

2º CICLO DE ESTUDOS

“Twice Torn”

Diane di Prima’s Corporeal Poetics

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Diane di Prima’s Corporeal Poetics

Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Americanos, orientada pela Professora Doutora Marinela Freitas

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À minha mãe, eterna menina de Letras, a quem devo a minha paixão pela literatura.

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Porto, 30 de Setembro de 2025

Joana Pinela

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Resumo

Esta dissertação examina a poética do corpo na obra de Diane di Prima, nomeadamente a forma como a poeta aborda o corpo como um espaço de opressão e libertação. A partir da poesia e da obra autobiográfica de di Prima, esta dissertação analisa a sua poética do corpo através de três iterações distintas: o *corpo escrito*, presente na obra autobiográfica; o corpo político, articulado em *Revolutionary Letters*; e o *corpo loba*, desenvolvido no *magnum opus* da poeta, *Loba*. Deste modo, esta dissertação tem como objetivo defender que o corpo constitui, para Diane di Prima, não só um tema recorrente ou motivo literário, mas também, e principalmente, um pilar fundamental da sua escrita, tornando a obra indispensável em termos de uma revisão crítica do cânone Beat e da afirmação de uma tradição literária feminista.

Palavras-chave: poética do corpo, autobiografia, poesia, tradição literária feminista

Abstract

This dissertation examines the corporeal poetics in Diane di Prima's work, namely, how the poet approaches the body as a space of oppression and liberation. Based on di Prima's poetry and life writing, this dissertation examines her poetics of the body through three distinct iterations: the *written body*, present in her life writing; the *body politic*, articulated in *Revolutionary Letters*; and the *Loba body*, developed in the poet's magnum opus, *Loba*. Thus, this dissertation argues that the body constitutes, for Diane di Prima, not only a recurring theme or literary motif, but also, and above all, a fundamental pillar of her writing, making the work indispensable in terms of a critical revision of the Beat canon and an affirmation of a feminist literary tradition.

Key-words: corporeal poetics, life writing, poetry, feminist literary tradition

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Introduction: *The Body Writes Back*

*Over and over the mind returns
to the bent shoulders of the young woman
who types, over and over, the poem*

Hettie Jones

Most avant-garde movements of the twentieth century were boys' clubs. The Beat Generation was, of course, no exception to this. So, where does this leave the women? Emerging in postwar America, the Beat Generation was an anti-academia, literary, and *avant-garde* cultural movement that defined itself in direct opposition to the increasingly conservative society of the 1950s. Central to the movement was the search for what Ruth Weiss, a woman Beat writer, called "an alternative approach to life away from the materialism that exploded after World War II" (qtd. in Grace & Johnson 59). Its members advocated for sexual freedom, recreational drug use, communal living, spiritual exploration, and a rejection of conventional literary forms. Their *ethos* was often summed up as a reaction against mainstream society and culture, a spiritual and social revolution of sorts. But for all its rebellion, many of the Beats complacently reproduced the same patriarchal, rather conservative, and misogynistic norms of the society and culture they claimed to be opposed to.

For the most part, women writers of the Beat Generation have been relegated to a peripheral position within the Beat Movement. Women in 1950s America were expected to adhere to rigid standards of femininity and domesticity. They were essentially seen as impediments to male freedom, fundamentally at odds with the "possibilities of male adventure", a lifestyle that the male Beats boasted (Ehrenreich 54). In her novel, *Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir* (1983), Joyce Johnson,¹ one of the first emerging female voices to come out of the Beat Generation, confirms critic Barbara Ehrenreich's argument that "their [the men's] adventure did not include women, except, perhaps, as 'experiences' that men might have" (Ehrenreich 171). In her memoir, Johnson writes:

¹ Joyce Johnson (1935-) born Joyce Glassman in New York City, is a poet and novelist. Johnson is better known for her brief relationship with Jack Kerouac, despite having written multiple books, including her memoir *Minor Characters* (1983), which chronicles her life in New York from her childhood to her young-adult life, side-by-side with the Beats.

Could he [Jack Kerouac] ever include a woman in his journeys? I didn't altogether see why not. Whenever I tried to raise the question, he'd stop me by saying that what I really wanted were babies. That was what all women wanted and what I wanted too, even though I said I didn't. Even more than I wanted to be a great woman writer, I wanted to bring life into the world, become a link in the long chain of suffering and death. I said, of course, I wanted babies someday, but not for a long time, not now. Wisely, sadly, Jack shook his head. (Johnson 136)

Similarly, in Diane di Prima's *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2002), the poet writes about an interaction with Jack Kerouac at a party. Kerouac had urged her to stay, rather than going home, seeing as she had a babysitter to take care of her children. In her memoir, di Prima remembers how, as she was leaving the party, Kerouac got up and shouted after her: "DI PRIMA, UNLESS YOU FORGET ABOUT YOUR BABYSITTER, YOU WILL NEVER BE A WRITER" (202). Of course, Diane di Prima left anyway, despite the nagging feeling that he might be right (*ibidem*). And, however right Kerouac might have been, di Prima risked it. She writes: "Maybe I was never going to be a writer, but I had to risk it. That was the risk that was hidden (like a Chinese puzzle) inside the other risk of: can I be a single mom and be a poet?" (*ibidem*). However, how Bob Creeley tells the story in the documentary *The Beat Generation: An American Dream* (1986) reveals the gendered bias with which women's lives were discussed. In her memoir, di Prima's comments on Creeley's version of the story show how this anecdote is telling of how women poets were seen by their male counterparts:

. . . it was an orgy I was invited to stay for (mixing it up no doubt with the orgy at the end of *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, or the eternal Beat Orgy that will live forever in the minds of all guys who were around for the second half of the twentieth century) and that I quickly forgot about the babysitter and stayed for the orgy. Now what I find so destructive, and so telling, about Creeley's version is: that if I had, as he put it so 'charmingly', opted to stay for the orgy, there would be no poems. That is, the person who would have left a friend hanging who had done her a favor, also wouldn't have stuck through thick and thin to the business of making poems. It is the same discipline throughout – what Pound called 'a man' [read 'woman'] standing by [her] Word. (203)

The clash between di Prima's account and Creeley's "retelling" illustrates the gendered double bind women writers were constantly faced with. For male writers, sexual and artistic freedom were easily conflated, whereas for women, the costs of those same freedoms were never forgotten or taken for granted. As feminist thinkers have pointed out, the sexual revolution was largely designed by and for men, who did not have to contend with the risk of pregnancy, childcare, or the social stigma attached to female desire and sexuality (cf. Firestone, 1970; Greer, 1970). So, women like Diane di Prima were forced to constantly negotiate their embodied existence in a society largely dominated by a patriarchal system, in which their sexuality was both demanded of them and denied.

In the 1950s, both middle-class and upper-middle-class women were expected to conform to the traditional roles of housewives and mothers, which essentially meant adhering to what Betty Friedan described as the *feminine mystique*: the "strange" discrepancy between the image they were supposed to aspire to and the reality of their lives (Friedan 278). The frustration felt by those who had to live up to and conform to this idealization of what femininity looks like is mostly linked to this entrapment in the domestic sphere. For Friedan, this *mystique*, reinforced at the time by the media and school system, could only be overcome by a kind of revolution.² She writes:

When society asks so little of women, every woman has to listen to her own inner voice to find her identity in this changing world. She must create, out of her own needs and abilities, a new life plan, fitting in the love and children and home that have defined femininity in the past with the work toward a greater purpose that shapes the future... [Once she realizes] neither her husband nor her children, nor the things in her house, nor sex, nor being like all the other women can give her a self – she often finds the solution much easier than she anticipated. (Friedan *ibidem*)

Until the 1990s, Beat literary critics neglected to include Beat women writers in their cultural and scholarly studies on the Beat Generation. Critic Edward Foster, for instance, bluntly stated that "women had little space in most Beat writings" (Foster 23). Coincidentally, this was also the view shared by the movement's precursors. In 1954, Allen Ginsberg records a

² For a better understanding of the impact of mass media on attitudes towards women in the 1950s and early 1960s see historian Stephanie Coontz's *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the dawn of the 1960s* (2011).

letter he received in a dream from the poet John Clellon Holmes, in which Holmes stated that “the social organization which is most true to the artist is the boy gang” (Ginsberg qtd. in Foster 22), to which Ginsberg added: “not society’s perfum’d marriage” (*ibidem*). This literary institution of the “boy gang” (*ibidem*) was, of course, exclusionary and defined only by the presence and work of Kerouac’s “new American boys” (Goggans 5). Decades later, when asked *where* all the women writers of the Beat Generation were, Ginsberg callously responded with:

I think the point is, the men didn't push the women literally or celebrate them. But then, among the group of people we knew at the time, who were the writers of such power as Kerouac or Burroughs? Were there any? I don't think so. Were we responsible for the lack of outstanding genius in the women we knew? Did we put them down or repress them? I don't think so. (Ginsberg qtd. in Goggans 32)

Were there any? Ginsberg only ever admitted that there were one or two writers who deserved the boy gang’s recognition and some merit for their writing, one of whom was Diane di Prima, a lifelong friend. In his own words: “where there was a strong writer who could hold her own, like Diane di Prima, we would certainly work with her and recognize her” (Ginsberg qtd. in Peabody 1). However, as Brenda Knight states in her book *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (1996), the women were as “fearless, angry, high risk, too smart, restless, highly irregular” as their male counterparts (3). Since the early 1990s, Beat literary criticism has recovered the names and the genius of Beat women writers who lived in the shadow of their male peers. Anthologies like Brenda Knight’s *Women of the Beat Generation* and Polina Mackay’s *Beat Feminisms* have shed some light on these writers’ works, though the women included in these studies are still often looked at based on their proximity to the most prominent men in the Beat Generation, rather than for their own achievements and writing (Goggans 30).

Did we put them down? Did we repress them? Women writers of the Beat Generation were very much put down and repressed by their male counterparts, in rather physical and tangible ways as well. Joan Vollmer, better known as Joan Burroughs, a writer in her own right, was reduced to a cautionary tale, shot and killed by her husband, and Beat

writer, William S. Burroughs.³ Elise Cowen, a gifted poet, is better known for typing “Kadish” for Ginsberg than for her own poetry, which, until 2014, had gone unknown and unpublished.⁴ This erasure of women’s presence in the movement also translates to the men’s texts. Allen Ginsberg’s work, for one, largely omits women. In his seminal poem “Howl”, Ginsberg proposes to sing about the best minds of his generation, but one might question why none of them are women. Where is, for instance, Elise Cowen? While it is understood that the poet is speaking about his own and his closest friends’ experiences, the lack of female representation within this ode to the Beat Generation’s best minds seems to leave space for only one thing: the objectification and sexualization of women. In Jack Kerouac’s largely autobiographical novels, women are merely experiences, and rather fleeting experiences at that (Goggans 20). Critic Eliot D. Allen defines the women in Kerouac’s fiction and memoirs as “singularly inarticulate . . . they have no ideas, perhaps even no minds. Their lives are completely physical . . . They eat, drink, occasionally cook meals, make love, have babies, or sit waiting for their wandering men to return” (99). Corroborating this idea that women were only seen in a physical, overtly sexualized plane, Kerouac writes, in his novel *Visions of Cody* (1972), that “as far as young women are concerned, I can’t look at them unless I tear off their clothes one by one” (23). An even

³ According to John Long, in his 2014 Huck article “100th Birthday — A tribute to controversial “beat” author William S. Burroughs who would have been 100 years old today, February 5, 2014”, when giving a young writer some advice on writing a book, Burroughs said: “Shoot the bitch and write a book! That’s what I did”. The “bitch” in question is, of course, Joan Vollmer. In the introduction to his novel *Queer* (1985), Burroughs writes: “I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing. I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out” (Burroughs 6).

⁴ Elise Cowen (1933-1962) was one of the first women poets to emerge from the Beat literary scene. While attending Barnard College in the early 1950s, she became close friends with Joyce Glassman, who introduced her to Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Cowen and Ginsberg had only a brief romantic relationship in 1953, the year Allen Ginsberg would meet his lifelong partner, Peter Orlovsky. In her memoir, *Minor Characters*, Johnson remembers Cowen and her “dread of lovelessness, her fear that she will never be found acceptable, never never fit, be outcast even among outcasts” (77), who felt “herself to be a shadow, Nada, voiceless” (*ibidem*). As Johnson put it, “Elise was a moment in Allen’s life. In Elise’s life, Allen was an eternity” (78). Cowen struggled with depression all throughout her life and eventually suffered from a severe psychological breakdown. After checking herself out of Bellevue Hospital, against medical advice, Cowen returned to her parents’ home on Bennet Avenue, New York. There, in 1962, Cowen commits suicide, aged 28. Unfortunately, after her untimely death, most of her poems were destroyed at her parents’ request, because of the poem’s explicit depictions of desire, sexuality, drug use, and depression. Fortunately, her friend Leo Skir saved eighty three of her poems and helped to publish them in several literary journals in the 1960s, including the *City Lights Journal*, *El Corno Emplumado*, and *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*. Cowen’s surviving work was collected in *Elise Cowen: Poems and Fragments* (2014), edited by Tony Trigilio.

uglier example of Kerouac's casual misogyny can be found in a letter addressed to Allen Ginsberg, dated 1955:

As for a woman, what kind of man sells his soul for a gash? A fucking veritable GASH – a great slit between the legs lookin more like murder than anything else – Really, my dear, every time I look at a woman now I almost get sick thinking of it. (Kerouac qtd. in Charters 1996, 449)

Kerouac's tendency to place women on an entirely physical plane is also well exemplified by this compliment in a love letter to a woman he had been dating: "You have the mind of a man, and the heart and body of a woman" (Charters 1996, 24).

While the male Beat writers often wrote about the female body in abstract and exploitative terms, reducing women to sexual conquests and objects, women writers responded by reclaiming their bodies and embodied experiences as a source of meaning and resistance. And despite these attempts at erasing their presence, women were at the very core of the movement from the beginning, as editors, publishers, and writers themselves. Women Beat writers did everything from creating their own printing presses and editing literary magazines, to raising their children all on their own. However, the narrative of the cohesive brotherhood of the boy gang did not extend to this group of women. These writers often wrote in isolation, and only much later began to really connect as a collective force (Mackay 5). In *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers* (2004), Nancy Grace points out that "some of these women did not even know each other during the height of the Beat movement", a few not meeting until the 1990s when Brenda Knight published *Women of the Beat Generation* (46). In *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, many of the significant female voices of the Beat scene recognized this lack of community. Brenda Frazer, known as Bonnie Bremser, stated that "maybe there was an advantage to the fact that we didn't hang out together all the time, the way guys did . . . Maybe we had some advantage – the isolation that all of us experienced as women" (119). As Nancy Grace writes:

This private, interiorized process of evolution . . . is a figure of self-reliant artistic individuality that exemplifies ways in which women writers augment Beat discourses: some of them

transformed the adversities of sexism's double standards and Beat's inconsistencies with regard to women into an Emersonian self-reliance, nonconformity, "genius". (17)

However, that self-reliance came at the cost of visibility. Separated from one another and pushed to the margins of the movement, their creative work unfolded, mostly, out of the mainstream. Women writers of the Beat Generation "escaped the eye of the camera, and stayed underground, writing" (Knight 1). They were invisible as artists to their male counterparts and are still mostly invisible today in the commonly held perception of what the Beat era looked like (Johnson & Grace 3). The literature they produced on the East Coast (New York City's Greenwich Village and Lower East Side) and the West (San Francisco) challenged the stereotype of the passive and sexually frigid woman of the 1950s. Their narratives were often concerned with their roles as mothers, wives, and lovers, as well as their corporeality and gendered experiences with birth control, pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion.

As di Prima suggests in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), women beatniks subscribed to what she called "our eternal, tiresome rule of Cool" (94), which, in some ways, did inhibit them from writing, whilst also, paradoxically, provided them with a cover behind which they were free to develop their literary voices (Johnson & Grace 3-4). Faced with exclusion, women "wrote back" against all the external impositions laid on them in a *space of their own*, cultivating a distinctive feminist response against the patriarchal culture at large. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf writes:

Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. (37)

Di Prima voiced a similar opinion regarding the female writers of her generation in an interview in 1978, where she declared that "a lot of potentially great women writers wound up dead or crazy" (qtd. in Knight & Knight, *The Beat Vision* 144):

I think of the women on the Beat scene with me in the early '50s, where are they now? I know Barbara Moraff is a potter and does some writing in Vermont, and that's about all I know. I know some of them ODed and some of them got nuts, and one woman that I was running around the Village with in '53 was killed by her parents putting her in a shock treatment place in Pennsylvania . . . (*ibidem*)

Recent scholarship has defined most Beat women as “feminist writers”, noting how their work consciously intervenes in, revises, and transforms the dominant gender normative discourse of the Beat Generation (Mackay 10). One of the ways through which women Beat writers “wrote back” was precisely through their bodies. Brenda Knight defined Beat as “underground, raw, unedited, pure, shocking . . . an expulsion, a vomiting of vision” (Knight, *Women of the Beat Generation* 5). This corporeal definition is better taken up, I would argue, by the women of the movement with their sense of immediacy, their orality and voice, as well as the self-expression of their embodied “naked poetic I” (Castelao Gómez 62), asserting their own narratives as they “appropriated, transformed, and corrected Beat discourses to inscribe their own subjectivity” (Johnson 20). This need to write the body was marked by nonconformist ideals against the patriarchy, as they wrote their embodied experiences and identities to critique “traditional literary genres that have been based on women’s subordination to men” (Mlakar 17).

The focus of this study is the work of Diane di Prima (1934-2020), whose work is situated within the newly emerging counterfeminist Beat tradition that emerged in the past few decades. Di Prima stands as arguably the most prominent and influential woman writer of the Beat Generation, across any generation of female Beat writers.⁵ Despite naming her first memoir, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), when referred to as a woman beatnik, the poet bristled at the term, which she saw as somewhat reductive and limiting. Di Prima argued, and rightfully so, that there were no beatniks when she moved to New York’s Lower East

⁵ Scholars have attempted to divide Beat women writers into different generations. Johnson & Grace divide them into “three generations of Beat” (12). The first generation is comprised of writers born in the 1910s and 1920s, such as Ruth Weiss and Helen Adams; a second generation is made up of writers born in the 1930s such as Diane di Prima, Joana McClure, Lenore Kandel, Elise Cowen, Joyce Johnson and Hettie Jones; and a third generation would include writers born in the 1940s such as Anne Waldman and Janine Pommy Vega (*ibidem*).

Side in 1953 – the term itself only coming into use in the late 1950s.⁶ In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2002), she refutes the idea of being any different from her male counterparts, writing: “I realize that there truly was this determinedly male community of writers around me in the 50s. This thing I am constantly questioned about, as in: ‘How did you survive it? Where were the women’? I saw these guys, myself and the others, as artists simply” (107). Diane di Prima’s rebuttal reads as a kind of refusal to be written off the literary and cultural scene, of which she was very much a part, based on her gender. This idea has gotten her some criticism, as some argue that di Prima, unlike the other women of her generation, garnered success with the men by being more “masculine”, namely because of this refusal to admit that she was treated differently because she was a woman. This would be, however, an unfair position to take. Naturally, and despite this refusal to see herself as any different from her male counterparts, much of her work is written from the very particular perspective of a female body and a female voice, which is constantly reminded of the fact that she exists in a male-dominated literary scene. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, Diane di Prima candidly reflects on the ways her gender interfered with her work (unlike men’s). Recalling her exclusion from Donald Allen’s landmark anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960) for her affair with LeRoi Jones, di Prima writes of the hypocrisy and the double standard under which she was treated:

As a woman, I was invisible. I took that as a matter of course. (As I had taken it as a matter of course when Donald Allen stopped in a doorway at a party – at Roi’s house, to tell me that he wouldn’t be including my work in the New American Poetry anthology. Though the work I’d given him – ‘The Jungle,’ ‘The Ballroom,’ ‘The Party,’ was certainly strong enough; holds up even now. He had been, he told me in that doorway, requested by Hettie Jones to leave me out. Because of my ongoing affair with LeRoi . . . LeRoi’s poems could be included, but not mine. He was married, which made me, by implication, the home-breaker, the scarlet woman. It was all very matter-of-course. (di Prima, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* 238)

Critic George Butterick claims that “Di Prima is the writer [among women of her generation] who by her life and her work most embodies the definable patterns of the Beat Generation”

⁶ In an interview given to Jonah Raskin in 2014, Diane di Prima allowed that she was part of the Beat Generation only if “you define Beat as a state of mind not bound by any particular time or by a single generation”. For the full interview see Raskin, Jonah, “Interview with Poet Diane di Prima” (2014).

(Butterick 149), but despite her prolific output and prominent presence in the Beat scene, di Prima has often been written out of its canon. Critics and anthologists privileged the voices of men, while women writers were relegated to the margins, going unpublished, sometimes, for the most cretinous, misogynistic reasons. In an interview given in 1984, di Prima claimed that her lack of recognition was mainly because she “actually had the balls to enjoy” herself (Knight 144). Choosing to use the term “balls”, di Prima places herself on a physical level playing field with her male peers to speak on her strength and resilience as an artist, using language that both emphasizes and de-emphasizes her “woman-ness” (Goggans 35). In rather unsavory terms, di Prima, in an interview with Anne Waldman, also attributed her lack of recognition and success to her poetics, in which she completely decentered men, making a dig at other women’s writing: “I’m not apologetic. I’m not sad ... Maybe if I was drinking a lot and writing miserable poems about some man and trying to kill myself every three years, maybe that would be okay, because that makes guys feel okay, too...” (qtd. in Goggans 47). But as Goggans argues, that is precisely *why* di Prima has gotten published as much as she has – her work translated and published across the world in over twenty languages.⁷ This de-centering of men is what allowed di Prima to create a particular kind of poetics, a *feminist corporeal poetics*, which, in turn, allowed her a modicum of success. In her memoir, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, di Prima writes a kind manifesto for this corporeal poetics:

I was a poet; I had work to do. And that work included an old resolve that I had expressed to Dean Cobb at Swarthmore, and that she had given me back as a Latin proverb. *I am human, therefore nothing is foreign to me*. It came to me still as a resolve, a vow: There was nothing that I could possibly experience, as a human in a female body, that I would not experience. Nothing I would try to avoid. No part of human life I would turn my back on. To me, this was obviously just part of the job, part of what one as a writer set out to do. (161)

Her corporeal poetics has both critiqued the notion that “women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men” (Grosz 14) whilst, at the same time,

⁷ A selection of Diane di Prima 's poetry was translated into Portuguese in the anthology *Easy to Love: Antologia de Poesia Beat Feminina* (2021). The anthology includes the work of Denise Levertov, Lenore Kandel, Elise Cowen, Hettie Jones, Joanne Kyger, ruth weiss, Janine Pommy Vega, Mary Norbert Korte, Anne Waldman.

using this notion to her advantage, claiming that there is an advantage and a kind of power one gains through a female body. Diane di Prima often situates the female body at the center of her writing, depicting it as a site through which a female subjectivity and agency are constructed through embodied experiences of pleasure and pain. In her semi-autobiographical memoir, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), di Prima challenges the masculinistic narrative around women perpetuated by male Beat writers, asserting ownership over her own sexual identity and bodily autonomy. Di Prima also wrote extensively on menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, birth control, and abortion across her life writing and poetry.

There have already been a number of studies concerned with identifying and exploring a counterfeminist Beat literary history. In terms of existing academic work on Beat women writers, we can find more studies written about Beat women's life writing, more prominently in anglophone countries. In Brazil, some research can be found, particularly regarding the exclusion of Beat women writers from the Beat canon.⁸ In Portugal, the only academic work on Beat women writers, apart from the present study, is Fernanda Bisi's *Women Writers of The Beat Generation* (2022).⁹ As for academic work on Diane di Prima, most of which, again, can be found in anglophone countries, we should refer to "Diane di Prima: The Muffled Voice of the Beat Generation" (1997) by Heather Goggans; "Reinventar a vida, mudar agora: lendo Diane di Prima" (2024) by Fernanda Castro; "Selling Herself: Diane di Prima, Desire, and Commodity in the Postwar United States" (2020) by Danielle Dumain; and "'O Lost Moon Sisters': Feminist Revisions in Diane di Prima's *Loba*" (2020) by Chelsea Megan Mathes. In the Portuguese academic context, little to no attention has been given to Diane di Prima's work. For this reason, my study focuses solely on Diane di Prima's work as a way to highlight her most extensive *oeuvre*. For this study, I chose to focus on Diane di Prima's corporeal poetics, in terms of how, for the poet, the body, particularly the female body, subverts, destabilizes, and challenges the masculinistic canon of the Beat Generation, whose success often relied on the invisible, physical labor of women writers. Since little to no attention has been given to the body in Diane di Prima's writing in these terms, I chose to

⁸ See " 'De todo modo, era a minha revolução': Silenciamento de vozes femininas na Geração Beat" (2021), by Ariane Ribeiro Santana, and "Elements for a history of the exclusion of North American white women from the literary field: Joyce Johnson's works" (2022), by Ariane Ribeiro Santana, Graziela Menezes de Jesus e Rafaela Scardino.

⁹ It should be noted that Diane di Prima is not one of the writers examined by Bisi, who instead chose to focus on the poetry of Elise Cowen, Joanne Kyger, Lenore Kandel, Janine Pommy Vega, and Anne Waldman.

fill this gap in the existing scholarship on di Prima's work to define what I believe to be one of the core elements of her writing.

The title of this study – “Twice Torn” – is taken from Diane di Prima's poem “The Practice of Magical Evocation” (which will be further analyzed in the first chapter). In the poem, di Prima describes the female body as “twice torn”: first by its physical, often painful, inherent experiences and “torn” again by the cultural and social norms that seek to discipline and control it. Thus, it seemed fitting to incorporate this expression into the title, as it encapsulates the central concern of my study: how the female body in Diane di Prima's writing emerges both as a site of oppression and liberation. To be “twice torn” is to live with the constant pain of living a markedly female embodied life under a patriarchal society, whilst also claiming the pain of the *torn* body as a source of power.

Thus, to have a comprehensive grasp of Diane di Prima's corporeal poetics, my study is structured around three distinct iterations of the body across di Prima's work. The first chapter – “The Written Body” – will deal with Diane di Prima's life writing, in the form of her memoirs, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), *Dinners and Nightmares* (1974), and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2002), as well as a selection of her *life poems* including “I Get My Period, September 1964”, “Brass Furnace Going Out: A Song after an Abortion”, and “The Practice of Magical Evocation”.¹⁰ This chapter will have as its focus an analysis of how di Prima deals with the gendered constraints of mid-century urban life, in which the female body is both subjected to constant objectification, violence, and control, and, at the same time, liberated in the downtown scene of New York City, a place that presents itself as an ideal setting for the discovery of one's body. Chapter Two – “The Body Politic” – will turn to Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* (1971) and look at how the body is recast as a *locus* for political resistance, protest, and anarchist impulses. Here, di Prima's most radical and political poetry articulates an embodied opposition to the patriarchal, capitalist, and imperialist values of American society, reimagining the female body as a weapon of resistance. The final chapter – “The Loba Body” – explores Diane di Prima's feminist *quasi-epic*, *Loba* (1978), described by Adrienne Rich as an “epic act of language, a great

¹⁰ Although this study does not aim to intervene in debates on what constitutes or does not constitute autobiography, the concept of life poems is inspired in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's use of the terms *life writing* and *life narrative*, since it provides an insightful framework for situating di Prima's work. For a more detailed discussion of autobiography and women's life writing, see Sidonie Smith's *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* (1993), and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010).

geography of the female imagination” (qtd. in di Prima, *Loba* 1998). This chapter will address how the female body in *Loba*, represented by the body of the metamorphic she-wolf, breaks free from social and cultural constraints, as well as the violence imposed on women’s bodies.

As Adrienne Rich (1984) reminds us, all knowledge is situated, that is, constructed from a perspective positioned in time, space, and social place, located in a body, from which the perspective is projected. For this study on the body, I used a range of theoretical approaches within the field of feminist studies, as well as other fields such as sociology and feminist geography. One of the primary feminist theoretical texts will be that of the French materialist feminist, Hélène Cixous and her concept of *écriture féminine*, which gives power to the materiality of the female body in women’s writing. And while this concept is particularly useful for my study, it was also fundamental that I turned to the North American feminist thinkers and to the body in terms of North American art. Adrienne Rich, in particular, offers an insightful framework with which to look at Diane di Prima’s writing: through a *politics of location*. In her essay, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location” (1984), Rich speaks of a gendered, racialized, sexualized body through which women must write: what Rich calls “the geography closest in” (Rich 9) and Karl Marx called “the first premise of all human history” (*ibidem*). In this essay, Rich insists that the starting point of women’s writing should encompass women’s material and embodied existence, addressing how matters of sexuality, reproduction, and social norms shape and constrain women’s lives. (*ibidem*)

Coupled with this study, I have also developed and annexed a Digital Humanities project – *Mapping Diane di Prima: A Cartography of Identity and Space*, available to explore online.¹¹ This project was developed during the period in which I held a junior research scholarship from CETAPS (Centre for English, Translation, and Anglo-Portuguese Studies). As part of the CETAPS Digital Lab, an initiative within the research center dedicated to the Digital Humanities, I was encouraged to create and carry out a digital project of my own. Drawing mostly from her life writing, this ongoing digital project traces Diane di Prima’s movements and presence across the United States of America throughout her life. Hosted on the CETAPS Digital Lab Blog, this project serves both as a scholarly resource, open to

¹¹ Click [here](#) to access the project. For further details, see the Annex.

contributions, and in constant progress. and as an attempt to better contextualize Diane di Prima's presence in the Beat countercultural movement and its spaces.

The project features three interactive tools: an interactive map, which users can explore freely, and discover more about Diane di Prima's presence in specific locations. When clicked on, every pin on the map provides the user with information about that location in particular, if there are any textual references to it in Diane di Prima's life writing, as well as photographic evidence of her presence there, when possible. The complementary widget, made alongside the map, allows users to explore the spaces that di Prima frequented and inhabited through a *place type* filter. Finally, an interactive cluster network shows Diane di Prima's extensive and dynamic interaction and relation to different artists from all kinds of backgrounds. This study will refer to the project whenever it provides relevant insight or context in the first chapter, where my discussion of Diane di Prima's life writing engages most directly with questions of the embodied realities of mid-century urban life. Further details are provided in the Annex.

Chapter 1

The Written Body

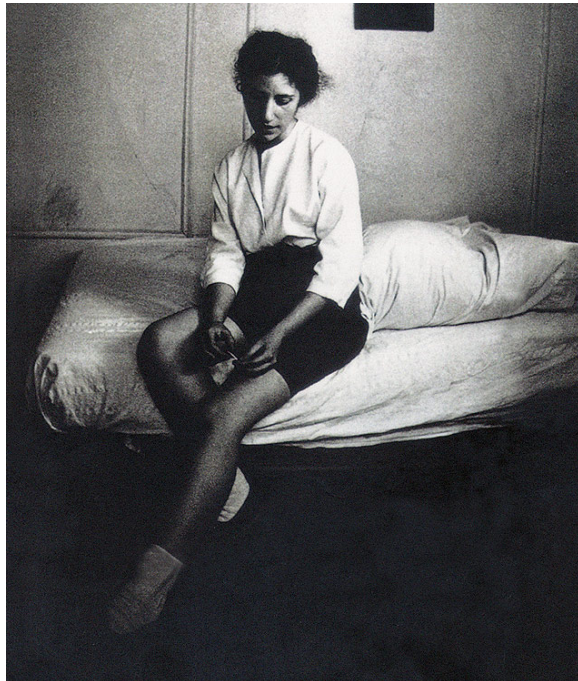


Figure 1. Diane di Prima, circa 1959.
Photo by James Oliver Mitchell.

*Censor the body and you censor breath
and speech at the same time. Write yourself.
Your body must be heard*

Hélène Cixous

The Pirate-Poet

Women of the Beat Generation have been, for the most part, studied through a “life writing” lens. Representing only a small fraction of their literary corpus, memoirs such as Joyce Johnson’s *Minor Characters* (1983) and *Missing Men* (2004), Brenda Frazer’s *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* (1969), Carolyn Cassady’s *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* (1990), Hettie Jones’ *How I Became Hettie Jones* (1990) and Joan Haverty’s *Nobody’s Wife: The Smart Aleck and the King of the Beats* (2000), promoted a greater interest in their lives rather than their work. These writers participated in a form of “collective memorialization” (Mlakar 1), their accounts of a confessional and intimate nature. As Mlakar further states:

. . . they depict unflattering accounts of illness, madness and suicide, sexual orgies, abortions, homelessness, alcoholism, and depression. What is also typical for female Beat writings is worrying about race, gender, and the establishment, which is pervaded by sexism and oppression of women. Traditional myths about female silence are rewritten, resisting their objectification as mere “chicks” or “ellipses”.¹² (20)

In *The Art of Biography* (1939), Virginia Woolf described traditional biography as presenting “the lives of great men only” (226). She asks, “Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography – the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what of greatness? And what smallness? He must revise our

¹² “Ellipse” was Lucien Carr’s pejorative nickname for Elise Cowen, who was famously in love with Allen Ginsberg (Trigilio, *Who Writes?* 121).

standards of merit and set up new heroes for our admiration" (226-227). Taking Woolf's idea into *autobiography*, I argue for the setting up of di Prima as a "new hero[ine]" for our admiration, while first taking on her life writing as something worth being read and analyzed. Generally speaking, Beat women's life writing reflects both a desire for a writing that truthfully portrays both the isolation of domestic life – the "smallness" – as well as their work as artists.

As Stewart (2007) argues, "in their awareness that their own histories dovetail with important literary history, the memoirs are aware of the media-exploited myths of the Beat Generation – acknowledging yet revising such fictions. . .or skillfully adapting them to create a fantastic narrative, in the case of Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*" (24-25). Undeniably, these memoirs have allowed Beat women writers to reclaim authority over their own stories, still somewhat shrouded in mystery, inscribing their names into the "book of myths" – or what I would call, the Beat *mythos*.¹³ Critical theory surrounding women's life writing is rooted precisely in this issue: for these writers, their identity became a major concern – not the identity shaped for them by other [masculine] voices, but the one they themselves defined, often in defiance of the attempts to repress and silence them. Therefore, their life writing is where they inscribe a self that is embodied, sexed, and gendered, insisting on their right to tell their own stories.

However, it is also possible that the narratives in these autobiographies risk reinforcing the very marginalization they sought to fight against, forgetting one crucial aspect: the fact alone that they are women brings forth a level of scrutiny that male writers were not a target of. Thus, their autobiographies seem to be upheld to a higher standard and looked at with a certain expectation for "greatness". Though it is important to understand that this emphasis on the autobiographical when it comes to the women writers of the Beat Generation was largely shaped by publishers who understood that there is a certain marketability to peering into a woman's personal life, which, inadvertently, reinforced the tendency to view Beat women as mere bystanders. The iconic photograph of Joyce Johnson standing behind Jack Kerouac outside the Kettle Fish in Greenwich Village captures that very dynamic. Johnson is quite literally in the margins of the frame, her face almost entirely blurred. Ironically, Johnson uses this photograph for the cover of her first memoir, *Minor Characters*: a visual reminder that the title of the book rings true and that these women

¹³ Adrienne Rich uses the phrase "book of myths" in her poem "Diving into the Wreck" (1973).

stood on the sidelines, obscured by the shadow the men cast. Part of her earliest memoir, *Dinners and Nightmares*, Diane di Prima's poem "The Quarrel" articulates the frustration of women writers and the unequal terms under which women entered the Beat Movement. In it, she replicates a conversation between her roommate, Mark, and herself. In this prose-poem, di Prima, tired of all the house chores falling on her shoulders, tells Mark: "In fact, I probably have just as much fucking work to do as you . . . / I am sick I said to the woodpile of doing dishes. I am just as lazy as you. Maybe lazier . . . Just because I happen to be a chick I thought" (76). While Mark lounges in the living room, she is left, begrudgingly, to do the dishes by herself, but she does not complain because it would be "so fucking uncool to talk about it" (*ibidem*). Thus, this "quarrel", all part of di Prima's internal monologue, never actually takes place aloud, as she does the chores silently and grinds her teeth. At the same time, Mark tells the group how impressive it is that "Picasso produces fourteen hours a day" (*ibidem*). Read against the backdrop of Beat women writers' memoirs, the poem is a reminder of the need for a space for female subjectivity, exposing the "quarrel" at the heart of Beat literary history: women's constant negotiation between being cast as "minor characters" and asserting themselves as the *main* characters.

Diane di Prima disrupts this dynamic entirely. Her life writing is unique in that it resists the flattening lens of confessional literature and instead moves towards a corporeal poetics – a literary practice in which the body becomes the driving force of the work. And di Prima seems hellbent on writing and re-inscribing the body as, paradoxically, the first site of both oppression and liberation, most particularly – as will be explored in this chapter – within the heavily masculinized geography of the Beat scene in New York in the 1950s: the city which features most prominently in her work. As Isabel Castelao-Goméz argues, Beat women writers "did not erase the private to occupy the public but negotiated with both spheres" (60). In her essay, "Professions for Women" (1931), Virginia Woolf had already articulated this double bind that women writers faced, describing the difficulty of writing truthfully from a woman's perspective, about the female body:

To speak without figure, she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of – what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She

could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer. This, I believe, be a very common experience with women writers—they are impeded by the extreme conventionality of the other sex. For though men sensibly allow themselves great freedom in these respects, I doubt that they realize or can control the extreme severity with which they condemn such freedom in women. (5)

After “killing the Angel in the House” (*ibidem*) – the internalized self-censorship imposed by patriarchal views of femininity – Woolf admits she could not complete the second challenge she set up for herself: “telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet.” (*ibidem*). The fear of “what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions” haunted women writers into silence, even when they faced and overcame seemingly more difficult obstacles. For Woolf, writing the female body remained an unsolved problem, hemmed in by a patriarchal society and internalized censorship and misogyny. Hélène Cixous would later return to Woolf’s “unsolved problem” in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), offering a solution. Whereas Woolf acknowledges that she could not earnestly write about her female body, Cixous insists that this is precisely what needs to be done. Cixous demands of women: “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (1). For Cixous, *writing the body* (*écriture féminine*) is an inherently radical act because it grounds language in the rhythms, drives, and desires of a lived female corporeality – a force historically silenced or reframed through a male-centered and controlled discourse, emphasizing how women have been “driven away [from writing] as violently as from their bodies, for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (2). Thus, reclaiming the female body through the process of writing disrupts this system, which imagines women as absences or objects under the male gaze.¹⁴

Adrienne Rich takes this further in her essay “Notes Towards a Politics of Location” (1984), in which she insists that writing must begin, not with an abstract “the body”, but with “my body” – the lived, material, and situated body which Rich considers as “the

¹⁴ The concept of male gaze was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). Although this study is based on literature, and this text conceived under the discipline of film studies, Mulvey’s text has been widely applied to a range of cross-disciplinary studies, including literature. In her essay, Mulvey looks at the sexual politics in Hollywood films and argues how, unsurprisingly, the imbalance of power between men and women in society was reflected in an imbalance in the relationship between men and women on the screen.

geography closest in" (212), and the place from which women must write about "the politics of pregnancy and motherhood. [t]he politics of orgasm. [t]he politics of rape and incest, of abortion, birth control, forcible sterilization. [O]f prostitution and marital sex. [o]f what had been named sexual liberation. [o]f prescriptive heterosexuality. [o]f lesbian existence." (*ibidem*). These "body politics" that Rich names are all discussed in di Prima's writing, *especially* in her life writing. Thus, it would seem that both Rich and di Prima are on the same page and that both agree that writing from their gendered bodies means acknowledging the full weight of their history, which begins precisely with the reclamation of their bodies. In Rich's words:

When I write "the body", I see nothing in particular. To write "my body" plunges me into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me. Bones well nourished from the placenta; the teeth of a middle-class person seen by the dentist twice a year from childhood. White skin, marked and scarred by three pregnancies, an elected sterilization, progressive arthritis, four joint operations, calcium deposits, no rapes, no abortions, long hours at the typewriter—my own, not in a typing pool—and so forth. To say "the body" lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say "my body" reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions. (215)

Likewise, di Prima's *writing body* and *body-writing* follow this directive, as she does what Woolf could not do and candidly speaks of her own experiences in a female body. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, "the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied. And life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects. Subjects narrating their lives, then, are multiply embodied" (Smith and Watson 10).

The lived experience of the body that formed the autobiographical context for Diane di Prima's discussion of her body in her memoirs, *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2002), must be understood against the backdrop of the United States of America of the 1950s – the *milieu* out of which di Prima emerges in the countercultural scene of New York City. Postwar America was marked by an increasingly conservative ideology that contained women to the private domestic sphere, as the nuclear family and suburban domesticity were promoted as pillars

against the threat of communism and social unrest. Birth control and other forms of contraception remained difficult to access (the pill, for one, would not be FDA-approved until 1960), abortion was criminalized, and sex education was minimal and moralizing. Within this culture, women's corporeal subjectivity was marginalized and silenced as they were still broadly construed as symbols of chastity, domesticity, and morality, even as mass media increasingly sexualized female bodies in ways designed to cater to the male gaze. For a young woman like Diane di Prima, who sought both intellectual and sexual autonomy, the 1950s presented her with a series of obstacles within a landscape fraught with rigid social norms, gendered double standards, and limited bodily freedom. Both her life and work embodied a rebellion against the conformist culture that constrained women's possibilities for living as independently as men. This insistence on the body as the first site of authorship puts di Prima in dialogue with both other women writers and visual artists who, particularly from the 1960s onward, turned to the female body as both subject and medium. As the rise of second-wave feminism brought the personal into the political, female artists foregrounded the female body in their artwork to challenge the dominant, patriarchal narratives around women's bodies and their sexuality.¹⁵ Like these visual and performance works, di Prima's life writing can be read as a part of a wider cultural moment in which women reclaimed corporeality as the ground of both artistic creation and resistance.¹⁶

In recent decades, the field of *life writing* studies has expanded the terms through which we think about autobiography, memoir, and related genres. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), "life writing" refers broadly to "acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital. In other words, we employ the term life writing for written forms of the autobiographical, and life narrative to refer to autobiographical acts of any sort." (4). Di Prima's writing thus becomes part of what Smith (1993) defined as the struggle over female

¹⁵ Examples include Carolee Schneemann's performance *Interior Scroll* (1975), in which the artist read from a text pulled from her vagina; Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Series* (1973–80); Judy Chicago's large-scale installation *The Dinner Party* (1974–79); Value Export's *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968), where she invited audiences to touch her chest through a curtained box; and Hannah Wilke's *S.O.S. – Starification Object Series* (1974–75), where she posed with her body marked with chewing-gum shaped into vulvas.

¹⁶ For discussions on feminist visual and performance art centering the female body, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, eds., *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001).

embodiment in life writing, where questions of identity, gender, and corporeality intersect. As Smith writes:

When a specific woman approaches the scene of writing and the autobiographical 'I,' she not only engages the discourses of subjectivity through which the universal human subject has been culturally secured; she also engages the complexities of her cultural assignment to an absorbing embodiment. And so the autobiographical subject carries a history of the body with her as she negotiates. (22)

Amongst her peers, Diane di Prima stands out as the first to write and publish memoirs, which include *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961),¹⁷ *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969),¹⁸ and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2002).¹⁹ Between the three, *Memoirs* and *Recollections* are by far the most popular and most used as reference when writing about di Prima.²⁰ However, both memoirs have been received rather differently by the general public and academia. Even though *Memoirs* has been discussed and used as a reference in multiple academic works, the book is not typically used as a valid autobiographical reference, unlike *Recollections*.²¹ The exception to this tendency is in the work of Maria Carden (2018), who approaches Beat women writers' work from a life writing standpoint, which includes *Memoirs* as both a valid source of information and analysis-worthy. In her study, *Women Writers of the Beat Era: Autobiography and Intertextuality*, Carden frames *Memoirs* within a tradition of life writing which, as she argues, is, like any other autobiographical work, "steeped . . . in some form of lie" (43), praising di Prima for creating a "truth located at least partially in the lies she tells" (31). This statement, while insightful, fails to consider that the

¹⁷ Hereafter referred to as *Dinners*. Though not a traditional autobiography, *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), contains di Prima's characteristic sexual transparency, her first allusions to wanting to be a mother, and a witty recollection of her memories in the early 1950s through the sections "What I Ate and Where", "Conversations", and "More or Less Love Poems".

¹⁸ Hereafter referred to as *Memoirs*.

¹⁹ Hereafter referred to as *Recollections*.

²⁰ According to an interview, Diane di Prima was working on the second volume of her autobiography with the working title *The Grail Is a Green Stone*, a continuation of her life narrative after her permanent move to San Francisco in 1968 (Grace & Johnson 105).

²¹ See "'The Willingness to Speak': Diane di Prima and Italian American Feminist Body Politics" (2003) by Roseanne Giannini Quinn; *Diane di Prima: Extending La Famiglia* (1987) by Blossom S. Kirschenbaum; and *Girls who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (2002), edited by Ronna Johnson and Nancy M.. Grace.

“lies” that di Prima tells are not an attempt to subvert the forms of life writing but instead, a fabrication she had no choice but to create.

Published in 1969, this provocative and semi-fictionalized *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is perhaps Diane di Prima’s most misunderstood work. Framed as an autobiographical account of her life as a woman beatnik in the 1950s, given the title alone, the memoir chronicles the poet’s artistic, communal, and sexual experiences that shaped her early adulthood. However, unlike her later memoir, *Recollections*, *Memoirs* was written under the guise of Olympia Press – a publisher known for its overtly erotic fiction – resulting in a skewed portrayal of her life. Thus, the controversy surrounding *Memoirs* centers largely on this issue: the book’s overt graphic sexual content made it so that by the time it was published, it was something else entirely from what di Prima had meant it to be. In fact, a great part of the negative reception of *Memoirs* comes after the rediscovery of Beat women writers and their work in the 1990s. It seems that whenever the content of their work does not stray enough from that of their male peers, there is a chasm. Naturally, the title *Memoirs of a Beatnik* led readers to believe that the book would provide a cultural portrayal of what it meant to be a woman beatnik in the 1950s, but instead, what they found was a text fraught with superfluous depictions of sex. The book was quickly dismissed as erotica, and gone was its value and validity as an autobiographical account.²² Likewise, its value as erotica is also dismissed as the language is perceived as too brash and masculine. However, as Audre Lorde (1984) argues in her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”, the erotic “is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (1). So, even if editorial pressure did push di Prima to exaggerate the erotic and sexual content in her memoir, this exaggeration is also a deliberate creative resource.

This kind of reception reveals more about the gendered lens with which Beat women writers were and are read still, than Diane di Prima’s writing. A memoir, as Gillian Whitlock argues, is “a genre for those who are authorized and who have acquired cultural legitimacy and influence” (qtd. in Carden 32), and regrettably, when *Memoirs* was first published in 1969, di Prima was still very much out of the mainstream and thus not a figure of authority like Allen Ginsberg or Jack Kerouac would have been. By rightfully naming the book,

²² This perception was of course also promoted by publishing companies themselves. The 1988 Last Gasp edition of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* designated it as “Ficto-Biography Erotica”. (Dokter)

Memoirs of a Beatnik, di Prima claims her place in a literary and cultural movement she helped build. But this cultural-historical movement was markedly *male*. This movement, usually characterized as a non-conformist rebellion that pushed against societal norms in the name of freedom, still “tended to reproduce the gender role expectations of conservative American mainstream” (Carden 2). Had any of the male Beat writers chronicled their sexual exploits with the same explicitness as di Prima, it would have been immediately absorbed into the Beat canon. However, coming from di Prima, a woman, the narrative is deemed excessive both because of the subject matter and of the *exposé* of the cultural double standard that made women’s bodies and sexualities both repulsive and desirable. This misogynistic reception validates Lorde’s idea that “every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power [the erotic] within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives” (1).

However, it is important to know exactly in which circumstances and conditions the book was written. This is clarified in the 1988 edition of *Memoirs*, which includes an Afterword titled “Writing Memoirs”, in which di Prima reveals what went into writing the memoir. Di Prima recalls meeting Maurice Girodias, the editor of Olympia Press, for whom she had written sex scenes as filler for a couple of “dull and innocuous novels” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 136), a somewhat dull process she compared to adding “oregano to tomato sauce” (*ibidem*). Short on money after moving to San Francisco in 1968, Di Prima admits in the Afterword that much of the book’s sexual content is a lie, “dream[ed] up . . . and cram[med] in”, at Maurice’s request, who would send di Prima’s drafts “with ‘MORE SEX’ scrawled across the top page” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 193) to which she would oblige. The narrative of the memoir mirrors this dynamic as the di Prima repeatedly “simulates sex for money, a parable, a cynic might say, of the text itself” (Carden, “What” 34). As Dokter notes, the imposed sensationalism allows di Prima to capitalize on and parody “the perceived erotic appeal of the structures she parodies while performing a metacommentary on the perils of being a woman and an author marginalised based on gender” (59). Despite its semi-fictionalized nature, *Memoirs* foregrounds questions that di Prima takes up with more autonomy and authority in *Recollections*. Published more than three decades later, *Recollections* chronicles her childhood years to the early 1960s, when she began her travels to California. This time around, the title, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, points to the

same idea she brings forth in “The Practice of Magical Evocation”: “I am a woman/ and my poems are woman’s” (qtd. in Charters 361). But what does it mean for a woman to write about living a liberated life in a female body? And what is the cost of speaking from one’s body – in one’s own words?

Corporeal Poetics: Life Writing

Diane di Prima’s life writing in *Recollections* provides both a vivid account of how di Prima grew up in a world where the binary between the male and female body carried considerable, often implacable, social implications. Thus, the many experiences endowed to a female body were never spoken of in a world that was, and still is, built around the biological differences of one’s body. Undoubtedly, di Prima was highly aware of these differences. As a child, she longed for an androgynous figure, to be a “pirate, tall and slim and hard, and not a girl at all” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 17) – to have a “boy’s girl-body. No breasts, and narrow hips, tight ass, but no penis either. I wanted all protuberances gone. Anything that stuck out seemed so vulnerable. Like the parts of myself uncovered in the crib” (di Prima, *Recollections* 69). This comes from the desire, not to become a man, but to become a woman unencumbered by the constant assault of the body. She writes that this “girl-man” (*ibidem*) she longed to be, had “straight black hair. It hung to her shoulders, smooth, no curls, no frizzy places. No freckles either, pale, flat, white skin, and green eyes” (*ibidem*), which was a look many of them tried to emulate later in the 1950s (*ibidem*). She writes:

It was never that I wanted to be a man. I held men for the most part in contempt and dread. But to be a girl in a flat and streamlined body. The opposite of my thick red hair, my Italian figure. Over and over, the image of cutting off my breasts, getting rid of them somehow, would come to mind. Breasts that had gotten me battered, simply by growing. (*ibidem*)

The poet embodied both the figure of the pirate and of the *flâneur*, both usually male, by transgressing the “established spatial patriarchal nature of gender differentiation by moving into the city” (Castelao Gómez 59) and living relatively independent lives as women artists (*ibidem*). In *Memoirs*, Diane di Prima recalls moving into her first apartment on the Lower East Side in 1953, a “tiny renovated two and a half rooms, on Avenue A and Fifth Street”,

rented out by a “forward-looking landlord” who “had decided, way back then, that the East Side was to become the “new Village” – the old Village being far too expensive for “impoverished young people who . . . wanted a haven, any haven they could afford, within walking distance of the bars, coffee shops and book stores” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 54). Diane di Prima recalls in an interview how it was [the women] “who made the community. There was no community before. When I hit the Lower East Side in 1963, they thought I must be a whore because women didn’t live alone, and then slowly, you found a few other people doing the same thing in other areas” (Grace & Johnson 88).

Feminist and cultural critic Janet Wolff, in her book *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (1995), calls the attention to “the importance of alternative cultures for young women independent enough to look for ways of escaping the suburban idyll” (141). Greenwich Village figures large in women writers’ escape scenarios as the ideal place for the beginning of their emancipated life. This dream for adventure, for a life “on the road”, an experience culturally established by men and, seemingly, only seldom experienced by women, was realized by Beat women writers in the early 1950s through their move to college, away from home, following their move to the city, away from the institution of the University. Diane di Prima herself only studied for half a year at Swarthmore College, “no more than three hundred miles from Brooklyn” (di Prima, *Recollections* 94), dropping out in 1952. Immediately after leaving college, she planned to “take an apartment with [her] friends somewhere in Manhattan, probably the Village” (98). However, Janet Wolff warns against this kind of “ungrounded and unbounded movement” (Wolff 128), suggesting that the apparent “equal mobility” of women, when compared to men, is ultimately deceptive. For Wolff, the freedom promised by such movement is predicated on the male body, while the female body, ever so volatile, cannot occupy space in the same way (*ibidem*). However, Diane di Prima’s *flâneur* ways were also defined by the way she presented herself. Standing alone in her Lower East Side apartment, di Prima made the decision “not to be beautiful” anymore (di Prima, *Recollections* 115), letting “the tomboy out who had never had any room at home” (*ibidem*), walking out onto the streets of the Village with her “sneakers . . . [her] long red hair down to a crew cut . . . men’s shirts and jeans . . . as [her] disguise. Costume . . . hiding most of [her] body” (*ibidem*). Thus, di Prima was able to walk through the city in an “ungrounded and unbounded movement” as “some strange hybrid: neither gay nor straight, neither butch nor femme” (*ibidem*). She writes:

Reading my short stories from those early years, a friend asked me recently how I did it. “They seem so masculine”, she said, “your adventures”. She could not imagine them. Could not imagine that I did not open more than that, open my heart. But I truly didn't. Walked the Village, stalking, looking. The East Side streets. Walked the halls of my heart. This would have been no problem if I were a boy, the pirate I had always longed to be. Most natural thing in the world. But somehow reprehensible — my friend seems to say — somehow wrong in a woman, this lack of feeling. (*ibidem*)

The perception that her “adventures” were masculine comes precisely from the fact that di Prima emulates exactly how the men of her generation lived – a life unencumbered by romantic attachment and domestic expectations and responsibilities. What read as “masculine” to di Prima’s friend was the freedom to move through the city and move between lovers, without guilt or shame. And it was precisely through this movement in the city space that Diane di Prima *moved into* her “first conscious relationship with her body” (di Prima, *Recollections* 151). After a childhood “marked by the fear of polio: ten-year-old school friends in braces, trailing withered legs. A president in a wheel- chair. As well as the paralyzing realities of war” (152), it is in the urban space of New York City that Diane di Prima discovered, or better yet, rediscovered movement (*ibidem*). For the poet, this movement translated itself into different things, the first of which was *dance*:

For many years, I kept wanting to be a dancer. Believed I could be one by the sheer power of my Will. But I started too late, or I was battling too many obstacles: a short torso and my eternally swayed back. More weight than was fashionable in ballet. And a stiffness and fragility that were more than physical . . . But then I knew nothing of the stories our muscles carry, the histories articulated by our nerves and joints . . . So I kept on for ten or twelve years, kept pushing my body into and past its limits. Broke my ankle once doing tours jetes across a slick floor, taking a dance class an hour after I sold a pint of blood to pay for it. (153)

With this renewed fascination with movement came the “inevitable interest in sex” (153). Sexual freedom was a paradigm of the Beat Generation, but Beat women writers were seldom able to experience it without being “aware of the dangers inherent in their sexual experimentation during the McCarthyite fifties” (Grace & Johnson 49). In an era of

ineffective birth control and illegal abortions, women who led sexually liberated lives had to contend with the risk of unwanted pregnancy, that, as Diane di Prima put it, “[e]verytime you made love you risked your life. Or risked changing the rest of your life” (di Prima, *Recollections* 230).²³ Beat women writers often wrote of how maternity was inimical to being sexually liberated: “it makes women less available for sex, and sex less available to women” (Grace & Johnson 27).

But Diane di Prima did not share this view on motherhood. She did, however, think of *birth control* as inimical to a sexually liberated life. In “Fuck the Pill: A Digression” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 74), di Prima suggests that all forms of birth control were a “drag” (74), and reminisces on how, for those first five years living on her own in New York City, she never used *any* method of contraception because she believed she “could ‘feel’ if [she] was going to become pregnant” (di Prima, *Recollections* 153), and that she could “will the child away if [she] had to, any child” (*ibidem*), an ability she attributed to her close connection to her body – its reproductive part – which for so long “loaded the dice in [her] favor” (154).²⁴ Birth control methods in the 1960s were newly developed and, naturally, far more uncomfortable than they are now, with an array of side effects that women were none the wiser to. In her rant, di Prima suggests that all birth control methods were far more harmful to a woman’s body than pregnancy could ever be. Using the diaphragm, for instance, meant, first and foremost, lying about being married to get one – after all, why would an unmarried woman need birth control for? Having to place the disk just before intercourse also meant scrambling out of bed to set the disk in place and having to start “all over again, of somehow working up to the passion we had set so easily and naturally going in the first place.” (74-75). Another alternative is the IUD, which di Prima ironically calls “the cunning little gadget” (76), another method which, for di Prima, only causes great discomfort with “cramps, intermittent bleeding, a general state of tension” (76). Sardonicly, di Prima turns to the pill:

²³ Contraceptives were not yet as widely accessible or as reliable as they are today, and abortion, until *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 remained illegal. This landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision recognized a constitutional right to privacy encompassing a woman’s decision to terminate a pregnancy, thus legalizing abortion nationwide. When Diane di Prima first wrote about abortion in the 1960s and early 1970, it remained illegal in most states.

²⁴ Despite Diane di Prima’s *blasé* attitude towards birth control and contraception, or perhaps *because* of it, di Prima makes a footnote to “Fuck the Pill: A Digression” in the late 1980s, where she clarifies that her text should not be taken as encouragement to avoid condoms, advocating for safe sex at the height of the AIDS crisis. She writes: “Flirting with pregnancy is one thing: having a kid can be a great celebration of life; flirting with AIDS is something else: is simply courting a quick and ugly death” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 74).

The pill, the pill, the pill! I am so tired of hearing about the pill, hearing the praises of the pill! Let me tell you about the pill. It makes you fat, the pill does. It makes you hungry. Gives you sore breasts, slight morning sickness, condemns you, who have avoided pregnancy, to live in a perpetual state of early pregnancy: woozy, and nauseous, and likely to burst into tears. And—crowning irony—it makes you, who have finally achieved the full freedom to fuck, much less likely to want to fuck, cuts down on the sex drive. So much for the pill. (di Prima, *Memoirs* 75).

Beat women writers wanted nothing more than to be able to live independent lives, just as men did, and birth control seemed to have emerged as a kind of solution to their qualms, but of course, men did not have to contend (and still don't) with all the discomfort and numerous side effects that ailed women's bodies. Alongside the women of her generation, Diane di Prima, her life writing, and her lifestyle itself, contributed massively to the development of the women's movement by "physically taking a stand, rather than intellectually or through any particular writing" (Grace & Johnson 160), simply by emulating what was commonly perceived as a masculine lifestyle. As Hettie Jones put it in an interview, women of the Beat Generation decided that they were going to live on their own, acknowledge their sexuality and actually have sex, use birth control, and "live what is generally regarded as a man's life" (*ibidem*).

However, for Diane di Prima, her "physical stand" against patriarchal cultural norms had always included the prospect of motherhood, which was preferable to the hassle of birth control and the unwarranted risk of abortions. For Diane di Prima, the prospect of being a mother was intrinsically linked to her role as a poet and life as a woman:

I was a poet, I had work to do. And that work included an old resolve that I had expressed to Dean Cobb at Swarthmore, and that she had given me back as a Latin proverb. *I am human, therefore, nothing is foreign to me*. It came to me still as a resolve, a vow: There was nothing that I could possibly experience, as a human in a female body, that I would not experience. Nothing I would try to avoid. No part of human life I would turn my back on. To me this [being a mother] was obviously just part of the job, part of what one as a writer set out to do. (di Prima, *Recollections* 161)

However, it is after having her first child that di Prima truly realizes the extent to which motherhood has an impact on her and her body. Childbirth in particular, was for di Prima a formative experience which she considered to be the way “you actually lost your virginity” (190): not from the “semipleasant invasion from a man. excursus from the outside in” (*ibidem*) but from “the joy, the power, of being OPEN. Something unconquerable and deep about it. Place from which I live. Twice-torn” (*ibidem*). Therefore, the most searing examples of her corporeal poetics come through her life writing, most particularly her *life poetry*, where the poet expresses the pain of having been forced to go through with an unwanted illegal abortion in the early 1960s: “Pain in my heart far worse than the cramps. I was writing, persistently writing to the child I had killed. Had sent away. I filled page after page, in some kind of wobbly scrawl, written mostly lying down. Some kind of ritual goodbye” (di Prima, *Recollections* 234).²⁵

In “Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, after an Abortion”, Diane di Prima contends with what for her was a great, violent act against both her body and her child’s body.²⁶ The second part of this long poem goes as follows:

...
 I want you in a bottle to send to your father
 with a long bitter note. I want him to know
 I'll not forgive you, or him for not being born
 for drying up, quitting
 at the first harsh treatment
 as if the whole thing were a rent party
 & somebody stepped in your feet

(di Prima, qtd. in Charters 363)

Diane di Prima wrote this poem in the aftermath of her abortion in 1964. Then, in an affair with poet LeRoi Jones (aka, Amiri Baraka), Diane di Prima directs her bitterness towards both him and their unborn child. Di Prima blames both Jones for forcing her to get an abortion in the first place and her unborn child for not evading the procedure and surviving it. Of

²⁵ Diane di Prima’s expression “twice-torn” can be read in dialogue with feminist visual art of the period, particularly Judy Chicago’s *Birth Tear* (1982) part of the *Birth Project* (1980–85), a collaborative series in which Chicago worked with over 150 needleworkers to bring forth visceral images of pregnancy and childbirth. The piece takes its title from the “double-tear” of childbirth: both the body’s physical rupture (read perineal tearing) and the woman’s struggle in the role of the mother.

²⁶ The cover of “Brass Furnace Going Out: Song After An Abortion” featured a reproduction of Suzanne Benton’s sculpture *Fertile Donation Box*.

course, this revenge that di Prima never materializes – the rule of Cool, “of what was expected of [her] as a ‘chick” (229) – did not allow di Prima to express the pain the experience had caused her. On the one hand, di Prima is among the Beat women writers who best and most often appropriate this rule in her favour – emulating the men’s emotional detachment; on the other, she is constantly reminded that this rule has made sure that women’s struggles are silenced, especially the ones inflicted on them by the men in their lives.

However, the bitterness with which the poem starts lasts for less than a stanza before the speaker addresses her child, in a way, imagining an alternate reality in which her child survives and she can check on them. Desperately trying to grasp onto her child, the speaker asks for their address: she wants to keep in touch, see a picture of them, and send them cookies (363). But just as the anger of the previous stanza dissolved into yearning, di Prima changed the tone of the poem, yet again, to reflect the violence enacted on both her body and her child’s body: “Your face dissolving like water, like wet clay” . . . “washed away, like a rotten water lily . . . your body sank, a good way back . . . and the wailing mosquitos even stop to examine/ the last melting details of eyelid & cheekbone/ the stagnant blood . . .” (365). Unflinchingly, di Prima examines the violence of the effects of the abortion in her child’s body in rather grotesque terms, referring to the child’s belly, “a home for the flies . . . [b]lown out & stinking, the maggots curling your hair” (365-366), their “useless never” genitalia and “the pitiful shell of a skull, dumped in the toilet, the violet, translucent folds, of beginning life.” (*ibidem*) Through the pain, the poet muses on what could have been had she not gotten the abortion: “and I cannot stop thinking I would be three months pregnant/ we would be well out of here & in the sun/even the telephone would be polite/ we would laugh a lot, in the morning” (367). Although di Prima mourns for the loss of her pregnant body as well as the loss of child, she hopes that the abortion won’t have been an actual termination, and that, somehow, her child could find its way to another woman’s womb: “I hope that wasn’t/ rebuttal, but a transfer, an attempt / that failed, but to be followed/ quickly by another/ suck your thumb somewhere/ Dear silly thing, explode/ make someone’s colors (368). However this hope is measured by some contempt: “I have cut the shroud to measure/ bought the stone/ a plot in the cemetery set aside/ to bury your shadow/ take your head & go”/ & may the woman that you find know better than talk to me about it” (365). In a last attempt to hold onto her child and their “ghostshape/ mistaken as a broken

tooth/ [their] flesh rejected/ never to grow – [their] hands/ that should have closed around [her] finger”, di Prima tries to persuade the ghost of her unborn child to visit her:

...
my house is small, my windows look out on grey courtyard
there is no view of the sea.
will you come here again? I will entertain you
as well as I can – I will make you comfortable
in spite of new york.

will
you
come here
again

my breasts prepare
to feed you: they do what they can

(di Prima, qtd. in Charters 369)

Even in the absence of her child, her body remains prepared to breastfeed, suspended in a state of anticipation that will never be fulfilled, almost becoming a kind of liminal space: intact yet empty, characterized only by the lack of her child.

This piece of eloquent *life writing* has been, and is often read by anti-abortion groups as supporting their cause, much to Di Prima’s dismay (Charters 359). While di Prima herself believed that being a mother was an essential aspect of her womanhood and artistry making herself “available to the imperatives of the flesh” (di Prima, *Recollections* 229) – a a channel . . . [t]hrough which souls fell to birth” (*ibidem*) – she still acknowledged that “there was no easy choice [for women], not in those days, and that as “illegal and dangerous as it was, it [abortion] was [their] woman-right” (di Prima, *Recollections* 229). Similarly, its *sister-poem*, “I Get My Period, September 1964”, is often taken out of its context to fit an anti-abortion narrative. In the poem, originally published in *Pieces of a Song* (1990), di Prima writes about the first period she has after the abortion. The poem goes as follows:

How can I forgive you this blood?
Which was not to flow again, but to cling joyously to my womb
To grow, and become a son?
When I turn to you in the night, you sigh, and turn over
When I turn to you in the afternoon, in our bed,

Where you lie reading, you put me off, saying only
It is hot, you are tired.
You picket, you talk of violence, you draw blood
But only from me, unseeded and hungry blood
Which meant to be something else

(di Prima, *Pieces of a Song* 51)

It would be transgressive enough for a woman to write about menstruation, but for a woman to write about her menstruation in the aftermath of an abortion *she did not want to have* makes the poem acquire a double transgressive nature. The speaker addresses her lover (whom we know to be LeRoi Jones) and expresses her disappointment over his apathy and contempt for her grief. Jones' dismissal contrasts with his passionate public militancy, his radical rhetoric for liberation undermined by his cruelty towards di Prima: she who bears the costs and reminds the reader that even revolutionary movements often still reproduce the same gendered norms of the system they seek to destroy. Di Prima undermines Jones' talk of violence by claiming that the only person he has hurt is her: "you draw blood/ But only from me" (*ibidem*). In her memoir, di Prima fantasizes about wanting him to be "the one on that table, the one to bleed. Or at least to cover his hands with my blood, smear it on his body. Go to sleep in the smell of it, smell of our murdered child" (di Prima, *Recollections* 237).

In contrast to these two poems stands one of di Prima's most famous poems, "Songs for Babio, Unborn", a poem dedicated to her first child, whom she decided she was going to raise all on her own in early 1950s New York City. In the first part of the poem, often overshadowed by the second, di Prima addresses *her own body*. The poem goes as follows:

Body
whose flesh
has crossed my will?
Which night
common or blest
shapes now
to walk the earth?

Body
whose hands
broke ground
for that thrusting head?
in the eyes
budding to sight

who will I read?

Body
secret in you
sprang this cry of flesh
Now tell the tale

(di Prima, *Dinners* 129)

Unlike the two previous poems, in “Songs for Babio, Unborn”, di Prima’s body is no longer withholding anything from her: this time around, the body has been allowed to be with child, unencumbered by birth control or abortion. Posing these questions *to the body* suggests that the body is, in some capacity, in charge. As di Prima suggests in her memoir, “the body has a vegetable mind, like a plant” and “[i]t has its own agenda and intent, separate from the mind, the heart, the Will . . .” (di Prima, *Recollections* 157). Di Prima’s command, “[n]ow tell the tale” (di Prima, *Dinners* 129) leads us to the second part of the poem (assumed to be the only part), where di Prima now addresses her unborn child: “Sweetheart/ when you break thru/ you’ll find/ a poet here/ not quite what one would choose” (130). Unlike the two previous poems, di Prima is not speaking to a spectrum of a child, but instead, to one she would be able to hold in her arms very soon.

Evidently, despite di Prima’s “masculine” lifestyle, she never dissociated herself or her writing from her female body, writing extensively on birth control, pregnancy, menstruation, and abortion. Di Prima approaches these bodily functions as sources of power and creativity, rather than hindrances or weaknesses. This is perhaps best articulated in her poem “The Practice of Magical Evocation”, written in response to Gary Snyder’s poem “Praise for Sick Women”. Snyder’s poem insists on the paternalistic claim that *all* women are essentially sick because of their reproductive systems, framing the biological and social experience of being a woman as a form of perpetual debilitation. Besides the obviously patronizing title of the poem, the imagery used throughout the poem regarding the female body and its reproductive system is in rather bad taste. For her response to Snyder’s poem, di Prima starts with an epigraph: the first three lines of Snyder’s poem. Di Prima’s poem goes as follows:

*The female is fertile, and discipline
(contra naturam) only
confuses her*

— Gary Snyder

i am a woman and my poems
are woman's: easy to say
this. the female is ductile
and

(stroke after stroke)
built for masochist
calm. The deadened nerve
is part of it:
awakened sex, dead retina
fish eyes; at hair's root
minimal feeling

and pelvic architecture functional
assailed inside & out
(bring forth) the cunt gets wide
and relatively sloppy
bring forth men children only

female
is
ductile

woman, a veil thru which the fingering Will
twice torn
twice torn

inside & out
the flow
what rhythm add to stillness
what applause?

(di Prima qtd. in Charters 361-62)

Historically, male authorities, ranging from doctors to philosophers, have claimed that women are somehow biologically inferior to men. This essentialist argument portrays women as weak, passive beings whose entire existence is solely defined by their ability to reproduce – a successful attempt in justifying women and their exclusion from intellectual, political, and public life. Snyder's fallacious claim that the female body is far too erratic to even begin to comprehend reason stems from the Cartesian distinction between the body and the mind: a distinction that has *always* been gendered. Although both women *and* men are endowed with bodies, women are commonly perceived to be more "corporeal" than men, generally more connected to their emotions and nature itself. It stands to reason that while men have been able to *transcend* their physicality by merely regarding their bodies as vessels for their intellect, women are understood in relation to their bodies alone. That a woman is more closely related to and ruled by her body *because* of her reproductive system

– a “victim of the vagaries of her emotions, a creature who can’t think straight as a consequence” (Kirby “Telling Flesh” 67) – while men are presumed to be able to separate themselves from both their emotions and bodies, has become a commonplace. Moreover, Snyder seems to characterize fertility almost as if a curse: “Apples will sour at your sight./ Blossoms fail the bough,/ Soil turn bone-white: wet rice,/ Dry rice, die on the hillslope” (Snyder qtd. in Charters 292).

This disintegration of the natural world in the presence of a fertile woman echoes the biblical vision of Eve and her body as sinful and the cause for a corruption of the natural world. Snyder seems to suggest that “[a]s man’s companion and complement, woman *is* the body” (Kirby 65) and, therefore, has absolutely no control over her own body. And if being sinful and corrupt was not bad enough, Snyder also claims that “[a]ll women are wounded” (292) by their reproductive system, which the poet seems to naively suggest, only grants them *pain*. However, Snyder’s portrayal of menstruation may just be the most egregious part of the entire poem: “First caught with the gut-cramp. / Gather punk wood and sour leaf. / Keep out of our kitchen. / Your garden plots . . .” (*ibidem*). Snyder alludes to archaic menstruation-related superstitions and beliefs, pervasive across multiple religious traditions, namely that menstruating women are not to enter certain spaces – like the kitchen – conveying the idea that menstruating women are somehow inherently unclean.

In the poem’s last stanza, Snyder reiterates the common idea that women are somehow related more closely with nature than men by bringing forth another superstition: that women’s menstrual cycles, which last for about 28 days, match with the moon’s lunar cycles, which last for about the same time: “Where’s hell then? / In the moon/ In the change of the moon” (292).²⁷ Completely out of a woman’s control, menstruation is seen as a sign of a woman’s lack of control over her own body, an idea explored by Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), where she writes:

Blood, vomit, saliva, phlegm, pus, sweat, tears, menstrual blood, seminal fluids, seep, flow, pass with different degrees of control, tracing the paths of entry or exit, the routes of interchange or traffic with the world . . . These body fluids have different indices of control, disgust, and revulsion. There is a kind of hierarchy of propriety governing these fluids

²⁷ The word *menstruation* itself is etymologically related to the word *moon*. Its derivative, *menses*, is also derived from the Latin *mensis* [month], which in turn is related to the Ancient Greek *mene* [moon].

themselves. Those that function with clarity, unclouded by the specter of infection, can be represented as cleansing and purifying: tears carry with them none of the disgust associated with the cloudiness of pus, the chunkiness of vomit, the stickiness of menstrual blood (195).

Diane di Prima addresses her counterpart's stigma around the menstruating female body by turning Snyder's "the female is fertile" (Snyder qtd. in Charters 291) into "the female is ductile" (di Prima qtd. in Charters 361).²⁸ Di Prima sardonically describes the female body as something *malleable* – something which can be pressed or beaten into shape by external forces – *by force*. Diane di Prima's biting irony is, however, rooted in personal experience, inspired by how she was taught how to see her own body: "built for masochist/ calm/" (di Prima qtd. in 361), di Prima learned from a very young age that her "body was commodity, not person" (di Prima, *Recollections* 35), and that she should use it for whatever ends necessary: "placate a man. bring in money, whatever. Let it hurt" (*ibidem*). Di Prima's eerie description of a completely complacent female body – "The deadened nerve/is part of it:/ awakened sex, dead retina/ fish eyes; at hair's root/ minimal feeling" (di Prima qtd. in Charters 361) – is also reminiscent of her own experience as a young woman. Most of Diane di Prima's earliest memories of physical touch were of pain (di Prima, *Recollections* 33): how her mother "scrubbed [her] in the bath till [her] skin was raw . . ." (*ibidem*) and boasted "of how many combs she broke on [her] hair, trying to get the tangles out" (34).

Di Prima also mocks the essentialist view that women are solely defined by their ability, or lack thereof, to have children by ironically comparing women to mere vessels, by whose functional pelvic architecture "assailed inside & out/ bring forth men children only" (di Prima qtd. in Charters 362). This irony also extends to a critique of the Beat Generation's "boy gang" mentality. By imagining a world in which women produce only sons, di Prima satirizes the inflated egos of her male counterparts, who styled themselves as the geniuses of their generation. The suggestion alone that daughters would be superfluous works as a biting parody of the gendered hierarchies that sustained the Beat literary scene: had it not been for the "daughters" of the Beat Generation, a lot of the work done by the men would have never fully materialized. The refrain – "twice torn/ twice torn/ inside & out" (*ibidem*) –

²⁸ For examples of visual and performance art that directly confront the cultural taboo of menstruation and use menstrual blood as a medium, see Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971), Mako Idemitsu's *What a Woman Made* (1973), Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Blood Sign)* (1974), Catherine Elwes' three-day performance *Menstruation 2* (1979), and Carolee Schneemann's *Blood Work Diary* (1971) and *Interior Scroll* (1975).

amplifies this critique by situating women as subject to a double rupture: both the physical tearing of the body in childbirth and the social “tearing” produced by cultural inscriptions that render women inferior to men. The poem’s closing lines – “what rhythm add to stillness/ what applause?” (*ibidem*) – crystalize di Prima’s critique of women’s erasure within the Beat *milieu*, making evident, through a rhetorical question, that the lack of recognition of women’s physical labor, whether that be childbirth, domestic labor, or the countless hours spent typing up and editing other’s poems.

Enacting Hélène Cixous’ concept of *écriture féminine*, di Prima undermines Snyder’s misogynistic stance by writing from her own body. Together, these four poems form a kind of *quadriptych* of Diane di Prima’s feminist corporeal poetics as the poet tells the truth about *her* own experiences in a female body, just as Virginia Woolf had wanted to be able to do. As critic Michael Davidson suggests:

The more di Prima asserts woman’s passivity, the less we believe her, and thus recognize her ability to use rhetoric in her own advantage . . . We could see her poem as an indication of what directions her [feminist] peers have taken in poetry, appropriating the coercive rhetoric of the masculine tradition and using it against itself.” (Davidson qtd. in Charters 359)

Following the biting irony of “The Practice of Magical Evocation”, Diane di Prima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik* extends that same satirical edge towards the terrain of her life writing. As previously discussed, while the text can be read as a candid account of the Beat era, it is also a carefully constructed and sensationalized portrayal of a single, bohemian woman’s life. Because of the fictionalized nature of the portrayal of sex in this book, *Diane* operates as a literary character through whom di Prima explores the sexual and socio-cultural scripts imposed on women and their bodies.

Chapter Twelve is a particularly good example of this exercise. Included in the chapter is a section entitled “A Night By The Fire: What You Would Like To Hear” (106), which details a fictionalized and rather detailed account of an orgy: “I slide my right leg under Leslie and lie with my cunt wide open, pushing against Don’s hand. He slows down, and moves in and out of my hole with long strokes” (*ibidem*). This is followed by another section, this one entitled “A Night By The Fire: What Actually Happened” (108), in which the fictionalized orgy is replaced by the rather boring, mundane details of their night: “Pete is

poking the fire, and the cheap old phonograph is playing the same Stan Getz record over and over. Donis sitting on the edge of the bed, playing drums with the poker against the fireplace" (108). Di Prima assumes early on in the book that the reader is mostly interested in reading a hypersexualized, unrealistic portrayal of her life. This interest is mostly shaped by the Beat's disreputable reputations and by the cultural imaginary of the sexual revolution.

Thus, di Prima suggests that a woman writing frankly about sex is not the same as being endlessly defined by it, and so, she plays with the reader's voyeuristic tendencies and stages a borderline pornographic fantasy, only to undercut it with the banality of her daily life, creating a "parody of gendered experience in the Beat generation" (Dokter 57). This parody is exacerbated in chapter six, "April Concluded", where di Prima is raped by her friend's father, Serge. Waking up from a nap, Diane finds Serge on top of her, his "tongue in [her] ear", begging her to stay quiet so as not to wake the others (67). At first, Diane resists and responds as one would expect: "thinking unbelievably that this was rape, that I was about to get raped" (68). However, when Serge's physical strength quickly overpowers her, a rather disturbing narrative shift follows: "my fear and horror seemed ridiculous. This was Serge, poor silly Serge, who never got to screw his wife, and if he wanted to throw a fuck into me, why I might as well let him" (*ibidem*).

Rather than sustaining the expected tone of outrage and revulsion for what was being done to her, the narrator adopts an almost condescending posture, treating Serge as pitiful and emasculated, and therefore feeling no need to offer serious resistance. While Diane allows that she "let him" rape her, she also recognizes that she did not have that much choice to begin with (68). Unable to physically stop him, the narrator takes hold of the encounter through language. Although she concedes that "pleasure began to stir in [her] breasts" (*ibidem*), this is immediately undermined by her own description of being "mostly bored" (*ibidem*) and of her orgasm as an "abstract mechanical finale" (69). The effect is quite unsettling, but it is done on purpose. Diane di Prima mocks the cultural scripts that women are expected to acquiesce to, suggesting in a way that women are more powerful than men, even if they have to endure and resign themselves to the sexual violence projected onto their bodies at all times. This "parody" culminates in chapter Fourteen, which contains what is arguably the most emblematic episode in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, better known as "the eternal Beat Orgy that will live forever in the minds of all guys who were around for the second half of the twentieth century" (di Prima, *Recollections* 202). In chapter fourteen, "We

Set Out”, di Prima reminisces on the night she spent with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. However, that night, which at first glance appears only to be a celebratory depiction of the sexually liberated mood associated with the Beat Generation, becomes, on closer inspection, an episode where the unbalanced gender dynamics of the movement are put on display.

Just as their night begins, Kerouac seizes di Prima’s notebooks and begins to “uncorrect” her poems. As Johnson and Grace state, Beat women writers resisted the *Kerouacian* creed of *first thought, best thought*, carefully crafting and revising their texts instead (16). Much like *poor, silly Serge’s* rape, Kerouac’s revisions are not overtly framed as malicious, yet both moments depend on the assumption that the narrator’s body – either *her* body or her *body of work* – is available to be violated and made meaningful by men. The spontaneous poetics celebrated in the men’s poems were difficult to achieve for women, whose bodies were constantly being either policed or violated. *Was* their first thought their best thought? Beat women writers hardly thought so. As Audre Lorde suggests, “we [women] are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex” (Lorde 88), thus naturally, if a woman’s body and sexuality are constantly curtailed and her erotic power vilified, then her writing cannot ever be as spontaneous as that of her male peers, whose brazen and unapologetic portrayal of sex and their sexuality was legitimized and celebrated.

The orgy itself is described with flat irony: “It was warm and friendly and very unsexy,” like being in a bathtub with four other people” (di Prima, *Memoirs* 131). Menstruating, Diane’s awareness of the “the little white string of a tampax sticking out of my cunt” (*ibidem*) further reinstates di Prima’s parody of the commonly held perception of the sexually liberated move of the Beat Generation. Pressured by Kerouac and Ginsberg to join in on the orgy, Diane flung [the tampon] across the room” (*ibidem*). Critics who dismiss *Memoirs* as pornography overlook this subversion. Even the “MORE SEX” scenes mandated by Olympia Press parody male fantasy and “social expectations about over-sexed beatniks, expectations formulated by and within a masculinized model of Beat identity” (Carden, “What” 34-35), while insisting on a narrator whose body “reformulate[s] the Beat mythos and contradict male-dominant models of gendered identity” (Carden, “What” 36).

In bringing together Diane di Prima’s life writing and the critical reception of her work, this first chapter traced how her body-writing refuses the confinement of the Beat

Generation's masculinistic *ethos* while simultaneously reimagining it by bringing forth the physical realities of being a woman (menstruation, pregnancy, abortion, rape) as sources for creative power, and exposing the gendered double standards embedded in Beat sexual politics. Thus, di Prima's lie writing insists on the centrality of the body as both a site of oppression and an instrument for liberation from a patriarchal heteronormative society. Between her memoirs, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, long misread through the lens of pornography, emerges here as a destabilizing parody of the submission to the male gaze and as a text that deploys the erotic, in Audre Lorde's sense of the concept, to reclaim agency over the sexualization of one's body. In turn, *Recollections* articulates a more genuine corporeal writing, grounded in actual lived experiences, situating the female body within "a politics of location" which does not allow for abstraction.

Through her life writing, di Prima dismantles Joyce Johnson's idea of the beat woman as a "minor character", replacing it with a new model of authorship that is, as much as the men's, unapologetically embodied. In doing so, di Prima challenges the very historiography of the Beat movement, almost as if demanding a re-reading of its canon, to recognize the female Beat writers as new heroines, worthy of the same admiration, critical attention, and myth-making once reserved solely for the men.

Chapter 2

The Body Politic



Figure 2. Diane di Prima circa 1969
Photo by Peter Moore for Poetry Card Series

Women artists rise up. We are on the mound, which is our stage, our platform, a throne for the manifesting deity. It's Sappho stage. It is an image of "becoming" . . . a pattern or process which reoccurs and it is in constant motion. We no longer have to be fetched up, nor do we have to fetch for anyone else. This also serves as paradigm for performance. Literally: taking center stage.

Anne Waldman

The Poet-Activist

If in her *life writing*, Diane di Prima places the process of writing in direct connection to her individual female body, then in *Revolutionary Letters*, the poet expands her corporeal poetics outward: toward the *body politic*. Traditionally, the body politic refers to the metaphor of the state as a body, with its sovereign as the "head" and its subjects as its "members". This is an old political trope and metaphor of order, hierarchy, and centralized control, which feminist thinkers, from the 1960s onwards, reappropriated. Instead of "the old metaphor of the 'body politic', found in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Machiavelli, Hobbes and many others, feminism inverted and converted to a new metaphor: 'the politics of the body' (Bordo 188), which imagines the female body as "a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped and marked by histories and practices of containment and control – from footbinding and corseting to rape and battering, to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilisation, unwanted pregnancy . . ." (*ibidem*).

This idea of the body as a "politically inscribed entity" (Bordo 188) is, of course, reminiscent of and in line with Adrienne Rich (1984) and *her* body politics (Rich 9). Similarly, other feminist thinkers have argued for a reading of the female body as a political entity, such as Shulamith Firestone, who, in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), declared that true revolution would necessarily have to entail "the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of *reproduction*: not only the full restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies . . . as well as all the social institutions of childbearing and childrearing" (Firestone 11). Similarly, and taking Betty Friedan's idea of the *feminine mystique*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) radicalizes it as Greer

essentially argues that “[r]evolution ought to entail the correction of some of the false perspectives . . . about womanhood, sex, love and society have combined to create” (21).

For these authors, reclaiming the female body was indispensable for their wish for a social revolution – a need that deeply resonates with di Prima’s own insistence throughout *Revolutionary Letters*, that any and every revolution has at its core the power of the flesh: all bodies coming together as one. These ideas were crystallized in the now commonly used expression “the personal is political”, popularized by Carol Hanisch’s 1970 essay of the same name, in which Hanisch argues that “personal problems are political problems” (Hanisch 76).²⁹ For Hanisch, whether women lived “with or without a man, communally or in couples or alone, are married or unmarried, live with other women, go for free love, celibacy or lesbianism, or any combination” (77), their qualms were all universal, shaped by a patriarchal and heteronormative system of power. In these kinds of feminist *exposés*, feminist thinkers insisted that their bodies and corporeal experiences were inherently political. Diane di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters* places her corporeal poetics within this feminist revolutionary tradition, as the female body becomes a pillar for the revolution di Prima imagines in *Revolutionary Letters*, and the poet openly discusses questions of forcible sterilization, abortion, birth control, pregnancy, rape, and sexuality.

First published in 1971, Diane di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters* embodies what Quinn calls “the time, place, artistic production, and progressive political upheaval of a generation” (Quinn 185). The series of long, urgent poems offers practical advice on how to conduct a revolution alongside social commentary on the economic, educational and medical institutions as well as the institutions of marriage, womanhood, pregnancy, abortion and birth control, moving fluidly between individual and collective struggle, collapsing the boundaries between the private and public spheres. The poems in *Revolutionary Letters* are a part of the predominantly masculine history of the American long poem. Emerging in the nineteenth century, the long poem is usually a fragmented, open-ended, and experimental poem.³⁰ According to Kathleen Crown, although the tradition behind the American long poem is markedly male, di Prima belongs to a long-standing tradition of women writers who

²⁹ The paper “The Personal is Political” was originally published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation* in 1970, where the famous title is given to the essay by editors Shulie Firestone and Anne Koedt.

³⁰ Key examples include Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* (1915-1962), William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* (1946-1958), Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems* (1960), Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956) and *Kaddish* (1961), and H.D.’s *Trilogy* (1944).

wrote in the long poem form, which, according to critic Kathleen Crown, is one of the most “remarkable developments in the postwar literary landscape of the United States” (1). Some examples include Mina Loy’s “Love Songs to Joannes” (1915-17); Gwendolyn Brooks’ “In the Mecca” (1968); Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), and Anne Waldman’s “Fast Speaking Woman” (1974).³¹ Diane di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters* are thus part of this experimental lineage, grounding the *poem-letters* in the immediacies of the political struggle of di Prima’s contemporary society, as well as in the immediacy of the particular struggles that affected the female body then.³² As Ian Davidson (2018) argues in his essay, “Times and Spaces Never Dreamed of in Diane di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters*”, di Prima’s *letter-poems* are “constructed from the materiality of everyday life, including the temporary spaces of the body and the home (1), which resonates with her *life writing*, as the letters here illustrate how spaces associated with the private sphere, “traditionally constructed as the preserve of the biological family, become increasingly public and reconstructed as ‘revolutionary spaces’” (1).

The *Revolutionary Letters* came along in a phase of great poetic maturity, when Diane di Prima moved permanently to San Francisco in 1968. Once she realized that the poetry she was writing was far too intellectual to be read in the street, she began writing the letters as a kind of “street theater” in line with the San Francisco Diggers, an activist performance group with which di Prima got involved as soon as she got to San Francisco in the late 1960s. These *letter-poems* are a kind of blend between manifestos and speeches, and in *Revolutionary Letters*, these epistolary poems are being used to address people in order to radicalize them. In an interview, di Prima reflects on her “arts activism” as she recalled that she had been “thrown into that role willy-nilly by *The Floating Bear* bust in 1961” (Knight 101) followed by her 1963 arrest with Jonas Mekas for screening Jean Genet’s *Chant d’Amour* at the New York Poets Theatre, because of the film’s explicit depiction of homosexuality.

³¹ While not always framed as long poems, other examples could include Audre Lorde’s *Coal* (197) and *The Black Unicorn* (197); Jayne Cortez’s *Scarifications* (1973), and June Jordan *Some Changes* (1971) and *Things That I Do in the Dark* (1977).

³² The notion of “contemporary society” shifts depending on which *poem-letter* we are considering. The first edition of the collection was published by City Lights Books in 1971, with expanded editions being published in 1974, 1976, and 2007. While the bulk of *Revolutionary Letters* was composed in the 1970s and 1980s, di Prima continued to write the letters throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. A definitive expanded edition was published posthumously in 2021 by Silver Press for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the first publication.

In a way, di Prima had been raised to expect and deal with such hurdles, having grown up attending anarchist rallies with her maternal grandfather, Domenico Mallozzi, a “friend of the great anarchist dreamers of his time” (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 1); and yet, it was only in the 1960s that di Prima felt it was “actually possible ... to work for some of the ideals I’d been raised with” (Knight 101). In the Bay Area, particularly in San Francisco, poetry was already a big part of the cultural scene by the time Diane di Prima arrived, seeing as people were accustomed to thinking that skits, songs, and poems were all part of a broader social and political movement, mostly because of the precedent that the Beat Generation set in place in earlier decades. In San Francisco, the poet worked closely with the Diggers, distributing free food and performing the letters on the steps of San Francisco Hall whilst also distributing them through the Liberation News Service to more than two hundred independent radical newspapers across the country, sneaking early 20th-century anarchist thought, learned from her grandfather, into the countercultural movement of the 1970s. The *letters* were inspired by political rallies, and so, in a way, these poems were for di Prima, a part of her activist performance, which is important to consider when discussing the poems.

Thus, Diane di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters* can be read as an example of what Hélène Cixous defines as a “new *insurgent writing*” (880), which allows the woman poet “to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history” (*ibidem*) on two inseparable levels. First, at the individual level, this insurgency emerges from the act of writing *her* body “which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (*ibidem*). Secondly, this *insurgent writing* manifests as a collective and political act, as Cixous states, “to be marked by woman’s *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on *her suppression*” (*ibidem*). Di Prima’s decision to write *Revolutionary Letters* and take the poems to the streets of San Francisco to read, constitutes such an act: in her own way, di Prima enacts what Cixous asks for and forces her way into a history that had no space for her. Merging the intimate register of writing about *her* body with taking center stage in the cultural and political scene of the time, di Prima presents a new insurgent poetics that is both linked to the personal and the collective. This doubleness constitutes one of the defining characteristics of her corporeal poetics, as di Prima uses the letters as a form of embodied insurrection against the patriarchal and capitalist system that sought to erase voices like hers.

It is in this context that Diane di Prima begins to write what she called a perpetually evolving, “endless” book, which she dedicates to Bob Dylan and her grandfather, who read me Dante at the age of four and named my mother after Emma Goldman (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 1).³³ Di Prima’s dedication of *Revolutionary Letters* and its first poem, “April Fool Birthday Poem For Grandpa” (3), places the book and the anarchist impulse behind it as a kind of inheritance. Important that she would mention Emma Goldman, after whom her mother was named, since Goldman is perhaps one of the most important anarcho-feminist figures of the 19th and 20th centuries, and, evidently so, a guide for di Prima’s most political work yet. Goldman herself considered the body, particularly the female body, as a site of oppression and potential liberation, writing extensively about the same topics that di Prima still discusses decades later, including the politics of marriage, birth control, sexual autonomy, and compulsory motherhood. This anarchist-revolutionary impetus never ceased to inspire Diane di Prima’s writing. The writing of these letters is intrinsically linked to the poet’s own fellowship with a long-standing anarchist tradition, her reaction to social and political struggles of the time, and her work with anarchist groups, besides the San Francisco Diggers, such as the Black Panthers, White Panthers, and the Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, among other small social associations.³⁴

Although Diane di Prima was not an active member of any of these anarchist groups, with the expectation of the Diggers, di Prima never hesitated to commit herself to the causes they fought for. Using her poetry as a tool, Diane di Prima was one of the most outspoken of the “poet-activists” of her time, associating her writing with the anti-war movement, a strong opposition towards nuclear energy and power, combining the “resistances of second-wave feminism” with the “Beat generation’s antiestablishment

³³ In 2009, during a public event held in San Francisco to celebrate her appointment as Poet Laureate, di Prima referred to the letters as her “endless book”. See “Mayor Newsom Names Diane Di Prima as 5th Poet Laureate” *YouTube*, uploaded by Gavin Newsom, 19 Mar. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoOnnDmjPYs.

³⁴ The Black Panther was founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Emerging as a response to systemic racism and police violence against the African-American community, the Black Panther Party combined community based programs (free food and health clinics) with a militant stance on self-defense. The Black Panther Party went on to become one of the most influential anarchist organizations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The White Panther Party was founded in 1968 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, by John Sinclair, Leni Sinclair, and Pun Plamondon. Inspired by the Black Panther Party, the White Panthers advocated for racial and social justice, for the end of the Vietnam War, and freedom of speech. Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (interchangeably known as Motherfuckers or by their acronym UAWMF) were a radical anarchist collective that emerged in New York’s Lower East Side in the mid-1960s. Inspired in part by the San Francisco Diggers, they became known for urban guerrilla-style actions, street theatre, and direct confrontations with the police. The group’s name was taken from the expression shouted by American police during arrests: “Up against the wall, motherfucker.”

impulses” (Grace & Johnson 256). As critic Jonah Raskin states, in the second half of the twentieth century, both men and women Beat writers wanted to liberate society from the shackles of capitalism and overconsumption “through a combination of shock, satire, and a sense of the absurd” (47) and advocated for “the transcendent power of the human imagination” (*ibidem*). This falls in line with Ginsberg’s own words in his essay “A Definition of the Beat Generation”, in which he argues that the Beats “disseminated ecological consciousness, generated opposition to the military-industrial machine civilization . . . and sowed the seeds for causes that improved the lives of gays, African Americans and women” (qtd in Raskin 43). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s “era of protest” (48), Beat nonconformity set the precedent for the mass political rallies and protests as “the nation sent troops to fight in countries around the world and continually tried to contain and control African Americans and other minorities all through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. . . .” (*ibidem*)

Corporeal Poetics: *Revolutionary Letters*

Channeling what she learned from her grandfather, Diane di Prima becomes entrenched in this culture, whilst also, at the same time, becoming part of the Italian-anarchist tradition that her grandfather set up. In *Revolutionary Letters*, di Prima voices a critique of both American history and its present, with whom di Prima rants and talks directly. Deliberately radical, the letters force the reader to rethink their whole position in society. This demand for reflection begins at its most personal level as Diane di Prima acknowledges the sacrifices she has had to make to live and write as a fully independent woman in Revolutionary Letter #1. The poem goes as follows:

I have just realized that the stakes are myself
I have no other
ransom money, nothing to break or barter but my life
my spirit measured out, in bits, spread over
the roulette table, I recoup what I can
nothing else to shove under the nose of the *maitre de jeu*
nothing to thrust out the window, no white flag
this flesh all I have to offer, to make the play with
this immediate head, what it comes up with, my move
as we slither over this go board, stepping always
(we hope) between the lines

The poem seems to go back to Diane di Prima's teenage years when, at the age of fourteen, di Prima made what may have been the most radical and marginalizing choice of her life: to become a poet. In her memoir, *Recollections*, di Prima remembers her early commitment to poetry: "and poems I will write. But this is more than the poems, it is the shape of a Life . . . Myself as I stand here. Take up the challenge. The knowing: No matter what, I will be a poet. Be great, whatever that means. Fulfill the dream (78). Inspired and influenced by her grandfather, di Prima decided at a very young age that she was to put aside a mundane and ordinary life, which the poet called the "regular human world" (*ibidem*), marked by the "simple one-love-and-marriage, children, material pleasures, easy securities . . . [d]ishwashers. Carpets. Dull respect of dull neighbours. None of this matters really. I have already seen it all for the prison it is . . . " (*ibidem*). For a woman, in particular, all of these things were in fact a prison, meant to withhold them from having a free, autonomous life, preventing them from catering to their own desires. In the poem, di Prima declares that her body – "this flesh all I have to offer" (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 5) – is the only currency she will ever have, consistent enough for her "to make the play with" (*ibidem*). The metaphor for gambling ingeniously represents what di Prima knew would be the precariousness of a commitment to poetry and, thus, to a marginal life: for every move she makes, di Prima is aware that whatever risks she takes will cost something irretrievable to her own "flesh" (*ibidem*) which she essentially offers up as collateral, reminiscent of the previous discussion of the commodification of the body in her life writing.

Now, if in the opening letter, di Prima stakes *her* individual body as the only available collateral, Revolutionary Letter #2 shifts the emphasis from an individual body to a collective body, where the poet denounces the "you only live once" credo that, for di Prima, is meant to instill fear and docility in the minds and bodies of the collective. The poem goes as follows:

The value of an individual life a credo they taught us
to instill fear, and inaction, 'you only live once'
a fog in our eyes, we are
endless as the sea, not separate, we die
a million times a day, we are born
a million times, each breath life and death:

get up, put on your shoes, get
started, someone will finish

Tribe
an organism, one flesh, breathing joy as the stars
breathe destiny down on us, get
going, join hands, see to business, thousands of sons
will see to it when you fall, you will grow
a thousand times in the bellies of your sisters

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 6)

No longer bound to fight alone as an individual body, di Prima believes to be a part of a “Tribe/ an organism, one flesh . . . (*ibidem*). What is perhaps most striking in this poem is how Diane di Prima locates the very origin of the tribe in women’s bodies. Here, reproduction, so often a mechanism of women’s subordination, is reconfigured as a symbol for continuity and the grounds on which revolution stands. Where patriarchal narratives tend to ostracize motherhood, di Prima characterizes the womb as an inherently radical space, from which revolution grows (*ibidem*), and, in doing so, aligns with feminist theories of around reproductive rights which saw childbearing as political, as articulated by Shulamith Firestone (1970), who argued for “the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of reproduction” (Firestone 11). This necessarily included “the full restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies” (*ibidem*) and the “seizure of control of human fertility . . . as well as all the social institutions of childbearing and childrearing” (*ibidem*). The poem’s effect is thus *twofold* as it erodes the conservative, individualistic lifestyle pushed by capitalism, and reimagines the body politic as an interdependent tribe, insisting that the collective body is the ground from which revolution rises. This idea, that revolution arises simultaneously from the choices one makes through our own individual bodies and the collective body, is perhaps best encapsulated in one of the most popular letters – Revolutionary Letter #4:

Left to themselves people
grow their hair.
Left to themselves they
take off their shoes.
Left to themselves they make love
sleep easily
share blankets, dope & children
they are not lazy or afraid

they plant seeds, they smile, they
speak to one another. The word
coming into its own : touch of love
on the brain, the ear.

We return with the sea, the tides
we return as often as leaves, as numerous
as grass, gentle, insistent, we remember
the way,
our babes toddle barefoot thru the cities of the universe.

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 4)

The poem begins with the refrain – “Left to themselves” (*ibidem*) – repeating it as a kind of structural hinge against the disciplinary forces of state, capital, and patriarchy. Through this refrain, di Prima imagines what society if bodies were completely unregulated: they would “take off their shoes . . . make love/sleep easily/ share blankets, dope & children” (*ibidem*). Significantly, each one of these unregulated experiences people would allow themselves is grounded in their bodies: in the tactile and ordinary experiences of everyday life. In this sense, the poem is a clear articulation of di Prima’s corporeal poetics as the poet emphasizes ordinary embodied practices and critiques the state’s repression of the body’s capacity for pleasure and connection. This description “of a hippie communal-like lifestyle is one of the many possible outcomes of the revolution, one of the many desired results” (Encarnación-Pinedo 4): a lifestyle defined by the immediacy of the body, where a community is built through “touch of love/ on the brain, the ear” (*ibidem*).

This utopia is a direct response to Diane di Prima’s concerns about the overconsumption of the world’s natural resources, one of which she considers to be the body. In “Revolutionary Letter #16”, Diane di Prima makes clear that our bodies, as the earth is, are being consumed: “look carefully, i.e, do we really want/ need/ electricity and at what cost in natural resource/ human resource . . .” (25).³⁵ The way di Prima chooses to frame this makes it so there is no difference between natural resources like “light and air”, “clean and flowing rivers”, and “petroleum pumped from the earth” (*ibidem*) and human resources. Drilling, overconsumption, and industrialization “. . . poisons the land/ for over 100 years, pumped from the car/ poisons the hard-pressed cities . . .” (*ibidem*) and poisons people’s bodies, making them sick and weak, disabling them from inciting and participating in

³⁵ To listen to Diane di Prima read “Revolutionary Letter #16”, click [here](#). Courtesy of Penn Sound.

revolution. In fact, di Prima paid much attention to the matter of what exactly people are doing and putting *into* their bodies, questioning the kind of food that is produced and consumed, medications and vaccines, birth control and abortion, and what exactly their effects are on the body. In Revolutionary Letter #43, di Prima states that the ground for revolution must be the body itself. The “map” she sketches of revolution begins with the body’s health, emphasizing how “strong bodies make strong spirit” (53), ready to take on revolution and change. Without bodies free of addiction to “sugar habit”, “meat and heavy drugs”, “chemicals”, and “processed food” (*ibidem*), it will not be possible to sustain a revolution. Dissent must then come from the conscious decision to relinquish all of these comforts and “find out what health feels like, even feel/ tireless energy pouring steady through,” which di Prima makes most evident in “Revolutionary Letters #54” and “#55”.

In “Revolutionary Letter #54”, a short but striking poem subtitled “How To Become A Walking Alchemical Experiment” (66), Diane di Prima ironically lays bare the grotesque consequences felt by the body because of our eating habits. *If what you want is to become a “walking alchemical experiment”* (*ibidem*), then di Prima leaves us this morbid guide:

eat mercury (in wheat and fish)
breath sulphur fumes (everywhere)
take plenty of (macrobiotic) salt
& cook the mixture in the heat
of an atomic explosion

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 66)

Placed just before letter #55, this short poem operates like an ironic epigraph to it, denouncing and exposing the way our bodies have been poisoned by modern consumption habits. However, in letter #55, subtitled “It Takes Courage To Say No”, Diane di Prima offers the antidote (67). In it the poet lists of harmful food, structured around the repeated word “No” urging people to say no the industrial and chemical additives in everyday processed foods, from “canned corn & instant/ mashed potatoes” to “pasteurized milk” and “chocolate pudding/ like grandma never made” (*ibidem*). Food, once nutritional and sustaining, is now “bleached w/ nerve gas”, “red w/ sodium nitrate”, “dipped and coated w/ aureomycin”, and filled “w/ embalming fluid” as well as “hormones, penicillin & speed” (*ibidem*). Diane di Prima’s rejection of processed foods by turning them into grotesque chemical experiments

of sorts is a direct response to the state's successful attempt to control people with the food that is advertised and sold:

All I can say
is what my daughter age six once said to me:
*'If I can't pronounce it
maybe I shouldn't eat it.'*

or Dick Gregory
coming out of a 20-day fast:
*'the people of America are controlled
by the food they eat'*

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 68)

Within this context, "Revolutionary Letter #19", subtitled "For the Poor People's Campaign," fits into this rigorous and demanding poetic voice.³⁶ Guided by the confrontation between "if what you want is . . ." (28) and the consequence "you are still the enemy" (*ibidem*), di Prima confronts the reader directly on wasteful and limiting comforts that rule their lives, instigating the reader to take action and distance themselves from material goods:

If what you want is jobs
for everyone, you are still the enemy
...
if what you want is housing,
industry
...
a car for everyone, garage, refrigerator,
TV, more plumbing, scientific
freeways, you are still the enemy
...
if you still want a piece of suburbia, green lawn
laid down by the square root
color TV, whose radiant energy
kills brain cells, whose subliminal adds
brainwash your children, have taken over
dreams

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 28-29)

There is here a clear rejection of suburbia, which for di Prima, as for many women of her generation, was an inherently political act: to reject the limitative confines of the suburban

³⁶ To listen to Diane di Prima read "Revolutionary Letter #19", click [here](#). Courtesy of Penn Sound.

home, particularly the confines of the kitchen, doe-eyed, yearning for the next gadget or utensil made to keep you under a spell, imprisoned in a never-ending cycle of overconsumption. The particular focus on the TV set is particularly relevant, seeing as television's "subliminal ads" dictated everything people consumed and purchased, from food and toys to new kitchen appliances. Society, di Prima suggests, has been lulled into a kind of daze by the constant stream of images of the television screen, which, by the time di Prima writes *Revolutionary Letters*, were in most American homes. Television programs in the 1950s and 1960s often depicted heteronormative, stereotypical traditional family settings of a happy husband, wife, and children living in all-abundant suburbia. There is, however, a break in the poetic register of the enumeration, which is negative in tone, when, in the last stanza, di Prima cries out in a kind of visionary extortion:

THEN YOU ARE STILL
THE ENEMY, you are selling
yourself short, remember
you can have what you ask for, ask for
everything

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 29)

By stating "you are still the enemy" (29), di Prima accuses the reader of being complicit, but turns radically around when she writes "you can have what you ask for, ask for/ everything". This poetic register is particularly interesting because it addresses the reader directly and has us question: what does di Prima's "everything" include? The letters are written to completely break with patterns of thought, which implies, from the outset, a writing that challenges the reader, as is the case when di Prima similarly questions us directly in "Revolutionary Letter #16".

Similarly, in "Revolutionary Letters #27", di Prima questions how it is possible to live "in the straight part of town" (37), completely conformed to the social and cultural norms the poet sees as constricting:

How much
can we afford to lose, before we win, can we
cut hair, or give up drugs, take
job, join Minute Men, marry, wear their clothes
...

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 37)

Adopting the conventional suburban lifestyle is, for the poet, incompatible with the ideas that governed the countercultural movement. Although acting in accordance with societal norms and conventions may allow one a modicum of security and comfort, this disengagement with one's own desires and corporeality results in great personal loss: "It is better/ to lose & win, than win & be/ defeated' sd Gertrude Stein, which wd you/ Choose?" (*ibidem*) Quoting Gertrude Stein, di Prima urges people to "lose" and let go of the material comforts that they seem to be unable to part with, and be free from the shackles of a capitalistic and patriarchal society that has, for far too long, controlled their lives. The antidote and antithesis to this conformity is a marginal, nonconformist lifestyle – one that di Prima herself lived by and recognized as heavily ostracized and criminalized. In "Revolutionary Letter #28", di Prima turns directly to this issue, addressing the censorship of the physical body. She writes:

O my brothers
busted for pot, for looting, for loving
young beautiful brothers & sisters, for holding out hope
in both hands to the Man, enraging him
O my sisters, freaking out this moment
 this beautiful summer evening
in all the cages of America
while the sun goes down on this fabled & holy land.

know that we have this land, we are filling its crevices
its caves and forests, its coastlines and holy places
with our mating flesh, with the fierce play of our children
 our numbers increasing
we are approaching your cells, to cut you loose
to march triumphant with you, crying out
to Maitreya, across the Pacific

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 38)

Addressing her "brothers" and "sisters" (*ibidem*), this *letter-poem* is dedicated to those incarcerated for petty crimes, "busted for pot, for looting, for loving" (*ibidem*). Yet, the poem reads as almost as a threat, sticking it up to "the Man" as, despite the state's overwhelming censorship and monitoring of the body, di Prima's rebuttal to that control comes from *her*

and her sisters' "mating flesh" (*ibidem*), whose reproductive ability, similarly to the letters #2 and #4, is framed as the great force behind revolution and resistance.

Although the poems in *Revolutionary Letters* are considerably less focused on women and their bodies (say in comparison to her life writings or *Loba*), the letters also explicitly, and rather radically, address the position of women in society and the ardent desire to dismantle the patriarchal system set in place, which constantly puts women and their bodies in jeopardy. Sprinkled in most poems is always a special nod to women and their embodied experiences, whether through Di Prima's veiled criticism of unregulated birth control or her celebration of women's bodies as potent weapons in the revolution to come. In another highly irreverent poem, "Revolutionary Letter #42", amidst ecological and economic concerns, di Prima exposes the unsanctioned and unconsented mass sterilization of "non-white" and "poor" women (52) across the world. Diane di Prima, as she does throughout the letters, confronts the reader and asks:

. . . do you know
40% of the women in Puerto Rico
already sterilized, transistor radios
the sterilization bonus in India; all propaganda
aimed at the 'non-white' and 'poor white' populations

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 52)

By questioning the problem of "overpopulation", which di Prima argues would be easily solved if "we minimise/ our needs, rip off large empty ranches, make the food/ nutritious . . ." (*ibidem*), the poet denounces the widespread discriminatory practice of female sterilization, thinly veiled as a means of population control. Adrienne Rich corroborates this in her book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), dedicated to all the activists "working to free women's bodies from archaic and unnecessary bonds" (Rich, *Of Woman Born*). On this question of mass sterilizations, Rich writes:

A thirty-year policy under the U.S. Agency for International Development resulted in the sterilization of 35 percent of Puerto Rican women of childbearing age. Between 1973 and 1976, 3,406 American Indian women were sterilized; at one Indian Health Services hospital in Oklahoma, one out of every four women admitted was sterilized in a single year. (In 1981,

53.6 percent of teaching hospitals in North America still made sterilization a requirement for abortion.) (10)

This critique of the state's oppressive and racialized control of women's bodies and their reproductive ability resonates with "Revolutionary Letter #6" in which di Prima warns against the prescription of birth control: "they love us and want us to practice birth control" (12). As discussed previously in terms of her *life writing*, Diane di Prima's contentious relationship with birth control stems from the unmitigated side effects these methods had on women's bodies. When oral contraceptives first became available in the 1960s, women were not properly informed about the potential side effects. Early versions of the pill contained very high doses of estrogen and progestin, which were later linked to blood clots, strokes, heart attacks, breast and cervical cancer, as well as depression. By the mid-1960s, women began reporting a multitude of alarming symptoms, but doctors frequently dismissed these concerns. Finally, the side effects and dangers were exposed in Barbara Seaman's landmark book *The Doctors' Case Against the Pill* (1969), which documented the pharmaceutical industry's suppression of evidence about the risks and, consequently, sparked the 1970 Senate hearings where feminist activists, including members of the Boston Women's Health Collective, disrupted proceedings to demand informed consent about medication that targets women specifically.

In "Revolutionary Letter #66", dedicated to Inez Garcia, subtitled "To The Patriarchs for Inez Garcia" (80), Diane di Prima presents the female body as a weapon and a means of resistance and great violence.³⁷ At the time of Garcia's trial, rape was still largely treated as an "apolitical" crime, instead seen as a crime of passion, divorced from questions which feminist activists of the 1970s forcefully brought to the surface: that sexual violence was a structural and fundamental mechanism of patriarchy and a means of exerting power, dominion, and control over women's bodies. The poem goes as follows:

*'That a man's body is
in itself a weapon in a*

³⁷ To listen to Diane di Prima read "Revolutionary Letter #66", click [here](#). Courtesy of Penn Sound. Inez Garcia (1941-2003) was an American woman who gained notoriety after being accused of the murder of her rapist in 1974. Garcia was convicted of second-degree murder and was sentenced to two years of a five year-to-life sentence at the California Institution for Women. Garcia's rapist was never charged with any crime.

*way that a woman's body
is not. ' – Free Inez Garcia Committee*

My body a weapon as yours is
MY CHILDREN WEAPONS ETERNALLY
My tits weapons against the immaterial

My strong thighs
choking the black lie

My hips
haven & fort
place where I stand
& from which I fight

My war is concentrated in the noise
of my hair

My hands
lethal to imprecision

My cunt a bomb exploding
yr Christian conscience

My teeth tear out the throat of yr despair
My jaws annihilate computer centuries
My arms/my knees embrace yr serpent
yr sin becomes my song

...

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 80)

Inez Garcia's story galvanized the anti-rape movement of the 1970s and inspired multiple women writers, like Diane di Prima, to write about this issue.³⁸ Ironically dedicated to the patriarchs, di Prima appropriates the quote from the Free Inez Garcia Committee: "That a man's body is in itself a weapon in a way that a woman's body is not" (80). Not only does di Prima immediately refute it, she turns it around, reimagining her body as a weapon, affirming the power one gains through a female body.

By claiming that the female body is just as powerful and potentially more dangerous than a man's, di Prima refuses the idea of the defenseless female body: the female body is

³⁸ Other works include Beverley Grant's song "Inez – The Human Condition" (1975), Marge Piercy's poem "For Inez Garcia" included in her poetry collection *Live in the Open* (1976) and Jayne Cortez's poem "Rape" dedicated to two different rape crimes in the 1970s: Inez Garcia's and Joan Little's, an African-American woman who was charged with the murder of Clarence Alligood, a white prison guard who attempted to rape her at beaufort County Jail in Washington, North Carolina in 1974. Joan Little herself wrote a poem entitled "I am somebody" (1975), published by the Women's Press Collective during her trial.

no longer a combat zone, but instead, a weapon. Unlike women's bodies, men's bodies – particularly the *phallus*, imagined as a “penis-weapon” (Kirby 9) – have traditionally been seen as a kind of superior force with which women cannot contend.³⁹ However, di Prima inscribes in *her* body a type of power unique to a female body: a power that emanates from her own sexed corporeality, reiterating what Adrienne Rich insists on in *Notes Toward a Politics of Location*. Listing different body parts and their effect: her “tits,” strong thighs”, “hips”, “hair”, hands”, “cunt”, “teeth”, “jaws”, and her “arms” and “knees” (di Prima *Revolutionary Letters* 80), di Prima locates her body as an inherently powerful weapon, and the poem's last three lines make the intent of the poem in reclaiming female agency through a sexed corporality clear. Seemingly, the last three lines of the poem describe an orgasm:

...
 The shock waves of my pleasure
 annihilate
 all future shock
 all future shock forever

(*ibidem*)

The orgasm, the culminating point of a sexual encounter, becomes the culminating point of the poem, turning the speaker's climax into a kind of cosmic power, which, because it is the climax from within a female body, “annihilates” and disrupts everything and everyone around it. Motherhood is also weaponized, as di Prima's children are seen as extensions of her herself and her body, becoming “WEAPONS ETERNALLY” (80). This idea of children and their bodies acting as weapons is taken up again in “Revolutionary Letter #69”: “. . . eyes and hands/ Knives & guns/ of the children” (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 89). For Diane di Prima, children embody the future of any kind of revolution and hope for any social change in the world. Far from reducing women to their reproductive abilities, di Prima reclaims motherhood as a facet of her corporeal poetics, insisting that the female body is capable of generating life but also serves as the origin and first premise of revolution itself. Diane di Prima further pays homage to motherhood and the politics of pregnability in “Revolutionary

³⁹ The cultural tendency to view the male body, especially the penis, as a weapon has been widely discussed. Susan Brownmiller (1975) famously described rape as “man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear. His forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood” (Brownmiller 14).

Letter #44", explicitly addressed to women, centering, once again, the strength of women's bodies. The poem goes as follows:

for my sisters

As we know that blood
is birth, agony
breaks open doors, as we
can bend, graciously, beneath burdens, undermine
like rain, or earthworms, as our cries
yield to the cries of the newborn, as we hear
the plea in the voices around us, not words
of passion or cunning, discount
anger or pride, grow strong
in our own strength, women's alchemy, quick arms
to pull down walls, we liberate
out of the knowledge, labor, suckling babes, we
liberate, and nourish, as the earth

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 54)

One of the most famous slogans of second-wave feminism was "Sisterhood is Powerful", coined by Kathie Sarachild in 1968. The slogan quickly became a rallying cry, much like "the personal is political" had become.⁴⁰ This feminist understanding of sisterhood as a powerful form of collective strength resonates with di Prima's corporeal poetics. Throughout the letters, di Prima constantly nods to her "sisters" – a collective bound by their shared oppression and desire for liberation. By explicitly dedicating her work to "my sisters", di Prima insists on the idea of sorority as a powerful social and political organization. "Revolutionary Letter #44" opens with acknowledgement that all women know that "... blood/ is birth, agony/ breaks open doors . . ." (54). By doing so, Diane di Prima reworks the cultural stigmas attached to menstrual blood, resignifying it as a source of generative force and shared bonding between women. As Elizabeth Grosz argues in her book *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), bodily fluids trace "the paths of entry or exit, the routes of interchange or traffic with the world" (195), and it is precisely this disruptive crossing of thresholds that di Prima seizes on. Here, blood becomes a material sign of continuity that "breaks open doors" (di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 54), ushering life in. Di

⁴⁰ The slogan gave its name to *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (1970), edited by Robin Morgan, which collected pamphlets, manifestos and flyers produced by feminist activists throughout the 1960s.

Prima resignifies stereotypical feminine qualities, satirizing women's ability and tendency to "bend" (*ibidem*) for others ever so "graciously". If we take the poem to be describing childbirth and a woman in childbirth, this "bending" acquires a performative edge: even though the woman's body is bent in pain, she has internalized the need to look desirable and enact grace, a performance of femininity dictated by the male gaze. Margaret Atwood explores this paradox in *The Robber Bride* (1993), where she describes how women, their bodies, and experiences are "run by male fantasies" (Atwood 471).⁴¹ As Atwood puts it:

Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur." (Atwood 471)

Thus, Diane di Prima exposes this contradiction, resignifying stereotypical feminine qualities and satirizing women's ability to "bend" as well as their ability to "undermine/ like rain, or earthworms" (54) the patriarchal structures that restrict them, quietly and subtly. This depiction of women's labor (both figuratively and literary) speaks to what di Prima calls a "woman's alchemy" (*ibidem*): that the alchemy of the female body allows her to turn her pain into a special kind of strength. Insisting that women liberate "out of our knowledge, labor, suckling babes" (*ibidem*), di Prima ranks motherhood high in all liberation movements and at the center of a revolutionary praxis.⁴² In contrast to a patriarchal outlook, which reduces women's reproductive abilities to nuisances and instruments of control, di Prima insists that women's corporeality – in this case, their ability to birth a child and sustain that

⁴¹ Atwood's statement is reminiscent of not only Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, but also John Berger's perspective in *Ways of Seeing* (1972). In his book, Berger argues that "[a] woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually . . . She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to men. . . The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47).

⁴² "Revolutionary Letters #66" and "#44" are of a similar nature to manifestos written by Italian feminists, the central premise of which is that resistance, for women, comes through and from their bodies (Quinn 183). The famous group UDI, *Unione Donne Italiane* wrote protest pieces for their demonstrations, in verse too: "We have cleaned bodies and houses/ from dawn to dusk/ You have reduced the world/ To a pile of trash/ Women will change the course of history because of the body, too they hold a memory" (qtd. in Quinn 184).

pain – grants them a particular kind of knowledge, rooted in *their* body: a knowledge which is indispensable for true liberation.

This insistence that women's embodied experiences are the grounds on which revolution and liberation stand extends beyond childbirth into other direct political actions taken up by women. In only four short lines, Revolutionary Letter #90, subtitled "Ancient History" (136), distills di Prima's corporeal poetics into a single, striking image:

The women are lying down
in front of the bulldozers
sent to destroy
the last of the olive groves.

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 136)

The tradition, set in the 1960s, of women protesting over ecological concerns is here revisited as di Prima places the female body as the last line of resistance against Western militarized industrial power. By the late 1960s, the second wave of the feminist movement had women rethinking their prescribed roles as housewives and mothers as well as their roles as human beings and the relationship they nurtured with the world, particularly nature and ecology, realizing that the same patriarchal system that repressed them and their bodies, was also part of the charge that had been abusing every one of earth's natural resources. In "Revolutionary Letter #90", di Prima uses the image of women lying down, a position which is conventionally passive, in protection of nature, making the destruction of the latter indissociable from the destruction of their bodies.

This connection between women and "Mother Earth" is taken up again, at length, in "Revolutionary Letter #68", subtitled "Life Chant" (84), where di Prima situates women's bodies and sexual experiences within a vast litany of natural occurrences and scenarios:

cacophony of small birds at dawn
may it continue
...
triumphal shout of newborn
may it continue
deep silence of great rainforests
may it continue
...
rite of birth & of naming
may it continue

. . .
 love in the morning, love in the noon sun
 love in the evening among crickets
 may it continue

 . . .
 grunt of mating hippo, giraffe, foreplay of snow leopard
 . . .
 without madhouses, marriage, highschoools that are prisons
 may it continue

 . . .
 in sisterhood
 may it continue

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 84-85)

The poem's repeated refrain – "may it continue" – affirms the poet's wish for the continuation of what she believed to be the natural order of things. When she writes of the "triumphal shout of the newborn may it continue" and "rite of birth & of naming / may it continue" (84), Diane di Prima places, yet again, reproduction and motherhood at the center of a revolutionary praxis in that this is one of the most natural things in the world and it should not be restricted nor ostracized. Similarly, di Prima's portrayal of a liberated, unrestricted sexuality, naturally and fundamentally related to reproduction, clashes with a conservative society's repression of pleasure and free love: "love in the morning, love in the noon sun . . . fierce joy of old ones loving / may it continue. . ." (85). This vision of sexuality is also strikingly utopian, of course: Diane di Prima's vision of a liberated sex life is unencumbered by notions of repression or shame, and unburdened completely by a world in which one must work and follow a schedule, rather than just following the natural rhythms and whims of the body. This poem portrays a world where bodies are, ideally, not exhausted by tireless work and, instead, are sustained and fueled by pleasure, and our bodies will.

By setting these embodied experiences alongside nature's cycles – "cacophony of small birds at dawn. . . deep silence of great rainforests . . . grunt of mating hippo, giraffe, foreplay of snow leopard" (84-85) – di Prima continues to reiterate how human beings are too part of this natural world and should be left completely unrestricted, as wild animals are, by "hospitals, death medicine: flu & flu vaccine" (85) and be able to live without the looming threat of "madhouses, marriage, highschoools that are prisons" (85). Towards the close of the poem, women's bodies reappear as a central presence in this revolutionary vision, anchoring

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...
    may it continue
as woman continue
    may it continue
as breath continues
...
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By closing *Life Chant* (84) with the image of women's bodies as the measure of continuity and true freedom, di Prima makes clear that liberation depends on the refusal of unnatural restriction and the affirmation of one's embodied experience. This emphasis on rejecting structures, characterized by di Prima as prisons, that confine one's body to an impossibly regimented life, leads me directly into the final poem I will consider in this chapter, "Revolutionary Letter #49", which, much like *Life Chant* denounces how everyone and everything are subjugated to the same kind of oppression in modern society and begins with a roll call of some contemporary figures, including Julian Beck, Timothy Leary, Angela Davis, and the Soledad Brothers, revolutionary icons, including Joan of Arc, Galileo, and Jesus Christ, as Diane di Prima situates her politics within a broad genealogy of dissent and martyrdom. The refrain – "Free all political prisoners" (59) – is repeated as a kind of mantra, making activists, revolutionaries, and anarchists of the 20th century stand in continuity with the rebels of centuries past. But what makes a political prisoner? There are, of course, several ways in which the term political prisoner could be interpreted, and Diane di Prima deliberately opens it up for a reinterpretation. However, the poem seems to be, first and foremost, a response to the fact that the United States does not recognize the existence of political prisoners altogether.

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this conventional definition of what a political prisoner is by paying homage to revolutionary leaders and anarchists, wrongly arrested solely for their convictions, di Prima also makes sure to expand this definition to include others: the marginal and criminalized, not arrested for their grandiose revolutionary action, but for petty crimes and social and cultural transgression: “Every pot smoker a political prisoner/ Every holdup man a political prisoner/ Every forger a political prisoner/ Every angry kid who smashed a window a political prisoner. . .” (59).⁴³ Diane di Prima goes even further as to recognize wild animals in a zoo, out of their natural habitats in the wild, as political prisoners: “Polar Bear at San Francisco Zoo a political prisoner/ Flamingos dying in Phoenix tourist park, political prisoners/ Otters in Tucson Desert Museum, political prisoners/ Elk in Wyoming grazing behind barbed wire, political prisoners. . .” (59).

The scope of the poem widens even further as di Prima names criminals as political prisoners: “Every whore, pimp, murderer, a political prisoner/ Every pederast, dealer, drunk driver, burglar,/ Poacher, striker, strike breaker, rapist. . .” (59). At first, this sweeping inclusivity is rather jarring. Her defense of sex workers is readily understood, as it is understood that women in such circumstances are victims of a system that makes it so people would have to resort to selling their own bodies to survive. More unexpected, however, is her extension of the same recognition and grace to pimps and rapists. Yet, this is the quintessential Beat ethos of anything and everything *underground*, giving a voice to the *beaten down* and the marginal. Di Prima’s point in including them is not to absolve these individuals of their actions, but rather to expose how even the darker, malign aspects of society are reflections and the byproducts of that same society.

Most radically, the poem insists that “[e]very woman [is] a political prisoner” (60), a claim that Diane di Prima repeats *twice*, emphasizing the overbearing control over women and their bodies in society, as well as that “[e]very housewife [is] a political prisoner” (*ibidem*). If women are already political prisoners by virtue of their gender and sex alone, the

⁴³ Throughout the 1960s, poets, filmmakers, and performers were routinely targeted, their bodies policed and censored when their work transgressed sexual, moral, or political norms. Di Prima herself was arrested twice in the early 1960s. In 1961, issue #9 of *The Floating Bear* was intercepted by prison authorities at Rahway State Prison in New Jersey when sent to one of its regulars, the African American writer Harold Carrington. The issue included William Burroughs’s poem “Roosevelt After the Inauguration” and a homoerotic prose piece by LeRoi Jones from *The System of Dante’s Hell*. The material was turned over to federal authorities, and in 1962 Jones was indicted on obscenity charges. Although *The Floating Bear* was a free mimeographed newsletter and not sold commercially, it was nonetheless targeted in a case reminiscent of the obscenity trial surrounding Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*. Jones was eventually acquitted – a victory celebrated in *The Floating Bear* #20 (May 1962) with the headline “Bear wins obscenity case by knockout” (Floating Bear Archive).

housewife – “twice torn” – is imprisoned further by not only being caught in the wider structure of patriarchy but also because of her entrapment to the domestic sphere, which Emma Goldman called, already in the early 20th century, the “terrible fetish” of the home, a “modern prison with golden bars” (Goldman 84). However, towards the end of the poem, the refrain changes and turns both towards the reader and di Prima herself:

...
You are political prisoner locked in tense body
You are political prisoner locked in stiff mind
...
I am political prisoner locked in dull senses
I am political prisoner locked in numb flesh

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 60)

By implicating the reader and herself, di Prima breaks a kind of literary fourth wall to break the reader out of the constraints that bind them to conventional and conformist norms, as well as to recognize that she too is a prisoner of the same kind of constraints, despite her recognition of it all. By declaring that everybody (and every body) is a political prisoner, Diane di Prima exposes a society “locked in tense body” and “stiff mind” (60) and crystallizes her anarcho-feminist vision of liberation as a fundamentally corporeal, grounded on our bodies and embodied experience. To free others, we must also liberate our own bodies and minds by unlearning the conformist, rigid constraints imposed upon them and reclaiming the body as the ground for resistance:

...
Free yourself
Free them
Free yourself
Free yourself
Free them
Free yourself
Help to free me
Free us
DANCE

(di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters* 61)

Having a female body is, in itself, a political act. Diane di Prima’s *Revolutionary Letters* make this clear: the body is the first site of oppression, but also the first premise of

liberation and resistance. The poem's closing exhortation to dance is reminiscent of Emma Goldman's misquoted slogan: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution", a reminder that liberation must be lived in the body, and not deferred to some abstract cause. In this sense, di Prima's corporeal poetics insist that revolution is not compatible with austerity, repression, or control, but, instead, with pleasure, touch, and love.⁴⁴ Adrienne Rich captured the politics of this kind of poetics perfectly when she wrote that "[t]here is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men. The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 55). To control women's bodies is the revolution's end – to free them is only the start.

⁴⁴ The phrase "If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution" is most likely inspired by the sentiment Goldman expresses in her memoir, *Living My Life* (1931), where Goldman rejects the idea that "the Cause" (read Revolution) should demand a need for austerity and a denial of pleasure. She writes: "At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha, a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. . . My frivolity would only hurt the Cause. I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy . . . If it meant that, I did not want it" (Goldman 56).

Chapter 3

The Loba Body



Figure 3. Diane di Prima circa 1981

Photo by Sheppard Powell

*I have suckled the wolf's lip of anger, and I have used it for
illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where
there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter.*

Audre Lorde

The Loba-Poet⁴⁵

Published in 1978, *Loba* is Diane di Prima's *magnum opus*. For the poet, this quasi-epic long poem was, for a long time, much like *Revolutionary Letters*, a "work-in-progress". In fact, in the author note at the beginning of Book I of *Loba*, it reads: "*The Work is, like they say, in 'progress'. The author reserves the right to juggle, re-arrange, cut, organize, and recycle parts of the poem in future editions. As the Loba wishes, as the Goddess dictates*" (xiii). In the blurb of the 1998 Penguin edition, Adrienne Rich described *Loba* as "an epic act of language, a great geography of the female imagination", pointing to how in this book, di Prima portrays women and their bodies, as she did in her life writing and *letter-poems*, as a kind of "boundless terrain" (Covil-Manset 26) for creativity, transgressing the boundaries womanhood is usually contained and restricted by (26). The embodiment of the feminine as a beast-like presence, the loba embodies Diane di Prima's feminist corporeal poetics as it "incorporates", according to Marge Piercy, "ecstasy and rot, all the forms of female experience from birth through death, transmuting them into poetry that seizes the imagination" (*Loba*, blurb).

Writers of the Beat Generation often viewed the poet as someone who was able to tap into a kind of superior knowledge and truth through their dreams and drug-infused visions. As suggested by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "The Poet" (1844), the poet is the sayer, the translator, the namer, obliged to transfer their prophetic knowledge onto the page (Emerson 234-6). Transcendent states and dreams were for the Beats sources of inspiration and a "refuge of authentic and spontaneous thought" (Mortenson 81), and Diane di Prima's "visionary exploration of woman as wolf goddess, best expresses these interests" (Grace & Johnson 85). According to Nancy Grace, this fascination with "prophetic and transcendental artistic individualism" (60), a "hallmark of Beat literary production" (*ibidem*), was precisely

⁴⁵ A shorter version of this chapter was previously published as "The Loba's Howl: A Comparative Reading of Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' and Diane di Prima's 'The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare'". *VIA PANORÂMICA: Revista De Estudos Anglo-Americanos / A Journal of Anglo-American Studies*, 12(2). 2023, pp.83-96.

what “guided Diane di Prima to recreate herself in the mythic Loba” (*ibidem*), the same way it “propelled Allen Ginsberg to imagine his rebirth from out of the sea in the conclusion of Howl . . . and that Jack Kerouac sought as he sang about art, jazz, and the Buddha in Mexico City Blues . . .” (*ibidem*).

The creative process behind the book was dictated by di Prima’s dreams and visions of the loba, who appeared to her and told her exactly what to write. In her own words, Diane di Prima explains how, unlike most of her work, *Loba* was “received” (Grace & Johnson 103). In her own words: “And the ‘received’ poems can come as images or heard words or a rhythm in my head or in the pulse/body. Or sometimes suggested by music. So poetry becomes a vast field in which I play, or pray, or make edifices for various motives or for the joy of it (104). Even the thematic division of the book was deferred to the she-wolf. Di Prima writes: “All I know is what I was ‘told’ – that Book I dealt with the physical/ sexual reality of woman; and Book II dealt with the soul; and that Book III, if I lived to write it, would trace the journey of the Spirit. I’m not at all sure what that means” (Grace & Johnson 102). In *Breaking the Rule of Cool*, di Prima recalls how she came to write the first poem of Book I:

And all of a sudden, I started to hear these lines. I mean that's not so unusual for me to hear a few lines, and if I write them down they'll lead into a whole poem, but it's usually a one page poem or something like that . . . and I just wrote down what I got, which is that first little section: “If he did not come apart in her hands . . .” And the first few sections, two or three, came in like that. And then I realized that I was onto something that wanted to be written, so I started. (Johnson & Grace 94)

This notion of poetry as “received” positions Diane di Prima’s poetics not only in line with Beat aesthetics of spontaneity and visionary truth, but also with Hélène Cixous’s conception of *écriture féminine*. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous describes women’s writing as a “self-seeking text [that] will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself” (889). In this sense, *Loba* resonates with this vision. As Cixous writes, “we [women] are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves . . . More or less wavy sea, earth, sky – what matter would rebuff us? We know how to speak them all” (*ibidem*). The poetic voice of the she-wolf that speaks through di Prima’s body is never singular. Rather, the loba disperses herself into a multiplicity of different

iterations across time and space, forming a kind of *choral* text. Di Prima's *mediumship* is inseparable from her gendered body. Thus, the loba operates almost as a kind of poetic strategy, allowing di Prima to claim authority over her spontaneous, unedited work by displacing the authority onto the she-wolf – who is “dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be, of the other woman she isn't, of him, of you”, as Cixous would say (890) – and stages a kind of mythopoetic multiplication of selves, where the one voice of the loba becomes many and the many return to the loba body, through which their histories are spoken.

Hailed by many as a kind of feminist counterpart to Allen Ginsberg's quintessential long poem “Howl”, Diane di Prima's *Loba* is a “radical classic . . . imbibed with the raw, the wild . . . the feminine” (Halifax, *Loba*, back cover). In this book, the figure of the she-wolf, “a being who contains the soul and consciousness of all women” (Mackay 81), speaks through the poet and digs up women's histories and myths in many classic discourses (*ibidem*). But why choose the figure of the she-wolf? In many literary traditions, the image of the woman as an animal – particularly as a wolf – has functioned as a powerful metaphor for the transgressive female body. In North-America, especially within Native American folklore, there are countless variations of stories about women who marry wolves, transform into she-wolves, or join wolf packs. Teresa Pijoan's *White Wolf Woman: Native American Transformation Myths* (1992), a collection of transformation myths collected from the oral traditions of Native American tribes, presents the wolf – particularly the she-wolf as an important presence. As Pijoan states, “[t]he wolf holds great magic and more often than not is represented as a female. Wolf possesses the power of the night, the healing power of the spirits, and wisdom to instill courage” (52). One such tale, *Wolf Woman Running*, recounts the story of a Sioux woman who escapes her abusive husband only to find refuge with a pack of wolves: “She lived with them through eight winters . . . [s]he grew strong. She learned wolf ways. She felt the power of the wolf within her. She decided that soon she would hunt with the wolves . . . [s]he outran them. She became Wolf Woman Running” (68-69).⁴⁶ This oral tradition intersects with another strong cultural inheritance in the United States: the Hispanic tradition brought by colonizers, constantly reshaped by the encounters

⁴⁶ For more on Native American transformation myths, see Teresa Pijoan, *White Wolf Woman: Native American Transformation Myths* (1992).

and intermixing of peoples. It is therefore not surprising that a Hispanic version of the she-wolf also emerges in contemporary literature.

An illustrative example is Xesús Rodríguez Fer's tale "Muller Loba" (1993). The tale tells the story of a woman cursed with lycanthropy, set in the urban geography of New York City, through which the author reimagines the myth of the werewolf and subverts the submissive role women usually take up in literature.⁴⁷ Curiously, the tale starts just like this:

todos sabemos que en Galicia houbo sempre lendas sobre lobos, lobishomes e alobados, pero tamén as houbo sobre mulleres lobas. A mim mesmo, por exemplo, contáronme a historia dunha da que, maldicida no momento de nacer por motivos de envexa, se dicía que andara de moza libre cunha grea de lobos polo monte e que, nas noites de lúa chea, se volvía loba e se apareaba con aqueles. Chegou a ter sete fillos, dos que só a sobreviviron dous, pero nunca casou nin viviu con ningún home. (Fer qtd. in Miranda-Barreiro 44)

This she-wolf that Fer describes in his tale is uncannily reminiscent of Diane di Prima herself – a marginal she-wolf who walked around New York City with her children in tow, and refused to marry and live with men. Much like the Galician loba, Diane di Prima's she-wolf transgresses the limits of their female body through constant metamorphosis, breaking with the patriarchal expectations of what a woman ought to look like or not, domestication and traditional roles, and, instead, putting forward a body that is mutable and malleable, and for that reason, essentially resistant to any kind of control. It is thus fitting that *Loba* draws on both Native American and Hispanic literary traditions, to imagine the she-wolf as a figure of insurrection, multiplicity, and female power.

Whereas folklore usually frames lycanthropy as a curse, Diane di Prima reimagines this metamorphosis as a sacred source of power that is unique to a female body. This power has been appropriated through the trope of the "wild woman", problematized by Clarissa Pinkola in her book *Women Who Ran With Wolves* (1992), in which the author addresses the embodiment of women's most primal urges, through old myths and folk stories, suggesting that "wolves and women are relational by nature" (Pinkola 1). However, this also seems to

⁴⁷ While there is no indication that Diane di Prima ever read "Muller Loba", the tale is an example of how the she-wolf figure is present across different culture's imaginariums. For a better understanding of the prominent presence of the werewolf in Galician Literature, see "A Galician Werewolf in New York: Migration and Transgressive Femininity in Claudio Rodríguez Fer's 'A muller loba'" (Miranda-Barreiro 2017)

make the suggestion that women are somehow more closely tied to nature than men. In her essay, "What Women Know", Ursula K. Le Guin rejects this premise altogether:

But I didn't and still don't like making a cult of women's knowledge, preening ourselves on knowing things men don't know, women's deep irrational wisdom, women's instinctive knowledge of Nature, and so on. All that all too often merely reinforces the masculinist idea of women as primitive and inferior – women's knowledge as elementary, primitive, always down below at the dark roots, while men get to cultivate and own the flowers and crops that come up into the light. (Le Guin 85)

And while Le Guin is not wrong in saying that this gender essentialist view of women as more connected to nature than men enables and reinforces "the masculinist idea of women as primitive and inferior" (*ibidem*), Diane di Prima's *loba* reinforces the poet's corporeal poetics in that di Prima uses this essentialist argument to her advantage, claiming that there is a kind of advantage and power one can only gain and have access to, through a female body: a power which is used against patriarchal systems of power. In the first chapter of Pinkola's book, entitled "The Howl: The Resurrection of the Wild Woman, La Loba, The Wolf Woman", the author describes the loba, this goddess like entity, as a bone gatherer, whose sole purpose is to collect and preserve "that which is in danger of being lost to the world" (Pinkola 11) which is precisely what Di Prima is trying to emulate when gathering and recreating women's experiences and voices: "By whatever name, the force personified by La Loba records the personal past and the ancient past for she has survived generation after generation, and is old beyond time. She is an archivist of feminine intention. She preserves female tradition" (Pinkola 12).

Hanna Priest's *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* (2015) approaches how the female werewolf can be seen as representative of women's concerns. Although her study focuses on the history of the female werewolf as a literary character (reaching as far back as the 12th century with *Topographia Hiberniae* by Gerald of Wales), Priest states that most presentations of the lycanthropy myth are male. However, the she-wolf has been part of plenty of cultural and literary myths too (Priest 3). The bestial figure of the werewolf, and its usually assigned savagery and role of the hunter, is most often associated with the masculine (Priest 4), a view furthered, no doubt, by the stereotypical view of prehistoric

men as hunters and women as gatherers.⁴⁸ In the same book, Barbara Creed's essay "Ginger Snaps: the monstrous feminine as *femme animale*" (180) reimagines the she-wolf as a *femme animale*, a spin on the trope of the *femme fatale* of film noir (*ibidem*). For Creed, the she-wolf signifies "an exploration of natural – as opposed to civilized-femininity, femaleness, and sexuality" (Thurston 84), placing the she-wolf in a long-held tradition of female-bodied mythical beings, whose stories have been appropriated by feminist thinkers to be used against patriarchal and phalocentric structures.⁴⁹ Curiously enough, subversive women have been labeled as she-wolves as long as the medieval times, where queens in particular were often associated with this term.⁵⁰ A pejorative term, referring to a woman as a she-wolf, could suggest one of two things: either she was ill-tempered, malicious, and aggressive in nature, or a prostitute.

Corporeal Poetics: *Loba*

According to renowned historian Mary Beard in her book *A History of Ancient Rome* (2015), "[t]he Latin word for 'wolf' (*lupa*) was also used as a colloquial term for 'prostitute' (*lupanare* was one standard term for 'brothel')" (Beard 35). This is particularly interesting given that the whole foundational myth of Rome lies on the figure of the *Lupa Capitolina* [Capitoline Wolf], the she-wolf who suckled the twin founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. This double meaning casts a rather provocative shadow over the myth, "[c]ould it be that a local whore rather than a local wild beast had found and tended the twins?" (Beard 35). Curiously, there is also a great level of ambiguity over the actual physical appearance of the *loba* throughout the text. In fact, the protagonist is mistaken for a woman several times throughout the text:

were it not for the ring of fur
around her ankles
just over her bobby socks
there's no one
wd

⁴⁸ Feminist archaeology has demonstrated that this is inaccurate. These assumptions largely contributed, for a long time, to the restriction of women's roles to the private, domestic sphere – a space that in prehistoric times was far more communal and shared among women and men than we imagine.

⁴⁹ See Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975)

⁵⁰ For example, the term she-wolf in reference to a Queen was first used by William Shakespeare in his play *Henry VI*. Richard, the Duke of York, refers to Margaret of Anjou as the "she-wolf of France". See Sharon Bennett Connolly's "Medieval She-Wolves: Part One."

ever guess her name. . .

(di Prima, *Loba* 28)

However subtle, “the ring of fur” (28) around loba's ankles does not allow her to pass as a woman. Taking on Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject (that which does not respect boundaries and that which disturbs one's identity or the system around), Barbara Creed argues that the “female werewolf is particularly abject because her body is more unstable than that of the male”; as she further explains, “the werewolf . . . is able to turn its skin inside out as it metamorphoses from human to animal and back again. The classic cinematic sign of this transformation is hair – the short hairs that sprout and burst through the inside of the skin to the outside” (188). Much like the mythic she-wolf of Rome, di Prima's loba functions in a similar way: a stand-in for women, the loba transforms over and over again, *tearing* her body to accommodate *all* women's experiences.

Loba's opening poem, “Ave” (as in Ave Maria), is, according to Diane di Prima, a poem for all “the street women of the world” – a “sense of myself as stray woman wandering with baby around globe” kind of poem (di Prima, “Ave” *Biting Off the Tongue of a Corpse*).⁵¹ Acting as both invocation and introduction, “Ave” (di Prima, *Loba* 3-6) sets the tone for the rest of the book, where Diane di Prima addresses her “lost moon sisters” (3) in a poem that echoes Walt Whitman's expansive poetry in its address of the struggles of women everywhere.

O lost moon sisters
crescent in hair, sea underfoot do you wander
in blue veil, in green leaf, in tattered shawl do you wander
with goldleaf skin, with flaming hair do you wander
on Avenue A, on Bleecker Street do you wander
on Rampart Street, on Fillmore Street do you wander
with flower wreath, with jeweled breath do you wander
. . .

(di Prima, *Loba* 3)

The poem's dedication to “street women” is particularly significant given loba's double meaning: she-wolf and prostitute. This etymological doubleness threads through *Loba*, as

⁵¹ To listen to Diane di Prima read “Ave” click [here](#). Courtesy of PennSound.

Diane di Prima repeatedly returns to the figure of the prostitute, either through the *loba* or one of her many different incarnations that she takes up in the poems. The women to whom di Prima dedicates this poem are her fellow *flâneuses*, who wander the streets of America. The repetitive chant-like quality of the poem mimics the rhythms of ritualistic speech, reminiscent of Anne Waldman's "Fast Speaking Woman", in which Waldman "explores female identity from the perspective of a woman who has decided to take action that would come to shape her authorial agency, which is to speak . . . which is principally expressed in the Beat-style incantations" (Mackay 127). Far from stigmatizing these women, di Prima incorporates their lives in her counter-feminist rhetoric and mythic vision, insisting on the dignity of their lives as they wander:

...
 jaywalking do you wander
 spitting do you wander
 mumbling and crying do you wander
 aged and talking to yourselves
 with roving eyes do you wander
 hot for quick love do you wander
 ...
 pregnant you wonder
 barefoot you wonder
 battered by drunk men you wonder
 ...
 digging for yams you wander
 looking for dope you wander
 ...

(di Prima, *Loba* 3-5)

The *wandering* women Diane di Prima addresses, whose bodies are marked by violence, poverty, drugs, and pregnancy, emulate the figure of the she-wolf as they, "with gloves, with hat, in rags, in fur, in beads/ under the waning moon" (3), are seen "wailing with stray dogs" and "hissing in doorways" (*ibidem*). The women grow more animalistic as the poem progresses. Notice even the *double entendre* of "in fur" (*ibidem*): fur as in a fur coat, of course, but also, as if sprouting from their skin, signaling the beginning of the shift from woman to beast. As their animalistic traits intensify, so does their behaviour become more erratic: "hungry/ hungry/ hungry/ shrieking I hear you/ singing I hear you/ cursing I hear you/ praying I hear you . . ." (di Prima, *Loba* 5). Di Prima's attention to the material realities of women's lives – "you kill on steel tables/ you birth in black beds/ fetus you tore out

stiffens in snow” (5)⁵² – is, as Roseanne Quinn notes, a “distinctly feminist act/action amid cultural histories where women are overwhelmingly and customarily written out of the story or only written in via the crudeness of misogyny” (24).

Di Prima plays the part of the bone gatherer as she collects the fragments of women’s lives and describes them with unflinching candor, recognizing in them both great vulnerability and great strength: “you are armed/ you drive chariots/ you tower above me/ you are small/ you cower on hillsides/ out of the wind” (5). As in *Revolutionary Letters*, Diane di Prima presents her relationship with the loba and these women as a sisterhood, “[her] mirror image and [her] sister” (5), ultimately declaring that there is no difference between her, the women of the poem and the loba: “I am you / I must become you / I have been you / and I must become you / I am always you / I must become you” (6). Thus, di Prima becomes one with her “moon sisters” as she seeks to “create and contribute to a tradition of women’s literature that only includes the stories of women for themselves and of themselves” (Mathes 54), ending with an enchanting mantra which turned “this moment in the book into a ritual that celebrates the community of the lost moon sisters to which the speaker has just been lead to by the Loba” (Mackay 82).

Similarly, “The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare” (125) problematizes the role of women in society, how they’re oppressed, and how they fight against it. Diane di Prima’s choice of the figure of the mare captures this condition with a particular focus on physicality:

small hooves
the ankles fragile
unsteady
not rooted here

the eyes
anxious
eyes of a doe
who has been hunted
but not w/in recent
memory

(di Prima, *Loba* 125)

⁵² This idea is reminiscent of di Prima’s “Brass Furnace Going Out: Song After an Abortion”, where the poet begins with “to say I failed, that is walked out/ and into the artic/ How shd I know where I was?” (qtd. in Charters 363).

The mare, doe-eyed and anxious, carries the trauma of all women in her body, haunted by the fear of the hunt. Her unrootedness is a sign of her and women's vulnerability. The "street women" of this poem are "unrooted", going from Vancouver to Chicago, always looking for a safe place for themselves and their children, but finding that wherever they go, they turn into prey – chased down and away. In the first stanza, when the loba remembers the mare (read women), her description is extremely visual: "Small hooves/ The ankles fragile/ Unsteady/ Not rooted here/ The eyes/ Anxious/ Eyes of a doe/ Who has been hunted/ But not w/in recent / Memory" (125). In the poem, women take the forefront of the narrative as the speaker makes a point to question women's roles and place in society as she exposes how their labor is what sustains life and yet goes unrecognized: "& who now remembers her hands working dye into cotton" (127). The women in the poem walk "across America behind gaunt violent yogis" (125), they die of methadone overdose (*ibidem*) in jail, they disappear among "oil lamps Morocco seeking dead fingers" or "pregnant barefoot & whoring". Yet, amid this bleakness, there are flickers of resistance and struggle as the women fight against their constraints and try to save each other: "wrote lipstick 'save yourself' on tin rail of furnished/ room bed", "or in love again peaceful scrawled candlesmoke 'there is/ salvation' triumphant on borrowed ceiling while friends coughed in the kitchen" (126). By juxtaposing the mundane details of these women's lives with violence and destitution, di Prima insists on portraying the most visceral aspects of womanhood, refusing to shy away from the embodied, often stigmatized, experiences of women everywhere.

While in "Howl", in the only few times women are mentioned they are referred to, not as individuals, but as sexual objects, reduced to "snatches" and "innumerable lays" in "empty lots & diner backyards" among other equally dubious places (Ginsberg 1), in Diane di Prima's poem women take the forefront of the narrative, seen as much more than just mere sexual objects. The poet makes a point to question women's roles in society by exposing how their experiences are deeply associated with domestic, manual jobs like "working dye into cotton" and taking care of children (127). Di Prima does not fail either to refer, yet again, to the underprivileged women sitting at "Sagamore cafeteria", or the ones in Route one, either on the road with their children prostituting themselves to make a living: "& who now remembers her hands /slant of her green eyes / Sagamore cafeteria / who has tears for girls now on Route One, the babies / wrapped in a scarf / the green / always further north / further than you can walk" (di Prima, *Loba* 127). In fact, women's hardships in the

poem are only enhanced by the contrasting examples of the problematic, abusive, and stagnant behaviour of the men around them, who, while the women sustained them with “oatmeal and grits”, sat “naked in bed / read Bible / jerked off” (126). Women in Di Prima’s poem are all victims to an incredibly violent patriarchal society in which not only is their labour undervalued but their bodies are overworked and overexploited, as the poem seems to question the patriarchy directly: “who was the whore of Babylon in the/ kerosene lamp of your childhood?” (126). The symbolic figure of the whore of Babylon serves to enhance how women have been consistently perceived in the past, as the loba both acknowledges this abused past and the still ever-present oppressive reality, trying to create a space for liberation. By the end of the poem, the cycle is not broken, and the mare is still “unrooted” (127), walking into the cold wind, as she starts again: Her ankles fragile/ Unrooted, she walks/ Into the Wind” (*ibidem*).

Although Diane di Prima depicts the loba as a vulnerable being, the she-wolf is, for the most part, a force no one wants to reckon with – especially not men. The loba is particularly violent and aggressive towards men, enacting on them the same kind of violence that they wish to enact on her. The loba is often mistreated and represented as a malignant being, and this mistreatment is “directly or indirectly connected to the violence human woman has been subjected to, both ontologically and physical/materially” (Covil-Manset). For example, in “And will you hunt the Loba?” (di Prima, *Loba* 29), di Prima confronts this male fantasy of control over the female body:

And will you hunt the Loba?
 Fools, will you use
 lance, spear or arrow, gun or
 boomerang?
 . . .

(*ibidem*)

The ironic opening of the poem turns the entire hunting and control fantasy on its head. The speaker mocks the “Fools” (read men) who are intent on capturing the loba with their man-made weapons, which the reader understands is a futility. No matter what weapon they reach for, their efforts will have been in vain. Di Prima suggests that hunting the loba is, in and of itself, a preposterous idea; however, it is a sought-after achievement. The rhetorical

form of the poem undercuts the male fantasy with each line of imagined violence framed as a question. The repetition of “will you” and “do you” exposes this male, predatory desire as completely delusional, mocking the very idea that the loba could ever be subdued by men. Strikingly, the loba is purely imagined in these terms of male conquest, her body turning into a prize catch, and her different body parts imagined as a part of a great bounty:

...
 Do you dream
 To chew shreds of her flesh from inside of her skin
 Turn inside out her gut, suck juice
 From her large, dark liver? Will you make a cap
 Of her stomach, necklace of her spine?

(29)

The speaker forces the reader to confront the deeply misogynistic and dangerous undercurrent of a male desire that wants for the consumption, dismemberment, and display of the female body. The things the speaker imagines the men want of the loba’s body are grotesque in their specificity: the she-wolf’s body broken into consumable parts. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker draws our attention to the figure of the loba: “Look, she lies on her back in the sand like a human woman” (29). The most striking aspect of this line is that seeing the loba transform into a human woman does not give the hunters pause: in fact, it only makes them more eager to pursue her: “After her! Whales tooth & abalone/ jingle as you give chase” (*ibidem*). Thus, Diane di Prima seems to suggest that the bond between the loba and woman does not shield the she-wolf from violence, but actually “incite[s] violence against her – as if building off ‘the fact’ of woman as the natural and necessary recipient of such violence, thereby justifying the loba’s slaughter” (Covil-Manset 45). However, the loba triumphs and can evade the hunters as the biblical inscription “NOLI ME TANGERE” [Touch Me Not] appears “in jewels / across the sky.” (29), repurposed by di Prima in defense of woman and her bodily autonomy.

Having exposed the male fantasy of the loba as prey, di Prima stages a counter-myth in “DREAM, The Loba Reveals Herself” in which the she-wolf is portrayed as a guardian:

she came
 to hunt me down; carried down ladder trussed
 like game herself. And then set free

the hunted turning hunter . . .

(di Prima, *Loba* 67)

Recognizing the loba's history as prey, "carried down ladder trussed/ like game herself" (*ibidem*), the speaker half expects that the loba will hunt *her*. The loba, a "big, rangy dog" (*ibidem*), stalks di Prima "tailgating, only a step or two behind" her (*ibidem*). Turning to confront and face the loba, "she-who-should-have-devoured-me", di Prima realizes that not only is she there to protect her, a "kind watchdog [she] cd/ leave the children with", she recognizes the loba as "[m]other, sister/ Myself" (68). When the speaker first frames the Loba as a predator ("she came to hunt me down"), she is echoing misrepresentations of the figure of the she-wolf as an ill-tempered and aggressive being, when in fact, the loba is especially protective of women and children. The power of the final word of the poem, being "Myself," rests on the recognition that the Loba's ferocity is not a threat to women, but a latent part of their own being.

In *Loba*, the different incarnations of the wolf goddess and her counterparts challenge "the inscription of female subordination in history" (Encarnación-Pinedo 4). The same way "Ave" the marginal life of "the street women of the world", "Ishtar" reimagines the ancient Mesopotamian goddess of war, love, and fertility as a prostitute:

deliberate as a shell of a body you offer
ungainly on the steps
scratch of yr voice in the shadows
3 a.m gold shorts
& hot pink thighs, high heels
& that ravaged face —
what are you selling, anyway?

deliberate yr limbs dislocated
awkward from drugs, you caricature
the human stream — enfold
the secret essence, perfect
bittersweet
tho it does to death — O sister
softer than watered silk
grey/ white/ black shadows of yr
ebony skin yr heart
edible as chocolate you enclose
the prize & you know it

gate of death, encumbrance

golden morning of the world
you offer it like poisoned silk
to the grinding, belching traffic, hordes
of dirty men like poisoned
watered silk
to wrap them round

(di Prima, *Loba* 280)

This particular emphasis that Diane di Prima offers to sex workers in *Loba* culminates in this poem. Her portrayal of prostitution and its costs for women is most evident here. The woman di Prima portrays here is only “a shell of a body”, ravaged by the constant abuse on her body and “awkward from drugs”. Very similar to “Ave”, in this poem, di Prima portrays her concerns around the opioid crisis as well as the objectification, sexualization, and *consumption* of the female body. There is something pertinent to be said about how di Prima describes her heart as “edible as chocolate” (280): this idea of being good enough to eat, consumed, devoured even, is an example of how, in its most extreme, male sexuality is here depicted as cannibalistic. The prostitute’s body thus becomes irresistible to men, luring them *into* her body, “gate of death”, offering it up “like poisoned silk”. According to Encarnación- Pinedo, “Di Prima’s mystic discourse in *Loba* elevates, rather than erases, the female body in its political context by making it the necessary site to fight for women’s independence” (14), which suggests that while di Prima portrays the woman as physically vulnerable and weak, by naming the prostitute Ishtar, she grants her the power to seduce the men, despite how denigrated her body is. As if in a trance, the “grinding/ belching traffic, hordes/ of dirty men” (*ibidem*) are lured towards her, suggesting that Ishtar takes advantage of their predatory desire to punish them.

Almost in opposition, the *loba* also incarnates the Virgin Mary throughout different sections of the book. In Part 6, “The Seven Joys of the Virgin”, di Prima portrays the conflict between the natural instincts that should guide childbirth and the patriarchal violence with which pregnancy and childbirth are treated. In the poem titled “Nativity”, di Prima writes:

...
They fettered me
w/ leather straps, on delivery table, I cd
cry out. Forced gas mask over mouth,

Slave. I cd not
 Turn head. Did they fetter me
 w/ breath of a fish? These poison airs? I
 turn head, move hand, or leg
 Thus forced. They tore child from me. Whose?
 ...
 Kind beasts around me: Women
 who knew same outrage. Every child here
 princeling, is shackled & numbered. We breath
 in our rags to keep each other warm

(di Prima, *Loba* 107-8)

Through both the figure of the loba and the Virgin Mary, di Prima contrasts with other depictions of childbirth in *Loba*, namely “The Loba in Childbed”, where childbirth is for the loba a really natural and empowering experience, as she “as she lay back, panting, remembering/it was what she should do” (di Prima, *Loba* 30). However, this natural process is violently interrupted in “Nativity”, where the loba’s labor “becomes an oppressive, enforced activity” (Encarnación-Pinedo 8). Restricted and heavily sedated, Mary is unable to move and actively participate in the labor of her own child, which immediately creates a disconnect between mother and child: because she is stopped from being able to *feel* her child come through *her* body, she does not recognize the child as her own: “They tore child from me. Whose?” (*ibidem*). But much of this pain comes, yet again, with the recognition of sisterhood. Mary is surrounded by women, presumably here in a modern hospital room and not a manger, who went through the exact same experience. The women, characterized as “[k]ind beasts” (*ibidem*), represent the loba’s role as woman’s protector.

Moreover, the poem seems to emulate Diane di Prima’s birth of her first child. In *Recollections*, di Prima describes a similar scenario in which she found herself “strapped onto the delivery table, [her] hands and arms strapped down, and [her] body in the most unlikely position possible for producing a child: [her] pelvis and legs way higher than [her] stomach, [her] legs tied onto the stirrups of this contraption” (170). To make matters worse, just as her child started to crown, “an invisible demonic being standing somewhere behind my head forced a gas mask over [her] mouth” and she struggled to get it off of her face: “I held my breath (all the while still trying to produce this infant). But to no avail. I finally did have to breathe, and the mask being over my face, I did pass out. At that crucial moment I was not allowed to be Witness” (170). Similarly, di Prima also remembers being “surrounded

by six or eight screaming, moaning, or semi-unconscious women” (169), all of which would suffer the same fate as her.

Part 8 of *Loba* opens with an epigraph from the *Shih Ching*: “disorder does not come from heaven / But is brought about by women” (di Prima, *Loba* 145). That women are the root of chaos establishes the ground for the poems that follow. Di Prima deliberately places it before pieces like “The Loba to Apollo” and “For Cameron”, and reframes this “disorder” as the effect of the accumulated violence women have endured and are now throwing back at the ones responsible. Much like “And will you hunt the Loba”, “The Loba to Apollo, at the Fountain of Healing” also exposes all the violence projected onto women’s bodies:

now dervish I slough off
pain which is my claim to
commonality of woman
were we not killed, out of jealousy,
run thru/ w/a black lance, every moon?
did I not burn?
...
was I not sold & sold & my daughters broken?
I remember
yr teeth on my half-formed breasts
welts on my legs.

(di Prima, *Loba* 147)⁵³

The loba identifies pain as what binds women together. Suffering is here posited as the common denominator of womanhood, which sets the poem’s register: a litany of remembered violences which the loba can embody and feel, as she accuses Apollo [a masculine figure], seemingly a representative of men, of allowing this abuse. These rhetorical questions the loba throws at Apollo need no answer. The loba points to the violence enacted on women by their lovers (out of jealousy, perhaps), who were burned at the stake (accused of witchcraft). The loba’s anger in the poem does not come from a single, isolated act, but from carrying with her the collective memory of women’s pain for millennia. The rhetorical questions addressed to Apollo are a litany of wrongs that have gone unanswered for far too long: being “sold & sold” like a brood mare, echoing the

⁵³ To listen to Diane di Prima read “The Loba to Apollo” click [here](#). Diane di Prima reads it immediately after “The Loba Addresses the Goddess/Or the Poet as Priestess Addresses the Loba-Goddess”. Courtesy of PennSound.

commodification of the female through sex trafficking and prostitution, the assault and sexualization of the prepubescent body: “yr teeth on my half-formed breasts” (*ibidem*). The poem insists, then, that women’s suffering has been continuous and that it has been tolerated and perpetuated by patriarchal power, here symbolized by Apollo. But by the end of the poem, the loba chooses to discard the pain that consumes her:

...
now dervish I slough off
this pain which is claim
to womanhood. Refuse

the remembering skin.
End commonality of rage
to be born
 In uniqueness

(148)

While it is true that, for the most part, Book I deals with the physical and sexual experiences of women, it is also true that di Prima, although more subtly than in her other work, continues to make the same kind of critiques she had been making since the 1950s. However, in *Loba*, she takes a step forward. In this collection, di Prima “constructs presentations of the goddess, the mother, the artist, and others, shape shifting into an essentialist female community” (Grace & Johnson 86) – a community which serves the loba, above all. In her poem “The Loba Addresses the Goddess/Or the Poet as Priestess Addresses the Loba-Goddess”, di Prima, rather scornfully, similarly to the last poem above, addresses the loba:

Is it not in yr service that I wear myself out
running ragged among these hills, driving children
to forgotten movies? In yr service
broom & pen. The monstrous feasts
we serve the others on the outer porch
(within the house there is only rice & salt)
And we wear exhaustion like a painted robe
I & my sisters
 wrestling the goods from the niggardly
 dying fathers
healing each other w/ water & bitter herbs

than when we stand naked in the circle of lamps
 (beside the small water, in the inner grove)
 we show
 no blemish, but also no superfluous beauty
 It has burned off in watches of the night.
 O Nut, O mantle of stars, we catch at you
 lean mournful
 ragged triumphant
 shaggy as grass
 our skins ache of emergence/ dark o'the moon

(di Prima, *Loba* 134)⁵⁴

Despite its more esoteric imagery, this poem parallels perfectly with di Prima's earliest life writing, where she complains about the never-ending domestic chores that fell on her shoulders, which, of course, included taking care of her children, in this case, driving them around wherever they want to go. But this poem has a particularity that her earlier poetry did not have. When di Prima writes this poem, she is not just complaining about the constraints of a domestic life like she did before. Here, she is complaining to the entity that ought to help her. In this poem, very much reminiscent of *Dinners and Nightmares's* "What I Ate and Where" section, Prima complains about all the "monstrous feasts" (134) she and her sisters have had to prepare for others. Taken from *Dinners*, di Prima reminisces on one of these great feasts: "and now i will tell you about the really big feasts, there were two of them as i said, i shall tell about them, one was for thanksgiving last year, one was Christmas eve, and i don't know which one was better . . . (30). More than anything, in this poem di Prima laments her and sisters' unrecognized labor. They who "wear exhaustion like a painted robe" (134), raising their children by themselves, "wresting the goods from the niggardly/ dying fathers" (*ibidem*). This exhaustion that women wear daily takes a toll on their physicality and appearance as di Prima writes that the beauty of their naked body has been compromised: "No blemish, but also no superfluous beauty / It has burned off in the watches of the night " (*ibidem*). These "watches of the night" likely refer to the countless sleepless nights women have spent taking care of their children, particularly their newborns, crying and fussing all night, preventing them to sleep, as well as their nights spent working because the night watch is the only time they have, once everyone is asleep and does not ask anything of them, for themselves and their work. The line "broom & pen" (134) is

⁵⁴ To listen to Diane di Prima read "The Loba Addresses the Goddess/Or the Poet as Priestess Addresses the Loba-Goddess" click [here](#). Courtesy of PennSound.

particularly interesting. In the service of the loba, women take up the broom, an item inherently associated with domestic labor, and the pen, representing their writing, in which women writers pay homage to the loba goddess.

In the closing stanza of the poem, the speaker pleads with the “lean mournful/ ragged triumphant/ shaggy as grass” loba for help, as women’s fatigue turns into excruciating pain as their bodies, constantly stretched too thin, are starting to break out into an actual transformation. The transformation into a werewolf is usually depicted as rather agonizing experience – bones snapping out of place, skin tearing, teeth growing – and while di Prima does not describe this grotesque process, she hints at its beginning as the skin under the waning moon starts to “ache of emergence” – emergence of the loba body as the strain of the domestic life is forcing their inner she-wolf to surface, trying to claw herself out. And then there’s the influence of the “dark o’the moon” on the speaker and her sisters. Werewolves, as per the lore, are bound by the lunar cycles, and here, the moon’s darkness signals the passing of the threshold when women go through this painful shift. In an adjacent section of the same poem, the speaker continues to question the toll women’s bodies take. The speaker brings forth the “street women” of “Ave” back into the center. The rest of the poem goes as follows:

In whose dream
did she beg forgiveness, in whose
did she die alone

For whom did she bend like weeds
under mistral; who found her
crumpled beside the sycamores

Who raised her from the streets, who
bought her on auction block; in whose
vision was she lashed to an empty boat?

...

Who tore thin wraps or cape, who
taught her shame; who was condemned
to go like her on all fours?

(di Prima, *Loba* 135)

Yet again, di Prima uses a repetitive form to drive home the argument. The speaker confronts the reader directly as she questions who dreamt up the patriarchal system set up, which continuously oppressed women into the margins. Each stanza circles back to the same questions: who was responsible, who owned, who violated women? One of Diane di Prima's central concerns in *Loba* – and a crucial part of her feminist corporeal poetics – is sex work. In *Loba*, she returns to it insistently, exposing how women's bodies are bought, sold, and consumed, and then blamed for their own commodification. The tone of the poem seems particularly accusatory, but the blame does not fall on women. Instead, the poem indicates a system that dresses them up only to strip them down, that teaches them shame simply for having bodies. The closing image – a woman on all fours as if she is a dog – lands with particular force. This posture of submission is imposed upon her – condemnation, not *condition*. Whereas *Revolutionary Letters* is thought of for a discussion of the present, *Loba* undertakes a revision of women's past and present oppression.

Similarly, in another poem from Book I, Diane di Prima explores how women and their bodies have been contained within a patriarchal society:

How was woman broken?
Falling out of attention.
Wiping gnarled fingers on a faded housedress.
Lying down in the puddle beside the broken jug.

It is too easy to write this.
Write of the grey
in straggling, thinning hair.

...

Where was the slack, the loss
of early fierceness?
How did we come to be contained
in rooms? Which room

holds the jewels which buy us
& for which we have
other uses?

to grind our teeth in our sleep
Give me that porcelain jug
too big to carry, too
precious for you to part with

let me figure how to get it home
unbroken. Give me
the story you wear
like a stone (jewel)

Or yr slack breast under my hand

(di Prima, *Loba* 132)

Diane di Prima's denunciation here is very similar to something we would find in her earlier poetry and prose when she goes against the expectations of women in the 1950s and 1960s. Unfortunately, when di Prima wrote the bulk of *Loba*, little had changed: the figure of the dutiful housewife still dominated the cultural imagination, and women continued to bear the brunt of domestic labor, even as the feminist movement made strides in re-negotiating women's public roles. Against this backdrop, di Prima asks bluntly: "How was woman broken? Di Prima makes a direct reference to the housewife, "[f]alling out of attention" of her husband, "wiping gnarled fingers on a faded housedress," which suggests from the outset, a life of unrecognized labor and exhaustion. However, di Prima acknowledges how writing as an older woman grants her a particular insight others do not have, as a woman who has lived broken like that. With age comes the clarity to see how that exhaustion and invisibility have worn women down, and she recognizes herself in these lines and knows exactly why this image is so familiar. The prevalent image of containment in the poem is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, in which, for Woolf, financial independence was a necessary condition for women's creative freedom. Here, di Prima states the opposite: women have not been given any "room" for freedom, only room for confinement. She asks herself, "how did we come to be contained/ in rooms?", in disbelief, because wanting to break from those rooms was all the women of her generation wanted. When di Prima asks "[w]hich room/ holds the jewels which buy us (& for which we have/ other uses?", the answer would be Woolf's imagined room of one's own – a room that does not contain and allows women to finally claim their space.

In the last stanza of the poem, di Prima pleads with women as she asks for them to stop their internalized oppression and break out: "It is too easy / to grind our teeth in our sleep" (152). It is too easy for women to bottle up their anger and "grind their teeth" but she refuses that resignation as she pleads for women's "porcelain jug/ too big to carry, too/ precious for you to part with/ let me figure out how to get it home/ unbroken"

(*ibidem*). The jug, fragile yet invaluable, becomes a metaphor for women's compromised autonomy and creative freedom: precarious, constantly at risk of shattering under the weight of social expectations. To carry it "home unbroken" (*ibidem*) is to protect what is most precious: women's histories, creativity, and right to claim a space of their own. This idea is further sharpened in the last stanza, where the speaker suggests that women's experiences, often borne like burdens, are their greatest treasures, their sustenance, and ground for their art. The "slack breast", marked by age, is offered up as the lived, physical evidence of what women endure, working as a call for women to reclaim both their history and their bodies as sources of strength.

Loba has been described as a "feminist revisionist mythmaking" (Grace and Trigilio 229), a designation that perfectly reflects her commitment to centering women and their histories within the long-form poem. In her "Loba Poems", di Prima anchors her work on the lived realities of women's bodies. This is achieved through the very particular choice of the loba as the medium through which di Prima writes the poems. Here, the she-wolf is the embodiment of dichotomies around the female body and allows for her an exploration of the natural, as opposed to the civilized, femininity, femaleness, and sexuality – as the loba takes up the mantle of leading an uprising against patriarchal and phallogentric structures that dominate society. Diane di Prima, then, refuses to turn away from the gendered body and, instead, makes it the poem's main instrument. Throughout the book, Diane di Prima inimitably addresses the female body as the space upon which female agency is constructed through pleasure, reproduction, exploitation, and resistance (Grace & Johnson 85). Thus, out of all her work, *Loba* is perhaps the one where di Prima is most concerned with considering and *reconsidering* the female body as the premise from which a discussion of material/corporeal realities of women emerges, as well as an emphasis on their sexuality, and the gender normative roles inscribed onto their bodies.

Conclusion: *Towards a Corporeal Poetics*

Throughout this study, I have argued for a reconsideration of Diane di Prima's work from a corporeal poetics lens, as the argument lies precisely in the fact that the body is one of the most fundamental pillars of her work, from her life writing in her memoirs and earlier poetry to her most radical and experimental poetry in both *Revolutionary Letters* and *Loba*. Diane di Prima then takes center stage as a pioneer in her own generation, writing against deeply misogynistic tendencies that prevailed in the writing of her male counterparts', of the literary critics and the editorial world, which often reduced women to mere sexual objects with no agency whatsoever.

Diane di Prima, among other Beat women writers, did this by, first and foremost, writing *her* body into *her* work. Whether it was writing about the physical hardship of working long hours, typing and editing poems that were not even hers, or a poem about menstruation, abortions, and pregnancy, these writers wrote candidly about their bodies at their most intimate. Their *body writing* and *writing body* were the great precursors of the feminist movement in America in the 1960s. Writers like Diane di Prima anticipated, already in the 1950s, the great concerns that troubled women at the height of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Even though reactions against the feminist movement were felt strongly, by the 1960s, a foundation for the entire movement had been set up by a band of pirates, bandits, and outcasts, who, more than a decade earlier, were taking the matter of their liberation into their own hands and writing.

Most research done on women Beat writers tends to focus more on the matter of their marginalization and exclusion from both within the movement and the later established literary canon, with only a small number of publications critically analysing their prose (in particular their memoirs) and even fewer, analyzing their poetry. Therefore, I favoured a close reading and analysis of both Diane di Prima's life writing and poetry to combat this tendency and deepen the critical reading of her poetics, as well as introduce the idea of a corporeal poetics in terms of her writing. The body of research on Diane di Prima's work seems to concentrate most on *Loba*, which is perhaps her most well-known book, as well as the one most studied and used within feminist and women's studies for its appropriation and revision of women's myths and histories. Although I, too, dedicate an

entire chapter to *Loba*, I attempted to veer off the work already done in terms of a feminist revisionist lens and focused, instead, on how the body, particularly the female body, is represented. All this considered, this study has aimed to shed light on Diane di Prima's work, because although she is arguably the best-known woman writer of the Beat Generation, her work is still relatively unknown. Given how extensive her *oeuvre* is, I chose to solely focus on Diane di Prima to introduce as many facets of her work as possible and to demonstrate the centrality of her poetics within both Beat and feminist literary traditions. For this reason, I also structured my chapters in a way that would allow me to showcase as many facets of her prose and poetry as possible, exploring her corporeal poetics through what I defined as three different iterations of the body: the written body, as in *her* body in the context of her life writing; the body politic, as in *her politicized* body in the context of *Revolutionary Letters*; and the *Loba* body in the context of the poetry collection of the same name, where di Prima and her body are a poetic vessel through which the she-wolf speaks.

Therefore, the first chapter of this study, "The Written Body", brought forth Diane di Prima's life writing, which included her memoirs, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, and *Dinners and Nightmares*, as well as some of her earlier poetry, originally published throughout other poetry collections. While it is true that most studies privilege Beat women writers' memoirs, it is also true that their focus is usually somewhat voyeuristic in looking for their connections with male Beat writers (especially their romantic and sexual relationships). However, what I have attempted to show instead is that these texts are crucial to understand *their* poetry, not the men's. Di Prima's memoirs are not secondary nor anecdotal, and so, for my study, I chose to begin my analysis of Diane di Prima's corporeal poetics within her life writing, for the insightful cues into the development of her feminist corporeal poetics. Both her memoirs and *life poems*, focused on and written between the 1950s and late 1960s respectively, set the stage for Diane di Prima's non-conformity against the status quo, but most particularly, the patriarchal system set in place which belittles women and their embodied existences and experiences.

And although my study focuses primarily on questions around a feminine corporality, Diane di Prima's corporeal poetics is not necessarily restricted to the female body, and so the second chapter of this study, "The Body Politic", focuses on a collective body of society, though with a particular focus on a feminist corporeal poetics *still*. Although not her most studied or analyzed work, Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, written largely at the

height of the second wave of the feminist movement, places women's issues and corporeal realities right in its center. From her critique of the housewife's role to her denunciation of rape as a violent crime, these *letter-poems*, emblematic of her Beat activism, amplify urgent social concerns, offering perhaps, right alongside it, the fullest expression of her feminist rhetoric. Since there are equally important tropes in the letters, chief among them environmental and anti-war sentiments, inevitably drew connections to the broader activist dimensions of the collection, since di Prima's corporeal poetics is here inseparable from her engagement with war, ecology, and the wider sociopolitical crisis of her time.

As for *Loba*, while the collection is extraordinarily rich from a feminist revisionist perspective, particularly in its reworking of women's histories, my analysis deliberately centered elsewhere. Choosing to focus on the *loba-poems* where the focus was on the corporeal realities of everyday women rather than revisiting mythic figures (except for the Loba herself, of course), the chapter is built around the figure of the she-wolf as a vessel for women's corporeality and subjectivity. Through the figure of the Loba, di Prima, the poet, becomes a vessel through which the Loba channels anger and defiance against patriarchal structures that have, for too long, oppressed women's bodies and minds. The Loba emerges as a representation of a volatile body, always shape-shifting, uncontained, and transforming repeatedly to tell women's stories. Read through the lens of corporeal poetics, *Loba* insists on the commonality of women: the shared, lived embodied experiences of women contemporary to Diane di Prima, whose struggles, unfortunately, remain pressing and relevant today.

Because this study considers both Diane di Prima's life writing and her poetry, I sought to resist the tendency to read her work only through a biographical lens, which has proved to be reductive and limiting. However, an engagement with Diane di Prima's life writing was necessary, since di Prima herself first insists on the body as the first space of authorship in her memoirs. Therefore, my analysis approached her life writing as a pathway into her corporeal poetics, placing her embodied experiences as a woman as one of the pillars of her work. Moreover, including her memoirs in this study works as a rebuttal to the prevailing idea that Beat women writers' life writing is a lesser form of art compared to that of their male counterparts. However, one particular limitation of this study arises from issues of access. While in the first chapter, I focused primarily on Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, and *Dinners and Nightmares*, I would

have liked to consider her first poetry collection, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards* (1958). As her first published book, it would have proved useful and provided valuable insight into the development of her corporeal poetics and her earliest attempts at articulating a sexed and gendered corporeality as a form of resistance. However, because the book was most likely printed in very small numbers, it is now only available through rare book auctions, and so, unfortunately, it is not possible to include it in this study. Future research would undoubtedly benefit from an examination of this work, especially in dialogue with the memoirs, to better trace the continuity between di Prima's life writing and *life poems*.

Future research could also take a comparative approach, placing Diane di Prima's corporeal poetics alongside the embodied poets of other Beat women writers, such as Anne Waldman, Joanne Kyger, ruth weiss, and Lenore Kandel. A study such as that would further reveal how women, at the center of the movement, inscribed the body as a site of resistance, creativity, and transformation, further destabilizing the masculinist mythos of the Beat Generation. Furthermore, the digital mapping project that accompanied this study (see Annex I) could be expanded into a more comprehensive cartography of Beat women's physical presence in the countercultural movements of their time. Just as I traced Diane di Prima's movements through her memoirs and poetry, similar work could be done with Joyce Johnson and Hettie Jones, whose autobiographical texts share thematic affinities with di Prima's but chart slightly different counter-feminist geographies of New York City and different vantage points on the Beat scene. Johnson's memoir, for instance, offers a perspective from the earliest days of the Beat movement, while Jones's narrative resonates more closely with Diane di Prima's but locates itself in other urban and social spaces. Undoubtedly, these projects could yield a broader, more nuanced map of Beat women's embodied histories.

As this study focuses on Diane di Prima's corporeal poetics, I find it essential to situate these poetics within a broader discussion about what it means to be a woman. It is crucial to write and talk about issues regarding gender and sexuality today, particularly female sexuality and the female body, because the way both women and men are understood in our society cannot be dissociated from cultural and social inscriptions projected onto their bodies. Alongside other categories such as ethnicity, class, religion, or nationality, gender is constantly used for the further exclusion and marginalization of women in society. Future research could therefore approach di Prima's work through an

explicitly intersectional lens, examining how gender in her poetics interacts and intersects with other categories of identity, and how this might enrich our understanding of her writing.

Writing about the body and refusing self-censorship are central elements of Diane di Prima's corporeal poetics. To write the body without censorship is to confront its realities – a body that suffers and feels pains but also one that experiences pleasure. Thus, this corporeal poetics is also defined by its insurgent nature against the cultural and social scripts imposed on women's embodied existence, speaking both to women as individuals while also situating them collectively in history, insisting on their presence *both* in private and public spheres. It is here that sisterhood, a collective force, emerges most evidently in *Loba*, where the titular character is both one woman and all women at once. In this sense, corporeal poetics is at once an individual and collective practice – a poetics of multitudes of singular voices that gather into *one* body.

From this perspective, Diane di Prima's corporeal poetics raise a fundamental question: *are* women's bodies, or do they *have* bodies? The answer, of course, is both. A woman is inseparable from her embodied existence yet still subjected to cultural scripts that inscribe meaning onto her body. Perhaps no one has said it better than Simone de Beauvoir, who famously stated that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir 273). Femininity, in this sense, has often functioned as a burden imposed on women: one that pushes them into the private, domestic sphere, having them relinquish their freedoms for the imposed roles of dutiful housewives and mothers. Diane di Prima's poetry resists this. By writing *her* body, Diane di Prima reclaims it as a site of knowledge, power, and liberation, rather than an embodiment of passivity or confinement, as the bodies that Diane di Prima describes do not want to be contained – they leak, shift, and go over the margins.

At the age of 14, Diane di Prima made what may have been the most radical and marginalizing choice of her entire life – to become a poet: “and poems I will write. But this is more than the poems, it is the shape of a Life . . . Myself as I stand here. Take up the challenge. The knowing: No matter what, I will be a poet. Be great, whatever that means. Fulfill the dream” (di Prima, *Recollections* 78). And so she made a promise to herself: “Nulla

dies sine linea.”(ibidem) – no day without a line – a promise that Diane di Prima would keep until her death in 2020.

Taking inspiration from her practice, I would suggest that the same commitment might guide us, as readers, to return daily, even if only for a single line, to di Prima’s poetry.

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Annex

Mapping Diane di Prima: A Digital Cartography of Identity and Space

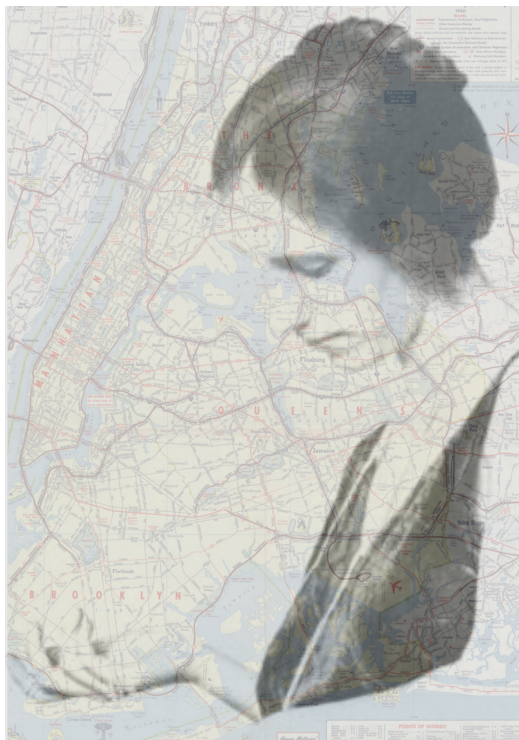


Figure 4. Collage combining a photograph of Diane di Prima circa 1969 (by Daniel Entin) with a map of New York City from the 1950s.

It was as if my body had come alive (it had). After years of sitting indoors, it stretched out. claimed all the space of the city as its own.

Diane di Prima, *Recollections*

Project aim

This annex presents the visual materials produced for the digital project *Mapping Diane di Prima: A Digital Cartography of Identity and Space*. This Digital Humanities project extends beyond mere geographical representation and tracking, showcasing the potential of Geographic Information Systems in literary and cultural analysis, through its digital affordances (such as interactivity), which allow people to explore maps in their own way. This project focuses on Diane di Prima, a figure who has long been obscured in canonical mappings of 20th-century literature, and contributes to the growing scholarly field that seeks to recontextualize marginalized presences, particularly those of women, queer artists, and radical thinkers, within broader cultural histories. To better accomplish this, this project is grounded in the theoretical lens of feminist geography, which puts into question how space and spatial relations reflect and reinforce a patriarchal system of power. Feminist geography explores how gender affects one's access to and experience of space. It asks the question of who is allowed to inhabit public spaces, who is to be confined to the domestic sphere, and how identities are both formed and rebelled against within these spatial structures. For women like di Prima, who fled domesticity and suburbia to navigate a literary landscape predominantly dominated by men, the city became a site of endless possibility. This attempt to digitally map Diane di Prima's life reveals how her physical and artistic movements challenged gendered and cultural boundaries.

Based on her memoirs, *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2001) we can find a detailed account of Diane di Prima's life in New York, up until 1968. Even though we have such detailed accounts of her life in New York at times, it is often the case that she mentions places only by name, with no reference to a street, or places about which there is little to no information on (e.g., Louis' Tavern or Frankie & Charlie's) – places that so far have proven untraceable. On top of that di

Prima does not have a memoir on her time spent on the West Coast, so entries in this region are relatively scarce. Other sources were biographies of the poet (of which there are not many), interviews, photographic and audiovisual evidence found online, and other archival sources.

Interactive Map

You can explore the map freely. By clicking on a pin, an interactive pop-up will emerge with quotations, images, even audio and video when available, connecting Diane di Prima's life directly to the spaces she moved through.



Figure 5. Interactive pop-up on the map.

Complementary Interactive Widget

The place-type widget, complementary to the map, lets you search by place type. Place type includes: Arts Complex; Bar; Bookstore; Café; Hangout Spot; Intentional Community; Jazz Club; Library; Museum; Park; Residence; Retreat; School; Theatre; Zen Center; and Other.

Mapping Diane di Prima

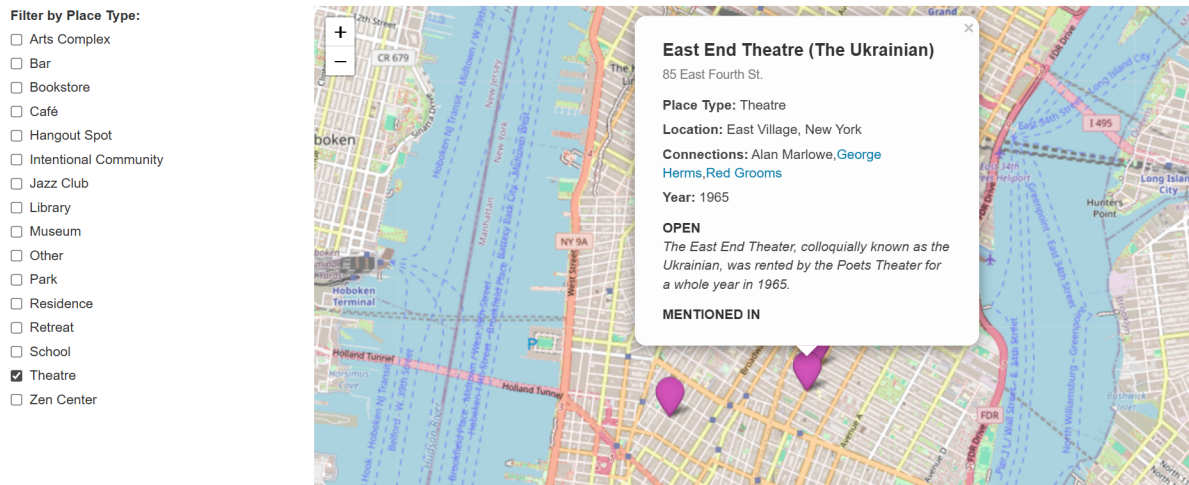


Figure 6. Place-type widget.

The widget boasts the same interactive pop-ups as the map, but it allows for a more targeted look into the content of the map, depending on one's interests. If, for example, users select "theater", the widget pulls up all theater spaces, most of them from her own theater company, The New York Poet's Theater.

Further Explore

This project makes use of mapping not simply as a method of spatial representation, but as a way to reposition Diane di Prima within the artistic and intellectual networks she built around herself, as well as challenging the myth that women were absent from the early cultural scenes of New York. Mapping her movements and connections makes visible a history, however fragmented, that might otherwise remain overlooked. To further explore the interactive map and widget, click [here](https://cetapsrepository.letas.up.pt/entities/publication/97a4ec45-ed5f-45af-9dab-037c2f1c7716) to access the CETAPS Digital Lab Blog, where the project is hosted.

Link

(<https://cetapsrepository.letas.up.pt/entities/publication/97a4ec45-ed5f-45af-9dab-037c2f1c7716>)