many traumatic events in his life; in 1943 when Joans was 15 his father was killed in a race riot in Detroit, an event which kept issues of racial identity and racism at the forefront of his work (Lee 317). After high school, he entered Indiana University, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting in 1950. He then moved to New York City to begin his eleven year residence in the city, ending when he decided that, like Man Ray forty years earlier, who had claimed that "Dada cannot live in New York," that New York and America were not ready to accept poets, artists or African Americans on any real terms (Kuenzli). Like Ray, Joans left the city for Paris, settling in Amsterdam and eventually moving between Africa and Europe where he would spend the next decade before returning to an America that he felt was ready to accept the African American as an equal (Woodson). During his time in New York, he spent the first four years working as an artist moving amongst the circles of Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists. By 1955,

having been introduced to Allen Ginsberg and the Beat circle he began to write more poetry, becoming an established poet by 1959 with the publication of his collection, *Jazz Poems*.

Returning to the competing narratives of Joans' life, I wish to focus on these "histories" because I believe they clearly illustrate the complex nature of the Beats' relationship to race both in the postwar period and in the study of that period by academics. Instead of portraying Joans as a working poet and artist in the 1950s, he is positioned as a myth, "born on a river boat, put out by his father with a trumpet to make his way in the hip world" (Miller). Joans becomes at the same time both an abstract symbol and the physical manifestation of the "hipster," what other white Beat writers thought a free and open existence could be like, without attempting to understand the difficulties involved in living such a life. As Maria Damon explains, this "veneer of hyper-verbal poseurism hides what for many minority Beats was, in fact, a life of 'secret terrible hurts' [like the death of Joans' father at the hands of whites,] that will never be known because the principals are dead, and they covered their tracks extremely well" (Damon 143).

Further, Joans has been placed on the margins of the literary culture of the Beats, positioned more as a hipster, or the spiritual leader of the Beats, and not as a true Beat poet. LeRoi Jones in his 1963 study of African American culture and music, *Blues People*, explains the difference in cultures between those like himself and Ted Joans: university educated middle class African Americans and the jazz musicians who inspired the Beats.

> White beboppers of the forties were as removed from the society as Negroes, but as a matter of choice. The important idea here is that the white musicians and other young whites who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity, though of course, the Negro himself had no choice. But the young Negro musician of the forties began to realize that merely by being a Negro in America, one *was* a nonconformist. (Jones 188)

This initial emergence of the nonconformist or hipster was rooted in music and a specific, urban space within African American culture. However, Jones argues that the African American musician was not representative of the attitudes of African American society as a whole, in fact, integration had made the middle class abandon specifically African American cultural expression in favor of taking on a white identity (Jones 176). In essence these "hipsters" were as alien to African American writers as they were to whites. This is missed

by almost all of those writing about or commenting on the construction of Beat culture in postwar America. All African Americans are lumped in with the hipster as being outside of white culture. While this is true, the hipsters stood outside of African American culture as cultural producers and as idols for young African American men. Even for Ted Joans, whose father had been an entertainer, African American jazz culture was outside of his understanding, as evidenced by his choosing white European and American ideas of art and literature, and living in Greenwich Village rather than Harlem.

This is not to say that Joans was not involved in this particular African American culture; he did know and live with saxophonist Charlie Parker and was mentored by poet Langston Hughes. The point is that he did not have some privileged access to it, an access whites assumed based on his race. Further, while Joans may have created a myth of the hip around himself, he was clear about his own life in his writing. In his 1961 collection of poetry, *All of Ted Joans and No More,* he explains his life up to his decision to leave America for Europe and then Africa:

> Like man, I came to the Village scene after doing the school bit in Indiana, Kentucky and Illinois, came here to paint and I did… got married and saw the birth of four masterpieces that ex-wife and I created… after four years, divorce, blues, beat bread, then split to Europe, Middle East and Africa . . . will still miss my old hipster friends. . . . [H]ave had write ups and photos in Life and Time magazines, Sepia and Ebony magazines, New Yorker, Holiday, Whisper, Pica and numerous monthly girlie magazines . . . I am much in love and plan to split New York's Greenwich Village uncurbed-dog sidewalks, I hate cold weather and they will not let me live democratically in the warm states of the United States, so I'm splitting and letting America perish in its own viscous puke or letting America find and live that Moral Revolution that I hope would happen. (Joans, *All of Ted Joans 94)*

In a few paragraphs, Joans has put forward his own life history and positioned himself within the Beat and artistic discourse of 1950s New York. Finally, he explains that the loss of the Beat dream is linked to what he perceived as the inability of America to achieve the dream of democracy in the climate of the cold war and rather than grow bitter with the struggle for change as many Beats had, he leaves America to let it die or mature.

More than just a member of the core Beat group, Joans was an integral part of the promotion of Beat ideas, reading "Jazz poetry" at a number of coffee houses in New York, and in the process popularizing spoken word and drawing large numbers of listeners to his sets. He created a business, Rent-a-Beatnik, to raise money for his art and those of his friends by renting out Beatniks, young people dressed in the accoutrement of the stereotypical Beat writer and affecting the disinterested Beat pose, for entertainment of the middle and upper classes at their parties in New York. Yet at the same time he did not quest for the kind of fame that Kerouac or Ginsberg enjoyed, choosing neither to fight the system nor conform to it. He published his work in limited editions and through small presses. It is this work, both his poetry and the illustrations that accompanied them that was essentially a contemporary history of the Beat Generation in New York in the late 1950s.

Creating an Image in Words and Pictures: The Early Poetry and Art of Ted Joans

Having outlined some of Joans' life I would like to turn to his illustrated poetry and his portrayal of Beat life in the 1950s through that poetry, as well as, a small collage he completed before leaving New York. Joans, like most of the Beats focused on what can be considered the last great taboo of American society: the frank and explicit discussion of sex and sexuality. This is made even more trangressive by the particular nature of race in America. While sex between whites would have been upsetting enough for most Americans, sex between an African American man and a white woman was actually illegal in several states and looked down upon in almost all. Whether Joans slept with white women or not is irrelevant, the readership and those who would be informed about his poetry through the mass market magazines which profiled the Beats would read the women he is talking about as white. As Toni Morrison states in her book, *Playing in the Dark,* "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (Morrison xii). That is, the sex he is discussing would automatically be construed as interracial and as an African American man writing about sex with white women, he would have been doubly transgressive and placed within the over two hundred year old discourse of the Black man threatening the honor and purity of white women.

In a similar manner, the reading of art in America was also understood as white unless the artist was explicitly labeled as African American. Thus, the gaze

both of the artist and the implied viewer is fixed as white and, as such, the image is filtered through this particular worldview. The stripping away of blackness from works of art is something that Joans also engaged with in an attempt to destabilize the meanings imposed both on his texts and his images.

In what seems to be even more radical than some of his poetry, Joans bombards the viewer with images from white high culture, science, colonial views of Africa and other images all meant to communicate two meanings. On the surface the images were faithful reproductions of white cultural memory and artifacts but beneath and in the mind of the artist, he appropriated the white culture in order to subvert it for his art. Maria Damon explains that Beat in this period, "was one where ethnic and subcultural styles were readily borrowed and experimented with, and consumed in the crassest sense of thoughtless appropriation" (Damon 148). I challenge the one sided nature of her claim, that African Americans were unable to draw freely from the styles of whites as whites had drawn on African American cultural imagery in this period. Instead, Joans was able to subvert white images from their traditional meanings and impose his own interpretation upon them, essentially stripping the image of its meaning, allowing whites to recognize the images or drawings as white, yet subverting the meanings in a manner not consistent with the initial meaning of the subject. That is, Joans paints in white forms with an African American vision. He attempts to unify the split consciousness to be both an artist and an African American while resisting the label of African American artist.

Returning to the transgressive nature of Joans' poetry it is obvious that this fear of the interracial relationship was not considered problematic when the gender roles were reversed. The best example of the racial transgressor as hero is seen in the work of Beat Generation writer Jack Kerouac and his book *The Subterraneans* published in 1958. In the text, Kerouac's narrates first the desire of his protagonist Leo Percepied to have a relationship with an African American woman and second, the period spent actually dating the woman, named Mardou Fox, and the eventual breakup of Percepied and Fox. While the story does not end well, Kerouac is not held responsible to account for crossing a social line that had been permeable for white men since the beginning of slavery, yet when the book was made into a film Mardou was cast as a white woman, the feeling being that America was not ready for any kind of story where an African American woman held power over a white man. I use the example of Kerouac, not only because he was a contemporary of Joans, but to illustrate the nature of race not only in America as a whole, but in the culture of the Beats as well.

Creating the Hip Aesthetic

Joans' early poetry, while it did focus on sex also closely examined his relationship to the hip culture of jazz. In his poem *Hallelujah I Love Jazz So,* he explains that, "Jazz is my religion and it alone do I dig the jazz clubs are my houses of worship and sometimes the concert halls some holy places are commercial like churches so I don't dig sermons there I buy jazzside to dig in solitude" (Jones, *Jazz Poems*). He positions Jazz music and the culture of the jazz club as holy, just as other Beats did, but he is more conscious of the transition of Jazz from marginalized cultural form to mass culture prop than other Beats were and is careful to stay on the side of what he thinks is the purer form.

While Joans' jazz and sex poems are an important part of his work, I would like to focus on his portrayal of life in the city, since these poems can be seen in some ways as the sociology of an emerging culture in postwar America. Joans is able to explain life in the Beat scene more clearly than most Beat writers and was therefore able to promote this cultural rebellion to the uninitiated on terms they could understand. In his 1961 collection, *The Hipsters*, Joans paints a portrait in words of life in Greenwich Village in the late 1950s. In his poem "The Scene" he puts forth his hope that the Beats could teach America about racial and social harmony;

> Here is Greenwich Village, New York, the home of the hipster, hipnick, beat, beatnik, flip, flipnik, etc., where several thousand top people of all races, creeds and colors, work, play and live in the sometimes peace and sometimes harmony and try to enjoy the lofty fruit of U.S. democracy. (Joans, *The Hipsters*)

In "Dramatis Personae," Joans defines the different characters such as the "Jivey Leaguer" a play on the term Ivy Leaguer, who "is a half-way cat whose sole concern is to be part of everything which he puts down or cashes-in-on as it suits his eternal search for girls… [or the] . . . Hipper-than-thounik . . . the overread writer or painter of sorts who speaks as an astute authority on every subject, even sex, which she knows only from books" (Joans, *The Hipsters*). Joans is able to portray a life which is populated with real people, who have real flaws and are described in a new argot.

As important as the text of his poetry is the visual poetry of his collages and sketches that are placed all around the poems. It is here that Joans, I would argue, is one of the most transgressive Beat poets; by using his artistic skills and his historical knowledge, Joans uses "white images" from medical texts, industrial

designs, travel narratives of Africa and even European artistic "masterpieces" to illustrate his vision of the Beat world. He has turned the mainstream culture's own vision of itself into a weapon against postwar society's hypocrisy. His use of medical illustrations, especially depictions of surgery and dissection, is analogous to the idea of his work reaching deeper into the American consciousness to expose not only the inherent racism of American society but the hegemonic construction of postwar life as a whole.

While the words of "Dramatis Personae" are powerful and his construction of the characters which populate the culture of the Beat a modern map of the underbelly of New York, he chooses to illustrate this scene not in twentieth-century terms but in the visual imagery of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. He portrays the "Hipper-than-thounick" as a French Salon hostess, gathering her writers and artists around her in order to instruct them in what is worthy of her support. The "Jivey Leaguer" is a Renaissance scholar or poet, using his skills to attract women or sponsorship not in the service of a higher art (Joans, *The Hipsters*). Joans takes the white image of European art and gives it an African American voice, forcing those who read his poems and see his illustrations to understand the interconnected nature of white (both American and European) and African American cultures. Using the high art of white discourse, Joans is able to challenge the idea that black and white are separate entities, forcing white images to speak to the white reader, stripped of the white identity or voice that had previously been connected with them.

In the same vein, yet more jarring to the reader, Joans employs images of surgical procedures or dissections. These images, such as the one depicted in his poem "Uh Huh" seem to strike at the heart of the race issue in America. That is, there is no difference beyond pigmentation underneath the skin. But the very nature of a hand being cut open and spread apart with surgical tools could also be an analysis of the postwar period itself. The image of the body being opened and examined by authority could lay the framework for a critique of the hegemonic postwar culture of containments invasion of all parts of American society (many formerly private areas, such as one's thoughts) in a search for deviance and difference of any kind (Joans, *Jazz Poems*).

In "We Split the Beat Scene," Joans turns the white image of Africans back on itself, holding up a mirror to those who produced a culture that would produce these images, demanding to know why they were acceptable and challenging the boundaries of that acceptability (Joans, *All of Ted Joans 6-7*). He carries this theme further in his 1959 collage work, *The Ronnie Manhattan Mau Mau Return from Mexico*, where he uses traditionally white views of savage natives, a white

term of derision for an African uprising and imposes a scientific diagram of a dissected body over one of the natives in the images, in order to challenge the legitimacy of American views of Natives, Africans and the supremacy of Western science as the norm in American culture (Joans, *Mau Mau*). Joans connects the plight of the Native American and the nationalist uprising in Kenya which was coming to its conclusion in the late 1950s. This connection is a direct result of the mainstream media's tying the savage African with his machete to the savage "Indian" with his tomahawk which was still a part of the American cultural landscape. Here Joans is criticizing the white mindset which saw the Kenyan uprising as another episode of savage violence which had plagued colonizers since they first settled the new world and the linkage of savagery in Africa with the savage nature of African Americans (Foreman 79-81). Yet he places tools of modernity in the hands of the Natives, who carry modern trunks or cases tied to lengths of wood as if modernism has defeated them by imposing their culture while minimizing the culture of the New World's original inhabitants. By speaking to the viewer through images of a white past, Joans is able to further challenge the racist mythology of American culture.

His artistic style placed him outside of the artistic mainstream, continuing to work with figures and images in an age of non-political abstract expressionism. Joans' style was political and his vision of America directly contradicted the established culture's values and exposed the lengths they would go to in protecting those values. In many ways the violence of his imagery reflected the intellectual, cultural and physical violence of the cold war period.

Yet this is not what Joans has been remembered for. In Richard Elliot Fox's article, "Ted Joans and the (B)reaching of the African American Literary Canon," the sexism of Joans' work is emphasized over his portrayal of real issues and conflicts in both Beat life and in postwar America (Fox 41-58). His poem "The Sermon" from *Jazz Poems*, which focuses on the role of young white women in the Beat life, as one might assume, is not flattering or positive. He positions the woman as supporter to the poet or hipster saying, "if you want to be popular with real hipsters, DON'T TALK SO MUCH and please dont (sic) ever argue . . . you should sit in the coffee houses and beerbars and spend some money on the farout cats of the fine arts . . ." (Joans, *Jazz Poems*). Yes, his work is sexist, so is the work of almost all male Beat writers, in fact of almost all male writers in this period. Joans is typical of his peers in his sexism, but atypical in the messages hidden within the poem where he advises women to be creative, to not stay in their hometowns if they want to be hip, to remember not to have sex without protection, to watch out for sexually transmitted disease, to read *Howl*

and *the White Negro*, essentially to live the Beat life without apology. He also inserts silhouettes of women's bodies beside the poem in various body types from the thin "beat chick" to a much more voluptuous woman, engaging with a full spectrum of both women's bodies and their minds. While this discourse is rooted in sexism, it would be anachronistic to expect Joans to conform to some higher state than other writers at the time. Yet, at the very least, even with this he is transgressive by talking about women as the center of his poem which is something that other Beats rarely did. Women, like African Americans, were usually two-dimensional figures in texts which were narratives of the experiences of white men.

Conclusions

More than a poet, an artist or an African American, Ted Joans was a part of the rejection of the hegemonic culture of the postwar era which attempted to ignore or undermine those determined to expose the cracks in its edifice. As Maria Damon has claimed for the work of African American Beat poet Bob Kaufman, "he fully deserves to be restored to the Beat historiography as well as to American and African-diasporic literary historiography in general and certainly introduced to the college classroom" (Damon 142). With Joans' death in 2003, perhaps it is time to rescue his life, literature and art from the marginalization and invisibility that he fought against all his life.

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