

“Queer Coupling, or The Stain of the Bearded Woman”

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When asked by a participant at a conference why there were no women poets in the Beat generation, Allen Ginsberg responded, “Is it our fault that there weren’t any women of genius in the group?” During the selection process for his book of *Photographs*, Allen likewise had to be reminded that he had not chosen any photographs of women. It was not deliberate; he had not noticed his omission.¹

Having explored the contributions of women to the postwar underground in many of my writings,² Gregory Corso’s explanation seemed more apt: “There were women, they were there, I knew them, their families put them in institutions, they were given electric shock. In the ’50s if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female your families had you locked up. There were cases, I knew them, someday someone will write about them.” As Ann Douglas has argued, many of the most gifted women of the Beat Generation didn’t survive, “in part because they internalized their male Beat models too intimately.”³ Often deferring their own careers in poetry to care for their poet partners, or manifesting their alienation from the male dominated scene in even more self-destructive ways, these women have largely been omitted from the history of the Beat Generation.⁴

Nonetheless, Douglas suggests that it was the *male* Beats who provided an example of liberation for the feminists of the next decade.⁵ Certainly this was true for Underground filmmaker Barbara Rubin, whose notorious 1963 film *Christmas on Earth* may be the most sexually explicit film of the sixties—stag, avant-garde, foreign, or otherwise. And it is to Rubin that this exploration of female subjectivity, queer coupling, and Judaism in the sixties is devoted.

As I write this, I am sitting here surrounded by a pile of books—Ginsberg’s biographies, letters, poems, correspondences, etc. There is also a pile of

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Figure 1. Barbara Rubin and Allen Ginsberg at the Royal Albert Hall, London; June 1965. Copyright. John “Hoppy” Hopkins.

criticism—about his biographies, letters, poems, correspondences, etc.—about to topple over where I have stacked them. It seems as if everything Ginsberg did was expertly documented. He created his own Allen Ginsberg archive, every scrap of paper filed away and neatly arranged in folders, from grocery lists to napkin doodles. There is a sea of material that still laps at his grave, ample room I suppose for the rest of us to dive in.

I have scoured these materials for any reference about *her*. But she exists only in fragments. A glimpse of her, here and there. Mostly there. Massaging Dylan’s curls on the back of the *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965) album cover, or hovering on the stairs in front of the Royal Albert Hall in London, where she organized the landmark International Poetry Reading in June 1965. I have a vision of Barbara standing behind the big boys, looming on the side of a photograph, a camera covering her face like a mask. She has been pushed aside to make way for the giants of poetry and prose, the *geniuses*. Or maybe not pushed aside, maybe self-effaced. Like the skull in Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*, she is the stain.⁶ I no longer know what is real and what I have imagined, so I return to the pile of books to search for some confirmation of my vision. It collapses.

Each of the Ginsberg books is threaded with neon post-its, a scholar's version of Gretel's trail of cookie crumbs. They mark places where she is mentioned, always briefly. The "filmmaker Barbara Rubin." Allen's "sometimes girlfriend."

If Barbara Rubin is mentioned at all in these hefty homages to the great Dionysian, her life is reduced to a few swift strokes—repeated over and over again in the different versions. Drugs: Many. Obsessions: Ginsberg. Downfall: Hasidism. Always, Ginsberg and Hasidism. Rejected by one, she turns to the other. Or, in alternate versions, her growing interest in Hasidism turns Ginsberg off. One is presented as remedy for the other, but it is a remedy that only makes the patient sicker. Her death in childbirth, a decade after she leaves the farm, proves the disease incurable.

Alternately, Rubin is the link between others to whom more attention is paid. She is a conduit. *So-and-somet so-and-so* through Barbara Rubin. And not just any old *so-and-so*. Dylan and Warhol. Warhol and the Velvets. These were not mere introductions, the busybody work of an amateur matchmaker. In another life, on the steps of White Russia, she must have been a *shadchen*.

Her image haunts me. She is one part saint and one part babushka in Mekas's *Walden (Diaries, Notes, and Sketches, US, 1969)*, her head covered by some sort of *schmata*, tied up by a long checkered scarf and crowned with a pair of sunglasses. Again, she is surrounded by the ambassadors: Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Ed Sanders, Tuli Kupferberg, Gerard Malanga, Andy Warhol. Barbara looks down, laughs, talks, looks away, listens. You can't hear what she is saying, but then another "voice" steps in, filling the place of the absent one. "It was Barbara who got us all together," Jonas's intertitle informs us, and on this note she disappears.

Rubin also appears in Warhol's *Screen Tests* for the requisite three minutes. The *Screen Tests* are like an alternative *Who's Who of America*, circa 1965, but the personalities he catalogued are of course more important than the forgotten names in the official version. More than anything, this is undeniable proof that she existed. But it is also evidence of how she disappeared. Her face emerges—a pretty, somewhat plain face—*Underground Mom and Pop Ken and Flo Jacobs insist she looks like Dietrich, but I don't see it*—but it blinks away into oblivion as the ghostly white leader overcomes her features. Is this where she has gone—into oblivion?

I long for sound, to hear her voice. I look up addresses. I write letters. I make phone calls. Am I the only person who still uses the white pages? But the white pages ought to be golden. There are phone numbers, addresses, traces of a past on its way to extinction. In this antiquated chronicle, landlines still exist. They describe a nearly obsolete New York, where people live in the same apartments for decades. Landlines belong to real people with real homes, the hipsters-cum-old-timers, the real New Yorkers, packed into their dense lofts and apartments, surrounded by the proof that they existed. These are the historians, these are



Figure 2. Barbara Rubin with Andy Warhol, whom she introduced to the Velvet Underground. Copyright Nat Finkelstein.

the museums. Lionel Ziprin—Jewish mystic, Kabbalah instructor, epic poet—is listed, lived in the same four- or five-block radius for eighty-something years until he died in March 2009. So are Tuli Kupferberg and Taylor Mead. They are there, keeping dutiful vigilance over the hundreds of unmarked archives and living time capsules that continue to inform this city even as the real estate market threatens to erase them, one by one. Minimal design is hip, but it is also an aesthetic of forgetting. It's a wonder the rest of us survive without all this proof. At least we can google ourselves.

Try to write letters first. It's more polite. But if you have to cold-call, you can't be too thin-skinned, otherwise you're bound to get offended. Not everyone wants to reminisce with a strange academic about their lost youth. "What was her voice like?" I ask. "How did you know her?" "Did she sleep with men? Women?" "What were your impressions?" "Did Ginsberg love her?"

Unwittingly, you pick at the scab of memory. Your youth is an insult. You're a schmuck, a fool, an ass; you want to know the details of dead people's sex lives. Sometimes they retaliate. *In the sixties, people fucked; didn't anyone tell you? Who do you think you are? What are you after? How old are you? Have you ever even seen a movie?* Always answer politely, like you don't get they are being rude. Unless you can make a joke.

"Like a yenta from Queens," Amy Taubin finally describes it—*her voice*. I sigh in delight. "When I first met her, she was gabbing on the phone at

the Filmmakers Coop, like a yenta from Queens, with her hair in rollers.”⁷ Later, I hear Rubin’s voice in Mekas’s recent tribute to her, *To Barbara with Love* (US, 2007), a short film comprising snippets of ancient footage—some from *Walden*, but also moments of Barbara I haven’t seen before—swimming at the beach, “filming” a young child in an apartment, dancing trance-like in some kind of street gathering or protest, wading into a public fountain fully clothed, riding passenger-side in a car, her fingers strumming her bare knees, her usually covered short hair exposed and windblown. She looks like a real girl here, a teenager.

When her voice finally penetrates the film, I strain to perceive its grain. But the verdict “yenta” has already been pronounced and it is hard to hear around that. The vibrations of her voice that are not “yenta” bounce around, too quick for me to hold.

Each “genius” seems to have constructed Barbara Rubin in his own image. For Mekas, she was a saint. His was the post-asylum nest into which she fell, after being institutionalized as a teenager, and from which she later sprung, transformed from Lester and Pauline Rubin’s overweight, troubled child into an Underground mover-and-shaker. Everybody says, “Jonas loved her.” Some people say she took advantage of his deep affection for her. “Did she love him?” The answer is unclear. It certainly *seems* as if she did, signing nearly every one of her letters to him, “Love love love.” Is this part of the historian’s job—to assess true love?

When you watch *To Barbara with Love*, you realize it is a love letter sent back in time; its heart still throbs in its mouth. In the film, they seem like a couple; it is the sixties, it is warm, they are young again. Jonas’s face is taut and angular, his hair long, smooth, and slightly greasy. She is *his* discovery, *his* angel, an unlikely Lolita, whose sexual provocations seduced older, more experienced men. And like Lolita, Barbara grew up, had kids, got fat, became unrecognizable to the people who had been infatuated with her. She began the sixties ahead of her time; she would end them behind it. And then she would die.

But there are always the cynics, who see ambition where others see love, who recall calculating selfishness where others describe immense generosity. I want to dismiss them—*she is my angel too*—but their testimony is often the most compelling. Shit talk always is. Anyway, what do I know? I wasn’t there. The past is not all roses—not even the sixties. Tell yourself: the past reeked as noxiously as the present. Say it again. Fine, fine. She was an opportunist, a starfucker, a p.r. genius, out for nothing but herself, an appropriator, a manipulator. She took superimposition from Jerry Joffen, who couldn’t afford to shoot with fresh film, and who believed that as long as you shot over the original footage in the same drug-addled state of euphoria, there would be an organic continuity between the layers of imagery.⁸ And as for the spontaneous, “live” radio sound track of *Christmas on Earth*: that was nothing Ken Jacobs hadn’t done first in *Blonde Cobra* (US, 1963).⁹

And as long as we're going there, might as well be out with it: Jonas ran the Cinematheque like a Stalinist boot camp. If he didn't like you, if you were a whacked out on drugs and stole equipment to pay for your next fix, or he just thought your films stank, he exiled you to the provinces. Imagine that: a Lithuanian refugee arrives in NY from a displaced persons camp in Europe, becomes the most important voice in avant-garde cinema, and starts his own blacklist! But instead of naming names, you have to watch boring, deliberately amateur films, over and over again. Are you now or have you ever been a member of the New American Cinema Group? It's just like a Cold War-era movie, no, it's like a Warhol spoof of one, starring Jonas Mekas as J. Parnell Thomas, Ron Rice as John Garfield, and Jerry Joffen as Herbert Biberman. You joke, but you weren't there. You don't know.

Everyone wants to talk about Barbara's Jewishness. Ask a few questions and before you know it, they are onto that: the notorious conversion to Hasidism. And once they get going, it's impossible to bring them back—to film, to the sixties, to Warhol, to Ginsberg, to the cool Barbara who knew everyone, went everywhere, and organized everything. Secular Jews love to kvetch about religious ones; it's our favorite hobby. But it's the one thing I am not interested in; it's too sensational, it's not the point.

I collect the references to her stardom eagerly, not like a zealot, but like a simple fan, seeking her secular traces. Oh, but how I would swoon to finger one of those *schmatas*, to coil around my finger a strand of the hair she repeatedly clipped off! But that would be too much. I am entering the dangerous territory of relics and saints. I am not a fondler of fingernails and teeth. Here are the facts.

To Barbara, with Love

From approximately 1963 to 1968, Rubin facilitated major exchanges and events whose impact extended far beyond their unique nature as happenings. She brought Warhol to Café Bizarre in Greenwich Village in 1965 to meet the Velvet Underground, and then helped to pioneer the multimedia assaults that became known as the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. Desperate to dance, Rubin dragged Warhol to the Dom, an old Ukrainian dance hall in the East Village. Ed Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg (later the Fugs) followed, as did Gerard Malanga and a host of other poets and artists. "Just as Barbara hoped, Warhol's Factory people mingled with the poets, and a new movement began in which music, art, and poetry were combined. Out of this union came rock venues like the Balloon Farm, later the Electric Circus, and suddenly the East Village became the New York center of the 1960s psychedelic rock-n-roll scene."¹⁰

Did Barbara invent the East Village? Hardly. But at a time when Warhol's Factory was dominated by Harvard dropouts and the black sheep of some of the United States' most blue-blooded families, Barbara embraced

the Old World ethnicity that flourished there—even if it was not her own. Filmmaker Ken Jacobs remembers Barbara standing on a car, commanding a mass of people, like a hyperbolic figure from a French Revolution painting. On another occasion, Barbara decided to join the Polish State Parade in order to advertise the New American Cinema.¹¹

More in keeping with her own ancestry, Barbara organized a multimedia event originally named the *Kreeping Kreplach*. (Someone with whom I spoke mistakenly referred to this as the Kreeping “Ker-platch,” making the sound a cartoon frog makes when it jumps off a two-dimensional lily pad into a sheaf of turquoise water. A kreplach is not a frog but a Jewish dumpling, like a wonton, but so doughy-dense that it might make a similar sound when it plunges into broth. For the record, I have never seen one “kreep.”)

Kreeping Kreplach was soon re-christened, or *judenfrei*-ed, as *Caterpillar Changes*, a two-week multimedia event, which played at the Cinematheque in February and March 1967. Participants included musicians such as the Gato Barbieri Quintet, the Free Spirits, Angus MacLise and the Velvet Underground, the ethnomusicologist and film abstractionist Harry Smith, as well as Underground filmmakers Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, Andy Warhol, Shirley Clarke, Storm de Hirsch, D. A. Pennebaker, Jerry Joffen, Marie Menken, Stan Vanderbeek, Willard Maas, Robert Breer, and Ed Emschwiller, to name just a few. It too was a *Who’s Who*, but unlike Warhol’s *Screen Tests*, which individually entombed each participant in an isolated, straining silence, Rubin’s event was a celebration, a free-for-all, a be-in, a happening.

London Calling

Barbara’s interventions weren’t always welcomed or appreciated. Her brazenness was as much of a turn-off as it was a turn-on, often for the same people. Showing up uninvited in London for Ginsberg’s thirty-ninth birthday—he was reportedly displeased about it—she irritated her British hosts by troubling their stiff upper lips with her commune “etiquette.” Carrying a camera with her, she often “filmed” without filming, or produced cinematic images with so much superimposition and free-wheeling camera movements that they ceased to document the events she “recorded” in all but the most subjective ways. That didn’t prevent her from infuriating people with her in-your-face filming techniques. In 1966, she scandalized a group of New York doctors at a dinner benefit for the New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry to which Warhol had been invited. Shouting obscene questions at them, Rubin extracted a morsel of delicious revenge from the profession that had once pathologized her. But in London, a year earlier, Barbara alienated people who might have been considered fellow travelers. On one occasion, the poet Gregory Corso threatened to throw her and her camera out the window.¹²

Ginsberg and Rubin were part of the first wave of Americans to come to London; by the end of the decade, the so-called British invasion would

be mirrored by an American invasion. It represented a significant meeting of some of “the best minds” of their generation, coming together from both sides of the Atlantic. Literary as some of these encounters were, their visit to England was undoubtedly part of the frenzy of Beatlemania. Though Ginsberg was already an established force in American poetry and a well-known personality, he, like every other teenage girl from America, wanted to meet the Beatles. So did Rubin. When John Lennon and George Harrison showed up at a party and talked with Ginsberg while she was off in another room doing drugs, and then disappeared before she returned, Barbara smacked and screamed at Ginsberg in a fury of disappointment.¹³ She had already met Roman Polanski, Federico Fellini, Aldous Huxley, and countless other major talents; she had slept with Dylan and Ginsberg. Is it possible there is another category that we have forgotten in our endless revisions of Benjamin’s notion of the Artist as Producer? Is there such a thing as The Artist as Groupie?

Not all of Rubin’s encounters were missed. Some of Rubin’s amphetamine-fueled whims were impossible to pull off; others created seismic shifts in the counterculture. An unwelcome guest at Ginsberg’s birthday party,



Figure 3. On the steps of the Albert Memorial, opposite the Royal Albert Hall, London, June 1965. Barbara hovers, with camera, over the ambassadors of mid-century poetry. Back row, from left to right: Adrian Mitchell, Anselm Hollo, Marcus Field, Michael Horovitz, Ernst Jandl. Front row: Harry Fainlight, Alex Trocchi, Allen Ginsberg, John Esam, Dan Richter. Rubin had organized the landmark First International Poetry Incarnation on a whim, after showing up invited to Ginsberg’s thirty-ninth birthday celebration. Copyright John “Hoppy” Hopkins.

Rubin ended up organizing a much grander celebration. The historic poetry reading at the Royal Albert Hall on June 11, 1965, featured nineteen poets, including Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Pablo Neruda, Andrei Voznesenski, Harry Fainlight, Ernst Jandl, and William Burroughs. The event drew 7,000 spectators, turned a generation of British youth on to Ginsberg's poetry, and inaugurated London's underground scene.

But who was Ginsberg's Rubin? It's hard to say. Kindred spirit? No doubt. They were friends on the Lower East Side. They went places together: the Kerista group, a hippie free-love commune that had been founded in San Francisco, and whose beliefs included "polyfidelity" and polytheism. Barbara, Allen, and Peter Orlovsky.

Going up the Country, 1968

Barbara moved into Allen and Peter's East Village apartment, on the sixth floor of 704 E. 5th Street, near Avenue C in the East Village. The rent was \$35 a month. Ginsberg biographer Bill Morgan has described the situation as follows: "Before long Rubin moved into Allen's apartment, aggressively took over the space, and began planning her life with Allen. She said she wanted to have twelve children by a dozen different famous men, and the first of these was to be Allen. The apartment became quite chaotic with five or six people living in three and a half rooms, exactly the nightmare Allen had hoped to avoid."¹⁴

The Ginsberg folks are fond of recalling Barbara's tyranny, which followed Ginsberg from his apartment on the Lower East Side to the home he purchased in upstate New York at Rubin's behest. In 1967, Barbara convinced Ginsberg to buy an old farmhouse in Cherry Valley, about eighty miles west of Albany. It would be a tax write-off for the newly formed Committee on Poetry, and Ginsberg imagined it as a kind of rehabilitation commune for poets grappling with addiction. Barbara had chosen the location after learning of a Jewish community in the nearby town of Sharon Springs from their friend Susan Brustman.¹⁵

The hot springs at Sharon Springs had once been a refuge for German Jews who were unwelcome at nearby Saratoga Springs. Yet the resort town fell into decline after Prohibition destroyed the market for hops, the local agricultural crop, and the construction of the New York State Thruway diverted traffic away from the area. After World War II, Sharon Springs got a second wind when the West German government paid medical care reparations to Holocaust survivors, whose therapeutic needs included the spa treatments naturally available in the vicinity.¹⁶ In the 1950s, while Ginsberg was busy expanding the role of the prodigal Jewish son with visionary flair—swooning over the hunky Jack Kerouac, sleeping with outlaw Neal Cassady and the patrician-cum-degenerate William Burroughs, writing the "obscene" epic *Howl*, experimenting with drugs, and traveling to Mexico, San Francisco,

Morocco, and Paris—the very middle-class Jewishness that Ginsberg was trying to escape was overflowing in Sharon Springs, with its kosher hotels and Yiddish bingo games.

Barbara Rubin and Allen Ginsberg weren't part of the postwar wave of Holocaust survivors that moved to Sharon Springs in search of spiritual and physical healing. If anything, the queer arrival of these bohemian city folk recalled an earlier moment in the history of the area, when Oscar Wilde had stopped there in 1882 to do a reading on his literary tour of America. But in other ways, their journey was not completely dissimilar from the trajectory of Jewish immigrants seeking the chance for rebirth outside the city. Like those traumatized subjects of history, they also sought healing and renewal. For Allen, moving to Cherry Valley represented the possibility of getting Orlovksy, his lover, away from his drug addiction and out of the Lower East Side, whose filthy streets he had obsessively tried to clean with a toothbrush while strung out on methedrine.¹⁷ For Barbara, moving to Cherry Valley meant the chance to marry Ginsberg, bear dozens of his children, and live out the rest of their days in idyllic Old World bliss. For many, this vision is the laughable fantasy that defines Barbara's wild intractability.

After buying the house from one Mrs. LaSalle for \$9,000, Allen and Barbara arrived in Cherry Valley in late spring 1968. The farm consisted of a farmhouse, a barn, and several outbuildings set on ninety acres of land with a creek running through it. Surrounded by a state forest, it had eight rooms, including four bedrooms, a large kitchen with a water pump, no electricity, and a vast attic. As Allen proudly reported in a letter to poet Gary Snyder from July 1968, there were three goats, one cow, one horse, fifteen chickens, three ducks, two geese, two fantail pigeons, and one "friendly hermit."¹⁸ Peter arrived with his mostly catatonic brother Julius in tow and no intention of weaning himself off drugs. Gordon Ball, a young filmmaker introduced to Ginsberg by Jonas Mekas, was hired to run the farm. "More kibbutz than commune," the farm was designed as quiet retreat from the city.¹⁹ Regular habitants during this period included Allen, Peter, Barbara, Julius, Gordon, Gordon's girlfriend Candy O'Brien, a friend named Stephen Bornstein, and Susan Brustman. Visitors were numerous and included many of Ginsberg's Beat friends, including Gregory Corso and Herbert Huncke, as well as the journalist/Velvet Underground manager Al Aronowitz and his children.

Letters from the early days of the farm manifest Ginsberg's frustration with his friends' dismissal of his "no needles" policy; people would hide their needles and stash all over the farm. And the downside of Barbara's incredible ability to mobilize people into action turned out to be her penchant for bossing people around. On the farm, Barbara preferred directing others and was rarely up for physical labor that involved sweating profusely.²⁰ She may have been a ball-buster, but she was hardly a *baleboostah*. Yet from all accounts, the farm at Cherry Valley was one of the many sites where the poet outlaws of

the Beat Generation interacted with, argued with, and lived with the younger generation of the Underground film, art, and music scene.

Nearly everyone with whom I have spoken insists that Barbara became more and more impossible to live with in Cherry Valley. She regularly visited a Hasidic community in Sharon Springs and would come home at night and proselytize about her newfound piety, particularly to the Jews in residence. This was particularly irksome to Ginsberg, who had consistently refused the label “Jewish Poet.” Allen and Barbara fought constantly. He defended himself against her tirades by screaming that he was a “Buddhist Jew.” In one of his many letters to his father from this period, Allen writes, “As I would not see myself as Black if I were black, I don’t see myself as a Jew as I am a Jew, & so don’t identify with nation of Jews anymore than I would of nation of America or Russia.”²¹ But if Allen’s arguments with his father were reasoned political debates—about the legitimacy of Israel’s policy toward the Arabs, or the United States’ policy toward the Black Panthers and the Vietnamese—his arguments with Rubin were banal, domestic squabbles. They may have involved ideology, but they seemed more like the bitter fights of an old married couple.

Queer Coupling

But there’s more to the story than Barbara’s supposed tyranny. By all accounts, she was an enchanting, alluring figure. She was full of an unbelievable enthusiasm and energy—some of it fueled by her voracious drug habits, but also reflective of her insatiable desire to bring people together. A woman under the influence, she also exerted an incredible influence on others. She had an ability to enrapture others, a magnetism she unleashed on Allen full force. He was not always as unreceptive to her charms as many of his friends claim. Peter and Allen were accustomed to having group sex. Yet most of the women with whom they shared a bed were more interested in Peter than in Allen. This all changed with the arrival of Barbara Rubin. “Now, in addition to Peter’s current girlfriend, a great beauty named Annie Buchanan, Allen had one of his own. He confided to Snyder at the time that he had learned the BIG heterosexual secret. All he had to do was lie back passively and let a woman make love to him from nipples to knees. After that stimulation he didn’t have any trouble getting it up and screwing her.”²²

Was Barbara Rubin Ginsberg’s beard? Unlikely. Ginsberg had already out-ed himself in public on numerous occasions, “married” Orlovsky, and defended the rights of persecuted gays in Castro’s Cuba. Ginsberg was gay before Stonewall, gay before “gay.” He had long ago given up the idea of hetero-normativity. Was she Allen’s girlfriend? There’s some debate. Everyone confirms they fucked at least one time: in the projection booth at the Filmmakers Coop. Allen had seen her film *Christmas on Earth* and was overwhelmed: “It was a lot of porn, beauty, in which she made an art object out of



Figure 4. A queer couple if ever there was one: Allen sprinkles an unknown substance into a drinking glass while sitting on Barbara Rubin's knee. Barbara, sporting a customary babushka, brought Old World style to Warhol's new world. Copyright John "Hoppy" Hopkins.

her vagina. I thought that was in the right spirit. We got into a very funny rapport, we were just there alone, and we actually ended up screwing on the floor that very night. She was really young and pretty and I liked her."²³

Allen Ginsberg had already achieved, in the 1950s, the kind of sexual freedom, artistic license, and community of friends, artists, and lovers that Barbara Rubin desired. But Rubin's film *Christmas on Earth* put into images the sexual ecstasy and all-over desire for penetration that Ginsberg had only put into words. Ginsberg's frequently expressed desire to move beyond the confines of heterosexuality and homosexuality and embrace the full sensual, contradictory fullness of being a "complete person" discovered kindred recognition in *Christmas'* explicit yet ambiguous images of throbbing genitals and other body parts. Yet in spite of this recognition, Ginsberg did not share Rubin's fantasy of getting married. In a letter to Snyder in July 1968, Ginsberg writes, "Barbara Rubin pining for me (ugh!) (ouch I mean),"²⁴ in a way that assumes the reader's familiarity with Rubin's aggressive romantic overtures. Everybody except Ginsberg seemed to be aware of Rubin's plan to marry the poet and have a dozen children with him.

In a lengthy interview with Paul Carroll of *Playboy* given in Chicago in August 1968, just months after Ginsberg moved into the farm with Rubin,

Allen is asked extensively about his sexual and romantic life.²⁵ He does not mention Rubin by name, but many of his answers seem to refer indirectly to their complex relationship and its troubling implications for his own identity. Carroll asks Ginsberg to clarify his earlier admission to Timothy Leary that an LSD episode had opened “the door to women and heterosexuality” through which he could see “womanly body visions and family life ahead.” Ginsberg ascribes this sentiment and his occasional interest in women to the mind-altering qualities of drugs and the perennial grip of the Oedipus complex. “Well, I get those feelings every time I take acid . . . Naturally, you’ll come upon old feelings you didn’t know were there and were ashamed of, like loving your mother and realizing that you and she were one and that you’d separated from her because you couldn’t stand the fear of being one with her. And realizing that all women and your mother are one—for myself, at least—I cut myself off from all women because I was afraid I’d discover my mother in them, or that I’d have the same problems with them that I had with her.”²⁶

But the family life that Rubin imagined was not completely without appeal for Ginsberg. Later in the same interview with *Playboy*, Ginsberg admits that he had worked hard to renounce the idea of fathering children, which had been desirable to him in the past. At the urging of a “long-haired Indian Vishnuite,” Ginsberg claims to have realized that he had to “give up attachment, compulsion to have children on account of you’re a Jewish boy from New Jersey.”²⁷ In light of his desire to detach himself from all things that stank of middle-class Jewishness, Barbara Rubin’s overtures must have been especially rancorous.

When Ginsberg is asked if he will ever marry—a seemingly strange question considering his publicly avowed homosexuality—Ginsberg replies: “I don’t yet feel enough of that erotic romance around the belly for a chick—not enough to want to contract to stick with one woman the rest of my life . . . Maybe if there were some chick I dug who had the same detachment as myself and who wouldn’t suffer continually from being unsatisfied by my lack of erotic interest, a marriage would be all right” (170).

Barbara Rubin was a kindred spirit, and she might have been a contender for the kind of relationship with a woman that Ginsberg was considering. In addition to polyfidelity, one of the values endorsed by the Kerista group to which they both belonged was “compersion,” which the Keristas defined as “the opposite of jealousy, positive feelings about your partner’s OTHER intimacies.”²⁸ There is no indication that Rubin was not an enthusiastic practitioner of both these ideals. But if her gender made her less appealing to Ginsberg than the seemingly heterosexual young men he was fond of, then her phantasmatic association with Ginsberg’s mother, Naomi Ginsberg, made her a threatening, potentially castrating figure. As his father could have “been killed by Naomi’s ecstasy,” so Allen could be swallowed up by Barbara’s rapacious pansexuality.²⁹



Figure 5. Ginsberg with Barbara Rubin on his thirty-ninth birthday party in Barry Miles's apartment, London, June 3, 1965. John Lennon and George Harrison stopped by around midnight, where they found a naked Ginsberg with a do-not-disturb sign tied to his penis. Barbara was furious that she missed the celebrity sighting. Copyright John "Hoppy" Hopkins.

Indeed, Rubin's resemblance to Naomi Ginsberg had more to it than what Ginsberg regarded as the inevitable connection of all women to each other in an endless maternal chain. Naomi Ginsberg, for whom Ginsberg composed his astonishing poem "Kaddish," was a mercurial, deeply troubled person who had been in and out of mental institutions since the early 1930s. Gripped by violent, irrational mood swings, Naomi suffered from paranoid ravings, seizures, and attempted suicides until her death in 1956. Hospitalized throughout Allen's life, Naomi had received shock therapy on numerous occasions, had been lobotomized, and spent her last years partially paralyzed, languishing in a mental institution.³⁰ When Allen was a child, he often saw her naked, and he alternated between serving as her victim, her caretaker, her confidant, and the child she seduced. "Kaddish," written three years after her death, in 1959, was an attempt to both mourn and redeem her. It spoke eloquently of Naomi's humiliation, her unfulfilled, desperate battle for personal and spiritual peace. It ended with quotes from a letter Naomi

had written but which Allen had received after her death: “Get married Allen don’t take drugs.” According to Joyce Johnson, Ginsberg briefly considered breaking up with Peter after her death so that they could both date girls.³¹

But Naomi had not always been the ashen figure who wasted away in an asylum. As a young Russian immigrant, Naomi had been politically active, outspoken, and intellectually curious. A figure of great pathos, Naomi had, in her youth, been a stunning beauty, draped with a mass of long black hair, and brimming with ideals. She was charming, fun-loving, vivacious, and overtly sexual in ways that were unusual for her time. In “Kaddish,” Ginsberg describes glorious moments of Naomi’s youth, in an epic that is otherwise devoted to tales of her abjection:

O Russian faced, woman on the grass, your long black hair is crowned with
flowers, the mandolin is on your knees—
Communist beauty, sit here married among daisies,
promised happiness at hand—

Like the many women she would never meet who would fall in love with her son, Naomi had been enchanted by a Jewish poet: Allen’s father, Louis. Yet as an almost militant communist, Naomi’s sensibility was too radical to fit into prewar ideals of bourgeois normalcy. She may have hoped that Louis could have offered a creative partnership where both of their political ideas could be nurtured; as it turned out, his beliefs were far more moderate than hers. As a nudist and a vegetarian, Naomi had scandalized her family, her neighbors, and even fellow members of the local Communist Party. Though not always recognized as such by her son, Naomi was “beatific” *avant la lettre*. Had she been born in New York in 1945, as Barbara Rubin had been, rather than in White Russia in 1896, Naomi Ginsberg may have had a better chance of survival. Better, but not by much.

Like the refugees on route to Sharon Springs, Naomi was tormented by visions of Hitler, however delusional. Her paranoia increased in the 1930s, as Europe fell to Fascism and Nazism. Throughout her life, Naomi had been sent to places of supposed recovery, where she was instead lobotomized and shocked into submission. As an adult struggling with her demons, Naomi had been happiest on the occasions without her husband, when a community of similar-minded bohemians surrounded her. She found this at Camp Nicht-Gedeigat, a communist Jewish camp near Lake Monroe in upstate New York where she used to take her children in the summers.³²

Naomi was an eternally lost soul, always tragically beyond the reach of the son’s desire for safety and wholeness. Seeing Orlovsky in a maniacal state of intoxication, Ginsberg must have been tormented by visions of his schizophrenic mother. Amphetamines formed a decaying daisy chain around many of Ginsberg’s troubled loves: his mother, Orlovsky, Elise Cowen, Barbara Rubin.

Allen was desperate to break the chain. He responded to the horror of the city and its emaciated ghosts by going upstate, in search of the perfect conjunction of nature and ideals that Naomi had sought, and temporarily found, in Camp Nicht-Gedeigat. It was an attempt to recapture the few, scattered moments of pastoral bliss that he had experienced with his mother. It was also an attempt to re-create an earlier moment of Popular Front-era Jewish bohemianism in the midst of the sexual revolution. Compelled to repeat, this son of the New Left returned to the mother of the Old.

In a failed attempt to exorcise madness, drugs were forbidden on the farm—an injunction to which hardly anybody paid attention. In the midst of his troubles with Peter, Allen could depend upon Barbara to take care of the extra-familial responsibilities he had amassed. He may have rhetorically rejected the yoke of the patriarchal middle-class family, but in other ways, Ginsberg and Rubin fulfilled somewhat traditional roles. Ginsberg paid the bills; Barbara looked after the “family.” By November 1967, Ginsberg reports to poet Robert Creeley that Julius Orlovsky was living with Barbara Rubin and her girlfriends on 3rd Avenue and talking and socializing at last.³³ On other occasions, Allen assures Peter that he should leave Julius’s care to Barbara: “Let that responsibility slide off your shoulders, quit that as much as possible, let Barbara and others take care of him for the summer.”³⁴

And she did. Indeed, Rubin nursed others as Ginsberg had nursed his mother when she was too sick to care for herself. Barbara took care of Julius Orlovsky, protecting him from others’ rage and his own, as Allen’s earlier disgruntled lover Elise Cowen had cared for Peter’s other brother Lafcadio.³⁵ Barbara cared for the children of rock manager Al Aronowitz and the children of the mystic poet and Kabbalah scholar Lionel Ziprin. She never took money for nurturing the young, the sick, or the insane, although she spent much of her time doing just that. As Jonas Mekas famously described, of all the people floating around the Cinematheque, Barbara would be the only person to “take a bum off the street.”³⁶ As Al’s daughter Brett Aronowitz recalls, there was something holy about her. Somewhere between a big sister and a nanny, Barbara was “the Mary Poppins of the Beat Generation.” Though it’s hard to imagine Julie Andrews reading the Old Testament in bed, chanting with the Hare Krishnas, reading Tarot cards, or taking a couple of kids to hear jazz at night in Harlem, that’s exactly what Barbara did.³⁷

With her classic dark Jewess looks and penetrating eyes, Barbara Rubin even looked like Naomi Ginsberg. Allen admitted as much to his friend and later biographer Barry Miles, with whom he stayed on his visit to London in 1965. It was both a turn-on and a turn-off. Allen, who had confessed to being extremely sensitive to “incest issues,”³⁸ must have seen in Barbara both the desired fantasy of maternal seduction and the threat of its fulfillment.

Like Allen’s mother, Barbara had been “afflicted” by eccentric ideas that were regarded as a form of mental instability requiring medical attention. Indeed, it was hardly unusual during this time for middle- and upper-class

families to try to “correct” non-normative behavior with psychiatric interventions. Spirited women and homosexual boys were particularly vulnerable to these violent interventions. Being overweight as a teenager landed Barbara Rubin in an institution, where she, like Warhol Superstars Brigid Berlin and Edie Sedgwick, became addicted to amphetamines and other narcotics. As a teenager, Lou Reed had undergone electroconvulsive therapy to cure him of his homosexuality. Ginsberg had also been hospitalized as a young man. Refusing to reshape her contours to more conventional form, Barbara had been sent away to cure her of her individuality. The cure had failed.

The Bearded Woman

As is well known, Barbara Rubin was not the only woman with whom Ginsberg slept. Nor was she the only one of his female lovers who had reminded him of his mother. In the mid-fifties, Ginsberg briefly dated and then lived with Elise Cowen, an unusual Jewish girl from Washington Heights who had been to Barnard and eventually committed suicide, in part because of her lovesickness for Allen. Indeed, Elise seems like Barbara’s tragic precursor. In *Minor Characters*, her memoir of the Beat generation, Joyce Johnson describes Elise as someone who could have passed for Allen’s twin. Like Allen, Elise considered her classically Jewish face ugly, an impression that was not helped by the fact that she had accidentally singed off all of her hair during an oven explosion, and had gained weight and developed acne as a teenager.³⁹

Elise and Allen looked alike—not like Edie and Andy, whose silvered silhouettes made them both the epitome of icy, *goyische* cool, but like two nerdy Jews. “They could have been born into the same family, brother and sister, they looked so much alike. Their broad foreheads and somewhat heart-shaped faces, the vulnerability at the corners of the mouths, their same darkness. They even wore nearly identical black-rimmed glasses.”⁴⁰ Obsessed with Allen after making love to him one night in his pad in the East Village in 1953, Elise takes Allen as a holy figure, a divine knower of truths, her “intercessor.”⁴¹ Alienated from her peers in New York, Elise longs to follow Ginsberg to San Francisco, hoping to find a community where she could finally fit in. Yet like Barbara Rubin, Elise is unwanted—a two-day-old beard, a stain, an embarrassment. Her affair with Allen means more to her than it does to him. Elise, an “outcast among outcasts,” a “shadow,” a “Nada,” “voiceless.”⁴² Elise.

And yet there was more than physical resemblance between Allen and Elise. In the era before the sexual revolution, when sex was “a serious and anxious act” for the women who dared to have it before marriage, Elise Cowen cut off all her hair “Joan of Arc” style, wore men’s Levis, carried a big, black leather “old lady bag,” smoked marijuana, and had sexual affairs with men and women.⁴³ Elise was as queer as Allen was, but as a woman she remained more bound by society’s domestic expectations. Johnson recalls, “There’s something between Allen and my friend Elise, that instant knowing which

can exist like a mysterious current between two people. He accepts her in her Crazy Jane-ness.⁴⁴ Like Rubin would a decade later, Elise reminds Ginsberg of his mother. “I’ve always been attracted to intellectual madwomen,” he will confess in his journal six years after meeting Elise.⁴⁵

Attracted, and also repulsed. According to biographer Bill Morgan, “The worst thing about Elise in Allen’s mind was that she reminded him of his mother; for that he could never forgive her. Her hair even smelled of death, he once remarked in disgust, so he was glad to be leaving her behind.”⁴⁶ Completing the transference with a waxen seal, Elise helped Allen type “Kad-dish,” Allen’s belated eulogy to Naomi. “You haven’t done with her, yet?” she asked.⁴⁷ Hardly.

Upon his return from San Francisco in 1958, Ginsberg and his new lover Peter Orlovsky moved in with Elise and her lover Sheila on E. 87th Street and 1st Avenue, in an old tenement apartment in Yorkville, a German neighborhood on the Upper East Side. To Joyce Johnson their unconventional arrangement seemed like “a new kind of family.” Indeed, Elise’s tenement apartment seemed to Joyce like the “most exciting place in the world,” as it brought together people, ideas, and manuscripts in ways that would last for an afternoon or a lifetime. In many ways, Elise’s apartment in Yorkville was the unheralded prelude to Cherry Valley: an early attempt at alternative, queer communal living. Elise’s kitchen was reportedly the only place other than the Eighth Street bookshop where you could find a copy of Ginsberg’s recently published *Howl*. But their alternative space was far from a genderless utopia. In spite of her unconventionality, Elise waited longingly for Allen to come home. She ironed, made soup, took messages, smoked, stared out of the window, and entertained Peter’s troubled brother Lafcadio.⁴⁸ As with his later relationship with Barbara, Elise is more interested in Allen than he is in her. Disgusted with her “hopelessness,” Ginsberg later tells Kerouac, “I don’t want no big Jewish wives yelling at me over the dishes.”⁴⁹ Cowen’s lines in “Sitting,” a poem published after her death, describe this situation more lovingly:

Sitting with you in the kitchen
Talking of anything
Drinking tea
I love you
“The” is a beautiful, regal, perfect word
Oh I wish you body here
With or without bearded poems

Rejected by Ginsberg, Elise wandered around, from New York to California and back again. She became an alcoholic, took a job as a typist, was fired, wrote poetry in secret, became addicted to methedrine, obtained a psychiatric abortion, was sent to Bellevue. She had never gotten over her obsession for Allen and, throughout the years, had stayed with him in various locations in the East Village. Imagine if the timing had been different, and Barbara and

Elise had met up one night in Allen's apartment. What would they have said to each other? Couldn't they have ridden off into the sunset together, these two queer bald *yiddishe* mamas, who must have seen in Allen Ginsberg the power to defy the conventions that they themselves remained bound by?

One of the last times Joyce Johnson saw Elise, she was withered by methedrine, carrying her belongings around in shopping bags, drifting from one East Village tenement to another. One night she came to Johnson's door to borrow a typewriter, with "three death hairs growing out of her chin."⁵⁰

Elise Cowen killed herself in February 1962. At the time of her death, she was almost ten years older than Barbara Rubin, who was either in a mental institution or about to be committed to one. When Elise threw herself *through* her parents' closed sitting room window in Washington Heights, she had just been released from Hillside Mental Hospital. I take it she was tired of sitting. At the time of her death, Elise was twenty-eight years old, only a few years younger than Rubin would be when she died of a postnatal infection in France in 1980, after giving birth to her fifth child. On hearing of Cowen's death, Ginsberg wrote the following to the poet Gregory Corso: "Though everyone else that took amphetamines regularly wound up a thin faced paranoiac wreck like Elise . . . Horror's sure hung his hat in New York of late."⁵¹

By his own admission, Ginsberg slept with women "lots of times," admitting it could be just as good if the "chick" was "lissome and springy, skinny and pretty." Ginsberg's stated preference for "little blonde furry fucky dolls"⁵² deliberately avoided mention of Rubin's own physical charms. A brunette, Barbara's hair was often shorn; sometimes it simply fell out because of Barbara's immodest drug use. Her weight noticeably fluctuated. She was hardly a little blonde "fucky doll."

Barbara left the farm after approximately seven months. Disappointed by Allen's rejection, Barbara had grown more and more involved with the Satmar Hasidic community at Sharon Springs, and her observance had become more fanatical. But what was the basis for her attraction to one of the most Orthodox, most doctrinaire forms of Hasidism, in which women were not treated as equals and conversation and debate with "outsiders" was of no interest? For a woman who dared to make sexually explicit, formally outrageous films at a time when even the Underground cinema scene was male dominated, it was, at the very least, an unusual choice. And while Satmar certainly offered the kind of immersive community that Barbara had always sought—in the Filmmakers Coop, at Kerista, at the farm—its exclusionary practice seemed as far as possible from Rubin's utopian ideal of bringing people of all backgrounds together.

According to Stephen Bornstein, Barbara claims that she was first turned on after being told by someone in the observant community that piety was divided into three categories. The third category, or the category of least importance, consisted of pious Jews who had been born into religious families and remained observant throughout their lives. The second category

consisted, surprisingly, of Gentiles who had converted to Judaism and had become observant of their own free will. The first, and most pious category, were individuals who had been born into Judaism, strayed away from an observant life, and then returned to a religious community. According to Bornstein, Barbara immediately recognized herself as a potential candidate for the first category. “She saw an opportunity to catapult herself into the most pious category” and she seized it.

The Golden Calf

When Stephen Bornstein first described the final argument that sent Barbara hurtling from the farm in gory, almost excruciating detail, I did not immediately see its relevance. Not as thick-skinned as I profess to be, I was, furthermore, perturbed by the method of its narration. “A cow’s vagina runs parallel to the ground. If you got on your hands and knees, your vagina would run parallel to the ground. Get it?” I got it. I didn’t want to, but I did.

I will try to narrate this story briefly. I will not refer, without permission, to your vagina, nor ask you to picture yourself kneeling on the floor with a gloved hand up your anus. You can if you want to, but it is not required.

A cow had been purchased for the farm. Inexplicably, “Bessie” stopped producing milk. Everyone at the farm assumed she was diseased. A vet clarified the seemingly obvious fact that cows, like humans, only produce milk when they are nursing. The vet offered to artificially inseminate the cow.

The farm’s mostly urban expatriates greeted this revelation with disbelief. Bornstein couldn’t imagine having to take care of a pregnant cow for months without getting anything in return! Peter refused to artificially inseminate the cow, claiming that everything at the farm was done naturally. Advocates of free love, Ginsberg, Orlovsky, and Rubin were hardly the kind of people who would deny amorous pleasure to any living creature. Bessie would fuck whom she wanted to fuck!

But cow fucking could be dangerous. Indeed, bulls were not modeled on the reformed, sensitive, anal-pleasure-loving peaceniks who populated Cherry Valley. Bulls were closer to the old-fashioned kind of man, the conservative rednecks who killed Bonnie and Clyde, or raped Jon Voigt’s chubby friend in *Deliverance* (US, 1972). Finally, a little peacenik feminist bull was found at a nearby dairy farm. In a parodic inversion of the gender dynamics of the farm, Bessie was emphatically disinterested. After many failed attempts to mate them, it was determined that Bessie would be inseminated artificially. As a consolation, she could “choose” her partner from a catalogue of bulls by licking the page upon which her beloved appeared.

Thirteen grueling milk-free months later, Bessie was finally ready to provide for the disgruntled inhabitants of Cherry Valley. But first, her newborn calf had to be eliminated. Barbara demanded that the animal be sold to a kosher butcher, claiming that it was an abomination to do otherwise. If her

friends didn't comply, Barbara threatened to leave and go live with the Satmar Jews.

Four days of eighteen-hour-a-day fighting ensued. In the end, a kosher butcher could not be found. As promised, Barbara left. When a man came soon after to take the calf away, he casually mentioned that the calf would be sold to a kosher butcher. Barbara had severed her relationship with Cherry Valley over nothing. Like the sinful worship of the Golden Calf that earned God's vengeful wrath at the Hebrews, the affair with the calf was a foolish misunderstanding. In retrospect, it was also the end of an era.

Oi Vei!

Spiritual discovery was, to a degree, part of what you did in the sixties. Before becoming a born-again Christian in the late seventies, Bob Dylan had a Jewish phase—encouraged by Rubin—that included seeking guidance from the famed Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld of Yeshiva Sh'or Yeshuv in Far Rockaway. The Beatles, followed by Donovan, had gone to India in 1968 to study with the Maharishi. Ginsberg embraced Buddhism. But if Eastern religion was cool, and the esoteric study of Kabbalah was part of the expanded perception—alongside hallucinogenic drugs, orgies, and experimental film—celebrated by the counterculture, then Hasidism remained decidedly uncool. Barbara's turn toward it in the late sixties was particularly troubling—if not embarrassing—for her secular Jewish friends who had struggled to free themselves from their grandparents' shtetls and their parents' split-levels.

Many of the people most irritated with Rubin's "conversion" were Jewish themselves. Lenny Bruce, notorious logorrheic Jew, found Barbara a "pushy big mouth, very demanding, not beyond deception in pursuit of her own goals, and very manipulative."⁵³ Though Rubin's Jewishness may have seemed exotic to some, her *chutzpah* became more off-putting as she became more dogmatic in her religious views. As a latent feminist and secular Jew, Amy Taubin was disgusted by the esteemed countercultural leaders—like Ginsberg and Dylan—who went around posturing like mystic *rebbe*s, trailed by a gaggle of women *shlepping* their burdens. After visiting Barbara in a Hasidic community in Brooklyn, Taubin hoped her enchantment with the Satmars would be short-lived.⁵⁴ It wasn't.

Of the underground film scene that developed around the Cinematheque and the Filmmakers Cooperative, there was not an overwhelming number of Jews. But Jewishness, and its re-signification as a more intentional kind of otherness—whether it be beat, hip, or avant-garde—was a significant if yet underappreciated aspect of the postwar underground. Indeed, ethnic communities were often the background against which the Underground's antics were performed, and the models upon which new kinds of artistic and sexual communities were based. Yet while the Eastern European identity of the Lithuanian Mekas brothers, the Polish Warhol, and the Russian

Orlovksy brothers helped establish their other-worldly aura, the middle-class, suburban Jewishness of people like Barbara Rubin, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, Lenny Bruce, and Lou Reed was a stain that had to be rubbed out. And though Ginsberg often acknowledged his cultural Jewishness, and saw affinities with the tradition of Jewish anarchism that would have included some of his other contemporaries, including Judith Malina, Julian Beck, Tuli Kupferberg, and Abbie Hoffman, he did not want to be associated with its postwar suburban incarnation.

Approximately eight months after the incident with the calf, Rubin called the farm and invited everyone to her wedding to Mordecai Levy, whom she had met at Rabbi Freifeld's famed *baal t'shuvah* congregation in Far Rockaway, a place where secular Jews were welcomed to "return" to God through religious observance. Like Barbara, Mordecai had explored alternative spirituality before coming to Far Rockaway. A law school dropout, Mordecai had hitchhiked around the country before ending up at Rabbi Schlomo Karvak's Jewish house of love and prayer in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. Like Bessie's ill-fated encounter with the bull, their meeting was a *shid-dach*, an organized introduction.⁵⁵

Rubin had been involved with other religious Jewish communities, in Williamsburg and Brighton Beach. Rabbi Freifeld's congregation was different. A renowned figure, Freifeld had an ability to communicate with all kinds of people regardless of their external appearance.⁵⁶ Regarding the hippie phenomenon as a "symptom" of an "inner restlessness," Freifeld nonetheless opened his doors to the countercultural youth. In an interview given in 1978, Freifeld discussed the types of people who flocked to him in the sixties. He could have been speaking directly about Barbara Rubin: "What is this business of going back to the farm? I visited a number of so-called hippie farms. It's running away from the confusion, from the complications of society, and seeking a simpler, more honest and profound way of life. So the whole hippie movement is just symptomatic . . . In fact we had a number of people here who were from the first hippies, who were so to speak leaders and pioneers in the hippie movement. But it wasn't because they were hippies that they became religious. It was because they had this symptom of an inner restlessness, of a vacuum inside their lives that drove them and motivated them to seek something else."⁵⁷ Rather than being completely beyond the ethos of the sixties, Hasidism was on a continuum with the communes, hippie farms, and free love societies that populate our imagination of that era.

The Return of the Repressed

When I first heard descriptions of Barbara Rubin's wedding to Mordecai Levy in January 1971, it seemed like pure apocrypha. People who had attended were fond of describing how men and women were separated, as was the custom, and how many of the women stood on chairs to peek over the dividing

wall to get a glimpse of Bob Dylan. But I now realize that Barbara and Mordecai's wedding was much more than an amusing footnote to the sixties.

Though Barbara's marriage to Mordecai didn't last very long, their wedding was one of the few moments when the postwar underground reunited with representatives of a religious tradition that many of them had abandoned or shunned. Crammed into a brownstone, two alternative communities who had been living in opposing worlds despite their neighborly proximity to each other came uncomfortably together. For some it was a vision of another world; for others, it was the return of the repressed.

Ginsberg came, excited to see Bob Dylan, with whom he had been out of touch for years. Stephen Bornstein was there. The Aronowitzs were there. Underground filmmaker Jerry Joffen came, reluctantly.

Bornstein recalls sitting at a table with approximately thirty old religious Jewish men with long white beards. When he introduced Jerry "Zalman" Joffen to them, one of the old men questioned whether Jerry was the son of Rav Avraham Yoffen, the famed head of the Novardok Yeshivah, one of the biggest and most important yeshivas in pre-World War II Europe.⁵⁸ Indeed, he was. Before arriving in the States in 1941, Zalman had been born in 1925 in Bialystok in present-day Poland. He lived there in the headquarters of the Mussar movement, which had first developed among non-Hasidic Eastern European Jews (particularly of Lithuanian descent) in the nineteenth century as a response to the social changes brought about by the Enlightenment. Yet in spite of being immersed in this method of disciplined instruction used to further ethical and spiritual development, Zalman suffered a crisis of faith. By the 1950s he had become a bohemian in New York's Lower East Side underground artist colony. Shunning his son's decision to leave the faith, Zalman's father had said kaddish for him, the Jewish prayer for the dead.

The conversation among the beards continued. Wasn't it also true that Zalman Joffen, as he was known, was also the author of a certain scholarly religious article that was still being discussed in talmudic circles? Yes, this too was correct.

In our present-day world of megachurches and the crusades of the Moral Majority, we don't tend to think of religious fundamentalists and avant-garde artists seeking mutual enlightenment from each other. Indeed, as journalist David Katz has suggested, "Orthodox Judaism, with its grey-bearded congregants in pure white shirts, *tallissim*, long black coats and wide-brimmed fedoras, laying tefillin and softly dovening in dimly lit shuls, may seem irreconcilably opposed to the secular libertines of the mid-twentieth-century avant-garde, devotees of all that is modern and against the grain, practicing their own rituals at art openings, poetry readings, happenings and 'scenes.'"⁵⁹ And yet, as it turns out, these worlds are not always as estranged as they seem. In 1970, they came together at Barbara Rubin's wedding.

Indeed, many of the most influential figures of the postwar Underground had one foot in the Old World and one foot in the New. With mystic scholar/

poet Lionel Ziprin as the downtown answer to Rabbi Freifeld, the blend of underground radicalism and Old World spirituality was a central nexus in the postwar underground.⁶⁰

While Rubin's turn toward Hasidism seems unthinkable in relation to her earlier polymorphous perversity, it becomes legible in light of these social and historical considerations. Yet try as I may, it is still difficult to imagine Rubin, whose relation to sexuality was both ambivalent and ambiguous, living within a system that defines gender difference as clearly and conservatively as Orthodox Judaism does. An extremely maternal person, Barbara Rubin had mothered the Underground's lost children. Often surrounded by homosexual men, her longing for her own children went unfulfilled throughout the sixties. Her second marriage to French Orthodox painter Isaac Besancon finally provided the children she desired.

Perhaps sleeping in a different bedroom from her second husband, who remarried only weeks after Rubin's untimely death, was not as unthinkable for Barbara as it may seem to those of us outside the faith. For someone whose sexuality had been formed in a queer community that nonetheless had different rules for women and gay men, Barbara may have been accustomed to the separation of the genders and the alienation from normative heterosexual intimacy. After all, with the exception of Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan, Rubin had always been much closer to women than she had been to men. Indeed, her list of constant companions during the sixties included extremely intimate friendships with Rosebud Feliu, Susan Brustman, Candy O'Brien, Wendy Clarke, and Kate Heliczner. Perhaps the Orthodox practice that linked heterosexual sex to copious procreation was not such a leap for a woman who had had her most intimate relationships with "gay" men and "straight" women.

In her phone conversation with me, *Village Voice* film critic Amy Taubin suggested that had the timing been different, the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s could have offered Rubin a different alternative. Rubin, who briefly stayed with Taubin and her then-husband, the playwright Richard Foreman, after leaving Cherry Valley in despair, had always depended upon a community to support her. Alternative artistic and sexual communities had been prevalent during the sixties, in the form of the Kerista group, the Cinematheque, Warhol's Factory, the Filmmakers Coop, Judson Church, and the St. Marks poetry scene, to name just a few. But as the sixties were coming to a close, these institutions became less viable means of support for the individuals who had participated in and depended upon them.⁶¹

Certainly, new communities emerged at the end of the sixties, but they may not have been as open to the fluid participation of "queer" women. Stonewall may have inaugurated a new era of visibility for homosexual men, but it also may have exerted a polarizing effect on the queer men and women who had lived and worked together in makeshift communes and disheveled tenements throughout the sixties. Stonewall did not even begin to address

the fate of the queer women who were the most significant fellow travelers of gay men throughout the sixties. In some ways, the gay rights movement that emerged from it was as male-centric as the Hasidic community to which Barbara turned.

Kaddish

Barbara Rubin's last film, *Emunah* (1972), which she co-directed with Pamela Mayo, is a mishmash of diverse footage, all related to her interest in spirituality. It includes concentration camp footage, images of Hebrew text, episodes of Ginsberg reciting "Kaddish" at Royal Albert Hall, and images of William Blake's grave. Suffused with the pathos of lost things, the film is a montage of Rubin's sixties, a poignant collision of the past and the present. Like Jerry Joffen, whose techniques of superimposition she borrowed, Rubin created a palimpsest of the different layers of her identity in *Emunah*. Superimposition may have been an economic necessity for both of these artists, but it was also an innovative formal strategy for representing the duality of what it meant to live as an Old World child in Warhol's New World. *Emunah* was Rubin's way of saying kaddish for the secular life she had left behind.

Barbara's Jewishness is superimposed in *Emunah*, forming a resplendent layer through which one literally cannot see the rest of the film. The title is the Hebrew word for "faith," a faith that every Jewish soul inherits from the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people. As an inherited trait, *emunah* is always present in every Jewish soul, though not necessarily conscious. *Emunah* is also the name of Barbara Rubin's first child, a daughter who may have inherited those traits that made Barbara so special, but who most likely grew up being unaware of her mother's vast contributions to the cultural zeitgeist of the sixties. Like these contributions, *Emunah* remains unpreserved and unremembered. But if Jewishness has been scraped off our memories of the postwar underground, it cannot be rubbed off Barbara's filmic farewell.

As much as their more esteemed male counterparts, the neglected women of the Beat Generation provided a model, in their relative absence from critical acclaim, of the gender inequities that would continue to plague the generation of women who followed in their footsteps. Suffering emotional alienation, critical neglect, sexual violence, psychological institutionalization, unwanted pregnancies, impoverishment, and the burden of domestic labor, the plight of these women demonstrated that the so-called liberation of the radical male subject did not necessarily imply the liberation of his sisters. These inequities did not magically disappear in the sixties but persisted, significantly shaping the choices that were available to women, who, like Barbara Rubin, were in search of camaraderie, sexual freedom, and artistic autonomy.

I mourn for my Jewish sisters—Barbara Rubin, Elise Cowen, Naomi Ginsberg. I, too, long to say kaddish for them, but I am suspicious that those holy words are not sufficient to redeem their memory in history.

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Notes

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1. Quoted in Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Viking, 2006), 616–17.
2. See the following by Ara Osterweil: "Absently Enchanted: The Apocryphal, Ecstatic Cinema of Barbara Rubin," in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007); "A Body Is Not a Metaphor: Barbara Hammer's X-Ray Vision," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (2009); "Women on the Front: Sexual Politics, Experimental Aesthetics and Female Authorship," in *Experimental Film: Missing Frames*, ed. Ben Meade (Kansas City: Avila University Press, 2009); and "Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Avant-Garde, 1959–1979" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2005).
3. Ann Douglas, "Introduction: Strange Lives, Chosen Lives. The Beat Art of Joyce Johnson," in Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 1999), xvi.
4. Important correctives to this include Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*, Brenda Knight's anthology *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (San Francisco: Conari, 1998), Ann Charters's *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), Diane DiPrima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (New York: Penguin, 1998), DiPrima's *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (New York: Penguin, 2002), and Hettie Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones* (New York: Grove, 1996).
5. Douglas, "Strange Lives, Chosen Lives," xvi.
6. See Jacques Lacan, "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book 11), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 67–122.
7. Interview with Amy Taubin, winter 2008–09.
8. Telephone interview with Stephen Bornstein, February 2009.
9. Telephone interview with Ken Jacobs, January 2009.
10. Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 394.
11. Interview with Ken and Flo Jacobs, winter 2008.
12. Telephone interview with Barry Miles, February 2009.

13. Telephone interview with Barry Miles, February 2009.
14. Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 392.
15. Telephone interview with Stephen Bornstein, February 2009.
16. Michelle York, "Sharon Springs Journal: Like the Water, Grand Plans Buoy Spirits at a Vacation Spot from a Bygone Era," *New York Times*, June 5, 2008. <http://travel.nytimes.com/2008/06/05/nyregion/05sharon.html?fta=y>.
17. Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 412.
18. Allen Ginsberg, letter to Gary Snyder, in *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Bill Morgan (New York: Da Capo, 2008), 343.
19. Ibid.
20. Interview with Gordon Ball, January 2009.
21. Allen Ginsberg, letter to his father, February 15, 1970, in *Letters*, 349.
22. Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 392.
23. Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography*, 334.
24. Ginsberg, *Letters*, 343–44.
25. First published in *Playboy*, April 1969, reprinted in Allen Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews 1958–1996*, ed. David Carter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 159–99.
26. Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 166.
27. Ibid., 169.
28. See Kerista website, www.kerista.com/index.html.
29. Ginsberg, "Kaddish" (1959), in *Allen Ginsberg: Collected Poems 1947–1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 215.
30. Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 300.
31. Johnson, *Minor Characters*.
32. Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 9.
33. Ginsberg, *Letters*, 336–37.
34. Ibid., August 10, 1967, 334.
35. Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 122.
36. Quoted in Gordon Ball, *66 Frames* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1999), 134.
37. Telephone interview with Brett Aronowitz, summer 2004.
38. Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 170.
39. Johnson, *Minor Character*, 55.
40. Ibid., 73.
41. Ibid., 75–76.
42. Ibid., 77.
43. Ibid., 89, 91.
44. Ibid., 75.
45. Ginsberg, quoted in *ibid.*, 76. Biographer Bill Morgan significantly alters the meaning of this when he writes that Allen "couldn't understand why intellectual mad-women found him attractive, but they did" (*I Celebrate Myself*, 308).
46. Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, 234.
47. Ibid., 307.
48. Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 122.
49. Ibid., 145.
50. Ibid., 257.
51. Ginsberg, April 19, 1962, *Letters*, 258.

52. Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 170.
53. Telephone interview with Rosebud Feliu, summer 2004.
54. Telephone interview with Amy Taubin, winter 2009.
55. Telephone interview with Mordecai Levy's sister, Devora O'Brien, February 2009.
56. Ibid.
57. Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld, quoted in Avi Shamir's "Not Just an Interview: Profile of a Baal T'shuva Yeshiva," *Bechol Zot* (Fall 1978), available at www.rabbifreifeldcds.com/files/Bechol_Zot.pdf.
58. Interview with Stephen Bornstein, February 2009.
59. David Katz, "Angels Are Just One More Species': David Katz Meets Lionel Ziprin, Mystic, Maven and Maverick of New York's Lower East Side," *Jewish Quarterly* (Winter 2006–2007): 204.
60. Other central figures in this would include Harry Smith, the ethnomusicologist and experimental filmmaker who, though not Jewish himself, had first anthologized the masterpieces of folk music and the liturgies of Ziprin's grandfather, and Judith Malina, founder of the Living Theater, whose own father was a Hasidic rabbi.
61. Rubin, like many of her female contemporaries, was unable to financially support herself without the aid of these organizations. Indeed, her one attempt to earn money during this period, by starting a clothing store with filmmaker Shirley Clarke's daughter Wendy, ended in bankruptcy. More interested in serving tea and communing with their clientele, Rubin and Clarke preferred giving things away to selling them.