

Wormwood Star: The Magickal Life of Marjorie Cameron

By Spencer Kansa

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Reviewed by Marc Olmsted

And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.

—Revelation 8:11

In his groundbreaking biography, Spencer Kansa examines Marjorie Cameron, an artist known only as Cameron on the West Coast Beat scene. The image that represents her in the Whitney Museum's exhibition catalog *Beat Culture and the New America 1950-1965* is said to have led to Beat photographer and artist Wallace Berman's arrest for showing it in his gallery in Los Angeles. The pen and ink drawing showed a psychedelic sex scene of a man taking a woman from behind – her forked tongue flickering out in ecstasy. The man's head is an exploding solar peyote button. The kinetic energy and sensuality of this drawing is very striking, like capturing the ripple of a whip cracking. According to Kansa, assemblage artist Ed Keinholz actually made a point of showing it to investigating police (140). The image was known as "Peyote Vision," while in *Beat Culture* it remains untitled (Philips 90). Berman would also use a photograph of Cameron's now starved, haunted face on the cover of his *Semina 1*, also pictured in *Beat Culture* (Philips 91). She is no longer a beauty, but she is certainly striking, and with her severely cut hair, the photo has a timeless, Joan of Arc quality.

Using the Whitney criterion of inclusion, whatever bohemia was occurring in America during this period is up for the Beat label. Marjorie Cameron was bohemian before there was Beat, and she would go on to be embraced by contemporaries of the Hippie movement as well as the fringes of Punk known as Industrial, as Kansa chronicles in this book. William Burroughs and, to a lesser degree, Allen Ginsberg would also straddle these cultural tides. Kansa denies her Beat placement, but a good argument can be made for someone who admittedly "swam in the same waters" (143). If the Beat label were left to the artists and writers themselves, most of the Beat histories would be considerably thinner. The Whitney Museum *Beat Culture* catalog includes a West Coast/East Coast diagram that shows the interrelations between the different groups. Wallace Berman was central to the West Coast scene: his *Semina* publication was one of the first outlets for *Naked Lunch*, and he provided many important linkages, for instance between Cameron, Michael McClure, and Allen Ginsberg.

The chapter in the catalog that mentions Cameron is called "Heretical Constellations," and this idea of constellations is helpful, as Cameron is certainly on the fringes of what most consider the primary Beat circle. Brenda Knight, for instance, mentions Cameron only in passing in her *Women of the Beat Generation*, in the context of a poetry reading she gave with Aya (aka Idell Rose Tarlow) and George Herms (Knight 244). Herms, meanwhile, is mentioned only in passing by Kansa as a "junk artist friend" (188) who had some influence on her later work, including Cameron's portrait of her daughter on a discarded door panel.

Kansa thankfully gives poets Aya and David Metzler wider coverage than Herms (117). Poet and photographer Aya was involved in the Beat Venice and San Francisco's North Beach scenes. She and David Meltzer met in a L.A. poetry class. Later they read together at the legendary 6 Gallery after she moved to San Francisco. Meltzer, a one-time lover of Cameron, thought that Gregory Corso would have been the most likely candidate to snag Cameron's interest, since Corso was so profoundly affected by P.B. Shelley (144). By all accounts, the Romantics interested her the most, but Cameron's painting was hardly nostalgic. The only book that covers her with some depth is *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle*. It is also the only place I've seen any color plates of her art in print (McKenna 100-105). Her works are smoky, fluid, reminiscent of paint used like a *sumi* brush stroke, yet her "Peyote Vision" pen drawing shows real training in perspective and representation. This training lends itself to the paintings, giving them a grounded quality, much like a jazz musician's training allows for improvisation with mindful precision.

Kansa asserts that the strong Crowley imagery that would come to dominate Kenneth Anger's work (photos of Crowley and his magical diagrams, for starters) began with Cameron's influence (111). Anger is another Whitney catalog draftee of the Beat movement. Cameron steals the show from Anais Nin in Anger's film *Inauguation of the Pleasure Dome*, being the most striking and crazed beauty in it, the Scarlet Woman. The film's *Caligari*-like somnambulist, Curtis Harrington, went on to direct Cameron with Dennis Hopper (yet another Whitney catalog appointed Beat) in *Night Tide*, as well as a short film called *The Wormwood Star* (135), which is a paean to Cameron and, more significantly, contains footage of some artwork now lost. The title, besides being mentioned in the New Testament's Book of Revelations, is also found in husband Jack Parsons' "Witchcraft Manifesto" (Kansa 87).

Kansa's book assumes that you have some background on not only Jack Parsons but also Aleister Crowley. Crowley traveled the world and studied its magick (as he spelled it to differentiate it from sleight of hand). Born in 1875, he died in 1947, and sprawled across some significant changes in culture, as well as anticipating others. Often described as a Satanist, a closer study will find Crowley more akin to William Blake with a liberal dash of Friedrich Nietzsche (an excellent Crowley biography is Israel Regardie's *Eye in the Triangle*). In terms of Crowley's influence on the Beats other than Anger and Cameron, the most obvious connections are William Burroughs (Waldman and Wright 168) and Diane di Prima (Sulak and Vale 37), but even Jack Kerouac mentions Crowley in *Vanity of Dulouz* (Kerouac 195).

It may still seem a wonder that Crowley might attract the likes of maverick cowboy scientist Jack Parsons, one of the original sons of rocket science, his contributions strong enough to earn him a named crater on the moon, albeit (and fittingly) on the dark side. Parsons not only found Crowley fascinating, but also the burgeoning L.A. science fiction writers' world he found himself in, which included Robert Heinlein and more strangely, the pre-Scientology L. Ron Hubbard. Parsons corresponded with Crowley from Pasadena and did magick spells with Hubbard. He was certain that one of these spells magnetized Marjorie Cameron. Cameron had already come around to the notorious wild scene of Parsons' "magickal lodge" in Pasadena, but they immediately hooked up after his spell. (For a biography of Parsons, try *Strange Angel* by George Pendle).

As grandiosity seems a potential occupational hazard of magick, Parsons decided that he was the Antichrist (magickal name: Belarion). Parsons appears to have seen himself more as a completion of Crowley than as a replacement. Cameron, on the other hand, had the honor of being the Whore of Babylon, spelled Babalon to keep numerological power. In this system of thought, Babalon was a Kali-like figure of adoration. Cameron really didn't think much of any of it at the time, but by the time of Parsons literally blowing himself up in his own makeshift lab, she was a complete convert to Crowley's path of Will, or Thelema as it is known in Greek and to all Crowley followers. She also accepted her Parsons-assigned role as avatar of Babalon. However, Kansa sardonically reveals what Crowley thought of Parsons and Hubbard: "I get fairly frantic when I consider the idiocy of these louts" (24). Cameron very nearly met Crowley when she traveled abroad, but he had just passed on at the ripe age of 72, thoroughly strung out on the heroin he had once been prescribed for his asthma.

Cameron settled in Venice Beach, California – basically the Los Angeles outpost of Beat culture. Robert Alexander, artist and printer (and heroin addict for a time), established the Temple of Man there in 1966, a center for poetry, jazz, and art, and Kansa tells us Cameron was made a minister. This is not surprising for an organization that had very little "holy writ," aside from Wallace Berman's mission statement "Art is Love is God" and David Meltzer's contribution, "The Temple of Man is within you." (Besides confirming this, Rev. Marsha Getzler reports in 2010 that the Temple remains active).

This book does little to dissuade us that, however great Cameron was as an artist, she, like Parsons, had probably gone off her nut, another occupational hazard of many of Crowley's more recklessly ambitious students. She seems to have raised her daughter Crystal like a wild animal: "Crystal sat nude in the center of the dining table and let loose a stream of urine. Nothing was said" (133). Cameron passed in 1995 and her memorial (252) was held at Beyond Baroque, the Venice equivalent of St. Mark's Place, the exterior of which had served as a court house in Cameron's feature film debut, Curtis Harrington's *Night Tide*. Cameron is a completely neglected woman of the Beat Generation's circle, a major talent, and a fascinating character of West Coast mid twentieth-century avant-garde. This book signals a big step toward her long overdue recognition.

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