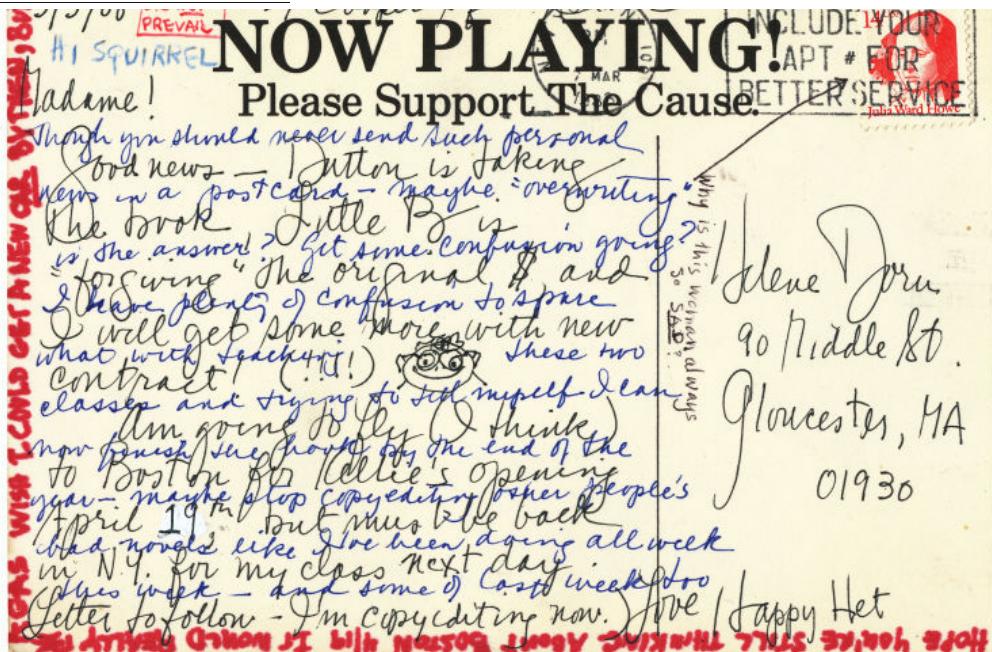


An Afternoon with Hettie Jones

How a friendship and decades of correspondence kept Hettie Jones writing.

BY JEANNE HODESH | OCT 5, 2016

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(ALL IMAGES COURTESY HETTIE JONES)

At a party in 1960, Helene Dorn and Hettie Jones met, and a friendship was born. Their initial connection was through their husbands, the poets Edward Dorn and LeRoi Jones, who later changed his name to Amiri Baraka. They all moved through the literary circles of the Black Mountain College poets and the avant-garde Beats. Hettie and Helene called themselves "Babes in Boyland" in the male-dominated scene. Soon after they met, Helene and her husband left for Europe, and a correspondence between the two women began.

Written in the moments after the kids had been put to bed, the letters let the reader in on daily scenes from the lives of two women as they sought employment, endured

divorce, and raised their families. They also provide documentation of everything from the 1989 march on Washington for abortion rights to the days following 9/11. Hettie and Helene cheer each other on through sickness and eviction, offering endless encouragement to keep creating — Hettie's writing, and Helene's visual art. Each offers the other a relentlessly sympathetic ear as they endure the perils of aging and career disappointments, ever trying to make ends meet. The encouragement paid off: at 37 Hettie published her first book, and when she was 44, Helene had her first solo art show.

Hettie has now published their letters in the new book *Love, H*. The letters — which span 40 years — are an engrossing read and an important archive of the lives of two female artists. Helene went on to join the artistic community in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where she produced glass mosaics and masks. This is Hettie's 24th book; she has written children's literature, volumes of poetry, and the critically acclaimed memoir *How I Became Hettie Jones*, along with founding the celebrated journal *Yugen* and co-founding the PEN Prison Writing program. She currently teaches in the graduate writing program at the New School, at 92Y, and at the Lower East Side Girls Club. Hettie's daughter, the art historian Kellie Jones, was just awarded [a 2016 MacArthur "genius" grant](#) for her work with contemporary art from the African diaspora.

This summer I sat at Hettie's kitchen table, where she wrote many of the letters. Bells in her window, a gift from Allen Ginsberg, jingled in the afternoon breeze as we spoke about her friendship with Helene (who died in 2004) and the correspondence chronicled in her new book.



Jeanne Hodesh: When the letters started, Helene was living in Europe, where Ed had a Fulbright, and you were in New York, recently divorced, with two kids, not really sure what you were going to do. Was there ever any jealousy between you two?

Hettie Jones: No. Because I was so happy for her! I felt I had to stay here, holding on to something. I would stand on the roof, feeling that I was holding down the fort in some way or another, and that I had been abandoned by everybody. I did feel like a widow, in a way, after my marriage ended. I was trying to cope with everything — and trying to figure out who I was, so I didn't have time to be jealous of her at all. I was happy for her.

JH: Helene was seven years older than you. Did that make a difference?

HJ: It wasn't so much that Helene was older, but that she knew what I was *in* for. She was more experienced because she had lived in that milieu longer than I. She had three children by two different men. She had lived in a lot of different places and knew so many people. They had lived in San Francisco, so she was acquainted with the West Coast Beats, but when she came to New York she already knew some of my

friends. We had this common social, artistic scene, and there was just something so simpatico about us.

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JH: How did your correspondence with Helene affect your own writing?

HJ: In my memoir I wrote, "It was only because of writing to Helene that I ever left the sewing machine and took up the pen." Our correspondence kept me writing and writing even before I started writing books. My correspondence with other women helped me too. When I was working at *Partisan Review*, Barbara Guest was the poetry editor. At one point she was in Italy, so we were in touch. When she came back, she said, "Are you writing? Your letters are so wonderful, you should really be writing." I took her compliment, but I thought, *When am I going to do that? I have this job, and I have this magazine that I'm publishing, and I have a baby, and I'm going to have another baby.* I was still young when I started to write, but I did all these things first — I had jobs, I had children — and then I felt ready to really start doing it. I'm glad that I waited. I had to wait until I felt secure that no one could change me.

JH: You and Helene were both avoiding constant threats of eviction, enduring an endless quest for employment, and also seeking recognition for your creative endeavors. What about the relationship with Helene in particular made it possible to face those challenges?

HJ: She was so supportive. She was always on my side. She looked after me in that respect and said, you know, things are going to work out. We both offered that. We were as close as sisters can be who are not blood.

JH: Occasionally you refer to your ex-husbands, but you didn't write about men often. Do you feel your correspondence took the place of those other relationships?

HJ: Yes. It sustained me. Even while I was married — especially then. LeRoi was always out in the bars. I had no desire to go out and get drunk. First of all, I can only have one drink — look at the size of me! I would go out to the Cedar Bar, and guys would hit on me. I remember spending time with this one guy and eventually I said, "OK, gotta go home." He turned to me and said, "You mean we're not going to make it?" And I just looked at him and said, "No." What I wanted was myself and my ambitions and writing to Helene — and that's what I did.



JH: I loved the reading recommendations you sent each other. When Edwidge Danticat's books started coming out, the two of you couldn't get enough! What other things did you discover?

HJ: She recommended her friend Lucia Berlin, who just received a bunch of attention posthumously for her book *A Manual for Cleaning Women*. She published three books of wonderful short stories before that, though, and I got to read them because of Helene, who knew her on the West Coast. I didn't know anything about the West Coast Beat world or any woman who had lived through that world, and Lucia's books were a revelation. I always turned Helene on to black writers, and she always read

them. It was so important that I had somebody to share that with. Helene was way more intellectual than I. She was an autodidact. She would just go right to the library and get the book.

JH: The letters cover the minutiae of day-to-day existence as well as historic events, like when you went to Washington, DC, to march for abortion rights. And there are fantastic scenes of domestic life, like Helene making a chicken-and-garlic stew that was so good she ate the whole thing right there, then wrote to tell you about it.

HJ: Yes! The way she described the bowl of garlic. I always thought Helene should have been a writer. She was such a *good* writer.

JH: Over the decades, technology changed radically. How did it impact the correspondence?

HJ: When I started writing, I wrote my first books by hand. Labor intensive. Then suddenly you could type things! You could change things and print it out again! It was magic! It would come out of the printer, and you just put it in the mail! And then the fax machine! It was instant gratification. Phone calls were very expensive, and once we got on the telephone we would talk for an hour. We couldn't afford to do that! So, the fax machine was wonderful. And then *email*. We were going to pile all of our emails on top of the other and make a scroll — like Jack Kerouac.

JH: You looked for a home for this book of correspondence for many years. Why is it important to you to have it out there?

HJ: Well, it honors Helene. And it's women's history! When I was a kid I never knew women *did* anything. We didn't learn about the suffragists, not to any degree. I wanted women to know that women can have friendships that are intense.

JH: Did you two ever discuss publishing the correspondence?

HJ: We didn't think about that. But there is a scene in the book where she has them all spread out on the floor. She wrote, "It's such a story, our letters."

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Jeanne Hodesh writes and teaches in New York.