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“O LOST MOON SISTERS”:  
FEMINIST REVISION IN DIANE DI PRIMA’S *LOBA*

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty in the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
Chelsea Megan Mathes

May 2020

“O LOST MOON SISTERS”:  
FEMINIST REVISION IN DIANE DI PRIMA’S *LOBA*

Date Recommended 7/30/20



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“O LOST MOON SISTERS”:  
FEMINIST REVISION IN DIANE DI PRIMA’S *LOBA*

Chelsea Mathes

May 2020

59 pages

Directed by: Kelly Reames, Wes Berry, and Alison Langdon

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

In her master work, *Loba*, Diane di Prima revises a variety of traditionally male-centered narratives from a feminist viewpoint in the long tradition of feminist revision that is a cornerstone of Second Wave Feminism. This thesis examines five of the revisions of Christian, Jewish, and Greek stories present in *Loba: The Virgin Mary, Eve, Lilith, Helen of Troy, and Persephone*. Di Prima revises these stories to include the full—physical, spiritual, and emotional—experience of the woman, often from her own point of view, to give the woman agency over her own story and subvert the woman-as-object tradition present in male-authored and male-centered texts.

Di Prima’s revision of Mary’s Annunciation, Nativity, and Coronation stories emphasize her physical trauma and lack of agency over her own body eventually leaving Mary trapped in the dogma of her own son’s kingdom. The revision of Eve reinvests Eve with her original female creative power as the mother of all and provided her with some degree of freedom within the patriarchal structure of her marriage to Adam. Di Prima’s revision of Lilith’s story reclaims her sexuality as a source of feminine power and ultimately liberates Lilith. The revision of Helen of Troy is unique in that di Prima chooses to revise a text by a woman rather than a man. In her revision of Helen, di Prima removes Helen’s idolized pedestal and her male suitors providing Helen space to define herself for herself. Di Prima’s revisions of Persephone focus less on her physical

experience as a woman and more on her experiences with her different roles and relationships. Di Prima creates space for Persephone to exist in her many roles—wife, daughter, working woman—all at the same time allowing Persephone to be her whole and true self. In each of these revisions, di Prima reinvests the women with agency over their own stories with the overall goal to give women the tools to fight the patriarchy from within.

“O lost moon sisters”:  
Feminist Revisions in Diane di Prima’s *Loba*

Introduction

When you search “Diane di Prima Books” in Google the first book that shows up is her quasifictional memoir, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. The second result is her anarchist inspired collection of poems, *Revolutionary Letters*, and the third result is her second memoir, *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*. Di Prima, like many other female writers of the Beat generation, is most known for her life writing and earlier, more radical poetry. Readers identify more with di Prima’s life writing and early poetry because her style and content more closely reflect the male Beat cohort, which is usually the first introduction to the Beat generation for readers. I first read di Prima’s work as part of a unit on Beat literature in an American literature course in my undergraduate studies. We read Ginsberg, Kerouac, and di Prima together, and the di Prima works were earlier poetry and life writing. I’ve been studying, writing about, and teaching Diane di Prima’s works off and on for the five years since I first read “Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, after an Abortion” (1960) and excerpts from her second memoir. While I knew *Loba* existed, I did not discover that *Loba* was di Prima’s master work until I began preliminary research for this thesis. When I took a senior level course focused on Beat literature, we studied the master works of Ginsberg (*Howl*) and Kerouac (*On the Road*) among other male Beat writers. However, we read di Prima’s *Recollections of my Life as a Woman* instead of *Loba*. While limited time and course objectives often dictate the texts that appear on such a syllabus, all too often female Beat writers are relegated to what they can tell us about domestic life (i.e. women’s lives and the sordid tales of the men’s lives) rather than what



they can show us through their artistic mastery and spiritual insights. Diane di Prima's *Loba* represents the height of her artistic mastery and explores spirituality on the same level any of the men do but through a feminist revisionist lens. In *Loba*, di Prima uses the confessional style common in women's literature, in general, in a way that reinvests the form with spiritual artistry that represents the more traditional forms of poetry featured in both Beat and traditional canons of American literature. She blends the personal with the spiritual and physical to revise and resist the dominating male narrative that so often silences women's voices.

Because Beat writers—di Prima included—operate under a poetics that “The requirements of our life is the form of our art” (di Prima, *Recollections* 226), a brief biographical insight is necessary to fully appreciate di Prima's *Loba*. Diane di Prima's life takes up just three double-columned pages in the *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature* edited by Kurt Hemmer, but her life and writing mean so much more to young feminist Beat writers, like me, who study at the feet of this revolutionary woman. She was born to an Italian American family in Brooklyn, NY on August 6, 1934. From a young age, she has been heavily influenced by her anarchist maternal grandfather who instilled in her a love for the arts, especially of the poems of Dante Alighieri. By the age of 14, di Prima knew she was destined to be a poet and vowed to devote her life to poetry. Despite this vow, she studied physics at Swarthmore College for three years before dropping out just before her 20th birthday to live in New York (Hemmer 70). During this time, she worked in bookstores, so she could read as much as possible, sometimes well into the night.

According to Beat scholar Brenda Knight in her groundbreaking book *Women of the Beat*

*Generation*, the “new bohemians” made up di Prima’s group of friends and roommates in the early to mid-1950s before the Beats were well-known (123).

Shortly after leaving college, di Prima struck up a correspondence with Ezra Pound who was at the time in St. Elizabeth’s psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C., where she later visited him (Knight 123). Di Prima’s relationship with Pound proved to be very influential and was the beginning of a number of literary correspondences with other writers including well-known Beat writers Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Kenneth Patchen (Knight 124). Di Prima writes about her relationships with some of these men in her 2001 memoir *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. She sent Ferlinghetti poems, and he wrote back with comments and suggestions (*Recollections* 163-164). She learned poetry techniques from these and other male writers who were a bit older and more experienced writers than her. She considers herself to be one of the first women to break into what had previously been an all-male group of writers passing wisdom and knowledge from man to man. She got her foot in the door of this all-male club through her more intimate friendship with writer Frank O’Hara (Knight 124). O’Hara was a confidante and “loyal friend” to di Prima, especially during her affair with LeRoi Jones in the late 50s who, according to di Prima, O’Hara also had a crush on (*Recollections* 220). By the late 1950s, she finally met Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso in person in New York (Knight 125). Di Prima describes this first meeting in *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*: “we read our poems and peered at each other’s notebooks till we tired of that and Allen [Ginsberg] announced that he wanted to find some lovers” (164). Eventually, di Prima was spending time at Ginsberg’s New York place where other writers would join in the “important intense talk

about writing” (*Recollections* 201). One such night, di Prima needed to relieve her babysitter and when she told the group, which included Jack Kerouac and Philip Whalen, Kerouac told her ““Di Prima, unless you forget about your babysitter, you’re never going to be a writer”” (*Recollections* 202). She left anyway, somewhat doubting her ability to be a single mom and a writer, but she realized later that the discipline it takes to stay true to one’s word is the same discipline it takes to stick through “thick and thin to the business of making poems” (*Recollections* 202). Eventually, she articulated a poetics that merged the requirements of motherhood and art: “The requirements of our life is the form of our art” (*Recollections* 226). She continued a friendship with Ginsberg until his death and took *Howl* as “proof that the work [she] was doing. . .could and would be published” (*Recollections* 163).

Around the same time, she met LeRoi (now Amiri Baraka) and Hettie Jones, who she worked with on the literary journal *Yugen* and their small press, Totem Press (Hemmer 70). It was Totem Press that published her first book of poetry *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards* in 1958. Di Prima continued to work with LeRoi Jones through the 1960s on their literary newsletter *The Floating Bear*, which became an important arts newsletter for shaping and maintaining various avant-garde literary schools (Hemmer 71). During this time, di Prima was also publishing her own work with various presses and having babies—two activities she believes to be inherently connected through her creativity (Carden 45-46). Her first child, Jeanne, was born the year she published her first book of poetry. Her second daughter Dominique, who she had with LeRoi Jones, was born in 1961, the same year she published her first prose book *Dinners and Nightmares* with Corinth Press (Knight 125). All in all, di Prima has five children with

several different men. She believes it was important for her to have children with or without a husband and practiced free love in her younger years (Hemmer 71). Motherhood became, for di Prima, “a principle of Beat creativity,” which is certainly reflected in her work (Carden 45-46). Di Prima believes, like many Beats, that “one cannot separate one’s life as an artist from other duties, responsibilities, and desires” with motherhood being a major duty, responsibility, and desire for her (Hemmer 71). This idea and the idea that female poets need a domestic life and a poetic life that meld together is reflected heavily in her 1960 poem “Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, after an Abortion” where she reflects on the abortion she had between her first two daughters at the urging of the father (Hemmer 71). She provides a deeper look into this experience in her 2001 memoir *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*.

Before she published the full memoir of her New York years, di Prima published a more controversial and quasifictional *Memoirs of a Beatnik* with Olympia Press in 1969 (Hemmer 71). According to Mary Paniccia Carden in her recent book *Women Writers of the Beat Era*, the literary community has considered *Memoirs of a Beatnik* “fictionalized autobiographical narrative” (33). Indeed, some of the publishers of the book, including Penguin Books, have categorized it simply as fiction rather than memoir (33). Di Prima herself admits that when her editor returned her manuscripts with the words “MORE SEX” written on the front page she would “dream up odd angles of bodies or weird combinations of humans and cram them in and send it off again” (qtd. in Carden 38). Carden argues that the memoir reflects some of di Prima’s feminist ideals through its emphasis on “female choice, agency, and freedom” especially when it comes to sex (41). Di Prima turns the traditional male gaze around and has the readers of *Memoirs of a*

*Beatnik* objectify the men's bodies instead of the women's (Carden 41). This subversion of the male gaze represents an early instance of di Prima's technique of revision of patriarchal narratives to reinvest women with agency over their own bodies and stories that is so prevalent in her later works, especially her epic poem *Loba*. Di Prima's more traditional memoir, *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, also revises the male narratives of the Beat generation. According to Carden, di Prima revises both specific stories previously told by Beat men "to declare a female-centered alternative to authoritarian and masculinized definitions of artistic integrity" (53) and "the masculinized Beat mythos" in general (57). Di Prima uses her own reevaluation of her life in New York to challenge readers "to view the Beat Generation through an oppositional, revisionary lens" (Carden 34).

Towards the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, di Prima moved around a lot, traveling all around the country reading poetry with her children in tow. She eventually settled in San Francisco where she joined the Diggers, a political activist group where she met fellow poet Lenore Kandel (Hemmer 71-72; Knight 126). In 1971, she published what might be, according to critic Anthony Libby, her most influential work, *Revolutionary Letters*, which exposes her anarchist background (57 & 59). Contrary to her intense outrage in *Revolutionary Letters*, di Prima began her lifelong study of Buddhism around the same time. She began as a student of Zen Buddhism but now practices Tibetan Buddhism, which compliments her interest in magical arts (Hemmer 72). This Buddhist turn in her life began a shift from anger to spirituality in her personal life and a shift from political activism to contemplative, spiritual artistic production (Libby 63; Hemmer 72). Consequently, her Buddhism plays a key role in

much of her later work including *Loba*. As she turned more contemplative, di Prima also began teaching. She, along with Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Colorado in 1974 where she also taught for many years (“History of Naropa”). Diane di Prima’s career spans six decades and multiple genres and includes editing, publishing, and teaching. She has been a player in at least three major American cultural revolutions of the 20th century including modernism, the Beat movement, and the psychedelic consciousness and political activism of the 70s (Libby 45). She is also considered a precursor to second-wave feminism, which is evident in her master work *Loba* (Libby 46). She began to write *Loba* in the early 70s during her transition from outrage to contemplation and spirituality, which is reflected in the work.

*Loba* is di Prima’s magnum opus and is the result of decades of writing. The first eight parts of Book I were published in 1978 and the entirety of Books I and II were published in 1998, which is the version this research refers to (Hemmer 72). Di Prima has said that Book III is in progress, but there has been no publication as of yet. *Loba* is “a kaleidoscopic vision of female myth and reality,” a “multilayered vision of woman as the wolf goddess” (Hemmer 72). This layered collection of myth from across cultures comes together as a feminist revision of those patriarchal narratives that serve to subordinate women. Prior to the first publication of *Loba*, di Prima published “Canticle of St. Joan” where she revises the Maid of Orleans to be “a companion to dragons and a powerful force who mates with dark forces” (Libby 62). This earlier poem serves as a precursor to the larger feminist revision in *Loba* that aims to empower women with their own stories. *Loba* opens with this Author’s Note: “The Work is, like they say, in ‘progress’. The

author reserves the right to juggle, re-arrange, cut, osterize, re-cycle parts of the poem in future editions. As the Loba wishes, as the Goddess dictates.” Such an Author’s Note declares a spirit of revision from the very beginning and sets up di Prima’s dedication to the female perspective—in this case, that of the goddess.

Despite being di Prima’s master work, *Loba* has received little critical attention. What recent criticism of *Loba* there is focuses on her revision of myths in *Loba*. The resurgence of scholarship on the Beat generation in general has led to more criticism on *Loba* where earlier criticism focused on di Prima’s prose and more controversial poetry like *Revolutionary Letters*. The most recent criticism of *Loba* comes from Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo who states that *Loba* is “a feminist mapping of multiple representations of women through historical, mythological, and religious texts” (3). Through this collection of texts across contexts, Encarnación-Pinedo suggests that di Prima exposes the dangers and sometimes benefits of the perpetuation of such discourses (15). He argues that in order for us to learn from these past narratives, we must expose how they have been used to subordinate women. Polina MacKay argues that Di Prima’s rewrites, especially of the Virgin Mary, expose and challenge the roles of submission women have been cast into but leave us with the possibility of freedom (4). *Loba* achieves this through female archetypes that serve as different incarnations of the goddess or counterparts that challenge “the inscription of female subordination in history” (Encarnación-Pinedo 4).

Encarnación- Pinedo situates *Loba* within the context of the goddess movement and second-wave feminism because of di Prima’s interpretation of Christian and Gnostic texts, specifically the Gnostic Gospel of Eve and the Biblical stories of the Virgin Mary’s

life (4). MacKay also places di Prima within the context of second-wave feminists who she says were devoted to “revision as a politics of writing” (3). MacKay argues that di Prima’s move away from revision of patriarchal texts towards an independent women’s literature that is not defined by its response to men’s literature is central to *Loba*’s feminist reframing (6). Di Prima begins a search for “an ancient divine power” that, because it offers paths for women not defined by men, becomes “central to female independence” (Encarnación- Pinedo 13). 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). This combination of religious discourse and feminist reframing of such discourse allows di Prima to expose the subordination of women through these past narratives and suggest a new kind of women’s literature independent of its male counterpart.

Noted Beat scholars Nancy M. Grace and Tony Trigilio have also explored *Loba* in relation to its revision of past narratives. They co-authored a chapter in the 2018 critical anthology *Hip Sublime: Beat Writers and the Classical Tradition*. Grace and Trigilio’s article explores di Prima’s revision of classical narratives that “serve to restage female identity as subject rather than object through an emphasis on the female body thriving in its outsider relationship to masculinized religious cultures” (229). They argue that di Prima’s revision of myth disrupts “notions of gendered identities” and focuses on the Buddhist principle of evading “subject-object distinctions” including that between male-female (230). Like Encarnación- Pinedo and MacKay, Grace and Trigilio view *Loba* as a mosaic of fragments that comes together in a new poem to erase the “patriarchal pedestals” the original narrative stood on, making the poem a space for



“female emancipation” (229-230). They make these arguments through an intensive examination of the Greco-Roman thread that weaves through *Loba* through which di Prima “restage[s] the female self as subject rather than object” by ridding the female body of “the essentialized subordinate figurations” put on it by the “sacred and historical fathers” (245). Grace and Trigilio’s approach draws attention to di Prima’s Buddhist undertones that focus on the elimination of subject-object distinctions through the revision of classical Greco-Roman myth.

Other critics have taken an approach that focuses on di Prima’s emphasis on the female body. Roseanne Giannini Quinn uses French feminist Hélène Cixous’s philosophy of feminist literature that calls for women to write through their bodies and produce “true texts of women—female-sexed texts” as a framework for *Loba* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (20 & 23). In this chapter of the 2012 critical anthology *The Philosophy of the Beats*, Quinn argues that di Prima’s attention to the female body and the material realities of women in both texts is 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” in accordance with Hélène Cixous’s philosophy (24). For Quinn and others like Gillian Thomsen, the right for women to have a sexuality on their own terms is at the forefront of di Prima’s feminism (Quinn 25). Thomsen argues that di Prima is concerned with “new forms of signification by reconsidering the body, female sexuality, and normative gender roles throughout her texts” (2). Di Prima maintains a fluid and somewhat ambiguous sexuality in *Loba* that challenges preconceived notions of femininity and female sexuality (Thomsen 4 & 6). Similar to Grace and Trigilio, Thomsen points to di Prima’s challenge of the essentialism of biological sex as part of the

reenvisioning of gender di Prima engages in throughout *Loba* as well as the reconciliation of male and female in relation to the Buddhist principle of avoiding essentialist dichotomies (17-18). Both Quinn and Thomsen consider di Prima's focus on the female body a central player in her overall feminist restructuring of female sexuality and femininity in general.

Whether critics focus on di Prima's revision of religious texts and traditions, classical texts and traditions, or female sexuality, they all agree that, in *Loba*, di Prima engages in some kind of feminist revision. Each layer of di Prima's revision plays an important role in the overall vision of *Loba*. The religious and classical that will be the focus of my approach depend on di Prima's redefining of the female body, femininity, and sexuality. Furthermore, *Loba* comes from a long tradition of feminist revisionists that influence how di Prima approaches revision. As a precursor to second-wave feminism in her early years, di Prima draws inspiration from that movement as well as the closely related goddess movement, both of which are evident in *Loba*. My approach—in step with my own confessional, second-wave feminist, Beat identity—adds another level of feminist revision to di Prima's text itself. As a woman who, like di Prima, exists simultaneously as a spiritual, political, physical, emotional, and academic being, I could not write about *Loba* with any integrity without acknowledging that my spiritual connection to the piece is reflected in my interpretation. As a poet who is intentionally confessional and continually revising, revisiting, and reinventing narratives—including di Prima's many works—I approach my academic scholarship with this identity comingled with an academic, evidence-based mindset. This kind of scholarship rests on the

foundation of feminist revision that di Prima employs in *Loba* and many other women have employed before and after her.

### Feminist Revision

Feminist revision of traditionally patriarchal texts including religious, classical, and literary texts has been, according to Mackay, “a central axis of the feminist movement throughout the twentieth century” (2). However, revision of such texts and the figures that populate them did not begin in the twentieth century. Women writers in the nineteenth century often used figures like Eve as a cover to write “erotic verse” and Medea to express forbidden female rage (“Theives” Ostriker 214). With the rise of second-wave feminism in the mid to late 1900s, women writers began to engage in feminist revision more explicitly and with more frequency. In a 1972 essay written for the MLA Commission on the Status of Women, Adrienne Rich, a feminist revisionist herself, writes, “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (18). In order for women and our literature to survive in a male-dominated society, we must understand what assumptions are made about us as women (Rich 18). Such assumptions stem from patriarchal texts, figures, and stories that have permeated and formed culture requiring women’s literature to refuse “the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” through revision (Rich 18).

In her 1986 book chapter “Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythology”, Alicia Ostriker explores the practice of “revisionist mythmaking” by several women poets including H.D., a significant influence on Diane di Prima in *Loba*

especially. Ostriker defines “revisionist mythmaking” as the appropriation of myth for new meaning that usually makes cultural change possible (212-13). This kind of mythmaking requires “reevaluations of social, political, and philosophical values” (235). Like Rich, Ostriker views these revisions of myth as acts of survival (215). Through revision that embodies the female experience, women transform the myth that was once a pillar of “phallogocentric ‘high’ culture” into something that now cannot exclude them by its very nature (215).

Later, Ostriker uses the term feminist revision to talk about women’s revision of the Bible in her 1993 book *Feminist Revision and the Bible*. Here, Ostriker lays out three different types of revision women engage in: “hermeneutics of suspicion”, “hermeneutics of desire”, and “hermeneutics of indeterminacy” (66). Within the hermeneutics of suspicion, the poet “identifies herself as powerless” and resists and attacks “the embodiment of patriarchal power” (66). Within the hermeneutics of desire, the poet finds what she wants in the text and bends it to her will (66). Within the hermeneutics of indeterminacy, the poet’s interpretation of the text does not make truth claims and accepts many meanings of god all at once even if they are “mutually incompatible” (67). Diane di Prima works within all of these methods of revision in *Loba*, but the epic as a whole represents an interpretation of the divine that presents in many forms most of them “mutually incompatible.” No matter which hermeneutics a woman poet writes through, women’s biblical revisionism in general insists on the sensual and the flesh operating as holy and the flesh coexisting equitably with intellect within the female body (81).

Ostriker argues that the women’s literature that falls into the feminist revision tradition could be part of “a larger movement to resurrect the goddess whose presence

was denied and whose worship was forbidden at the advent of patriarchal monotheism” (*Feminist* 79). This larger movement, often referred to as the goddess movement, has several tenants that overlap with Biblical feminist revision including a reconnection of the body and spirit, a rejection of dogma, “the return and immanence of nature”, and “an insistence on the unmediated personal experience of the divine” (83). *Loba* is both feminist revision—Biblical or otherwise— and goddess poetry.

### The Goddess Movement

Following the beginning of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s, some women within the movement began searching for a more feminist version of spirituality. This search for the feminine divine resulted in a goddess movement that began in America in the 1970s, around the time Diane di Prima began writing and publishing parts of her epic poem *Loba* that invokes the goddess by her many names. According to psychologist of religion Denise Dijk, the goddess movement in America began as a search for “symbols with a positive meaning for women” (258). In general, the women of the goddess movement found themselves disenchanted by the patriarchal nature of the Western religions of their childhoods. By and large, the goddess movement was neither academic nor activist per se, but formed in clusters and collectives of the counterculture, around coffee pots and in covens. This is to say that di Prima’s goddess work was as likely inspired and informed by her inner journeys, bodily realities, and encounters with her sisters of the scene, as much she was by any methodological study or systematic theology.

Dijk lays out three aspects of the goddess movement: “studying matriarchal societies,” “creating a woman’s culture,” and “feminist witchcraft” (260). According to

feminist theologian Carol P. Christ in her 1997 book *Rebirth of the Goddess*, all of these aspects culminate in a religion that celebrates “female power as creative and vital” and writes women into the “mysteries of nature, in the cycles of birth, death, and renewal” (2-3). The study of matriarchal societies forms the foundation of the goddess movement because without the original stories of women in the past, women of the present have “been denied their own heritage” (Dijk 261). Christ claims that “women often live out inauthentic stories provided by a culture they did not create” (qtd. in Dijk 261). Even the stories *about* women in patriarchal society and religions are told to women *by* men. This is where study of women’s stories and a revision of stories about women told by men becomes paramount in the recovery of the goddess.

While Diane di Prima does not make any claims to a Goddess religion, she certainly evokes a goddess in *Loba*. The Author’s Note even says “as the Goddess dictates”. When she began writing *Loba*, di Prima was a practicing Zen Buddhist and since then has become a Tibetan Buddhist—clear evidence of a rejection of patriarchal Western religions. Even the impetus for this epic poem stems from a dream, similar to those described by women experiencing the goddess as young children, where di Prima and her children are chased by a she-wolf who eventually becomes a companion and caregiver (Grace and Trigilio 232). *Loba* explores a variety of different goddess myths and stories from many cultures traditionally told through a man’s voice.

For di Prima, the revision of such myths as the Virgin Mary, Eve, and Helen of Troy that have previously been told to women by men becomes what Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo describes as “tools to dwell in patriarchy and to fight from within” (14). In *Loba*, Diane di Prima revises a series of stories from Christianity, mythology,

literature, and other sources with the she-wolf, Loba, as the central myth. Each revision tells the original story from a feminist viewpoint emphasizing the lived experiences of women to subvert the woman-as-object tradition present in each story and create a tradition where the woman operates as the subject of the story. *Loba's* fragmented collection of women's histories brings the forgotten experiences of women alive as a resistance to the patriarchal structures that first put the myths into place.

#### La Loba: A Brief Context

The titular myth of *Loba* comes from the Mexican myth of La Loba or the Wolf Woman. La Loba represents the archetype of the Wild Woman. She is also referred to as the bone woman because she collects wolf bones and creates whole skeletons. According to Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés, La Loba specifically collects and preserves “that which is in danger of being lost to the world” (27). Once she has an entire wolf skeleton, La Loba sings over the bones and the wolf regains her body and her life. Finally, when a ray of sunlight or moonlight hits the wolf at the right time it turns into a laughing woman and runs toward the horizon (Leeming and Page 173-174). La Loba is wild and life giving. As Estés puts it, “she is an archivist of feminine intention. She preserves female tradition” (29). She returns as the goddess in *Loba* over and over again and is often depicted with her young and singing or dancing. Di Prima uses the Wolf Woman as a focal point for her poem as a way to emphasize female creativity, the life giving nature of women, and the deep connection to nature the goddess brings about. However because of her preservation of female tradition that might otherwise have been lost to the world, La Loba's presence as the titular myth in *Loba* also further highlights di

Prima's mission to collect, archive, and revise the stories of women that have been distorted, stolen, hidden, and lost in patriarchal structures.

### Chapter 1: Revisions of Christian and Jewish Mythology

While *Loba* is dominated by myths outside of the Jewish and Christian traditions, it contains three substantial sections dedicated to prominent female figures of these traditions. Feminist theologians and goddess practitioners alike find Mary, as well as Eve and Lilith to a lesser extent, compelling figures for contemplation and adoration; likewise, Mary, Eve, and Lilith are a focus for this interpretation of *Loba*. These figures appear in Parts 4, 5, and 6 in sections titled "LOBA AS EVE", "LILITH: AN INTERLUDE", and "The Seven Joys of the Virgin" respectively. Eve appears first in *Loba* as the accepted first woman in the Christian tradition, while Lilith appears second as the dark counterpart to Eve in the Jewish tradition. Even though Mary appears third in *Loba*, she appears first in this discussion because di Prima's revision of Mary's story establishes an important focus on the physical experiences of women that continues throughout not only the revisions of Jewish and Christian myths but also the revisions of Greek myths in *Loba*. Furthermore, di Prima's Mary never regains her own agency despite di Prima's inclusion of Mary's full, true story. Eve, on the other hand, emerges triumphant and free to some extent in di Prima's revision, while Lilith becomes the most independent of the three.

In Part 6 of *Loba*, somewhat ironically titled "The Seven Joys of the Virgin," di Prima retells the Virgin Mary's story from Mary's point of view, including the seven traditional stories of Annunciation, Visitation (to Elizabeth), Nativity, The Marriage at Cana, Resurrection of Jesus, and the Coronation of the Virgin in Heaven. Traditionally,



these texts, when told from a male writer's perspective, situate Mary as the object of God's plan. Even though di Prima's revisions tell essentially the same story, the focus shifts to Mary, making her the subject of her own life story.

Mary's consent to the conception of Jesus is widely accepted by Christian thinkers, but di Prima calls Mary's consent to sex and pregnancy into question. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the story of the Annunciation is narrated from a man's perspective, depicting the angel Gabriel relaying God's plan to impregnate the Virgin with his son. When Mary asks how she is to become pregnant even though she is a virgin, Gabriel responds, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee" (*King James Version*, Luke 1:35). The language of the man's retelling suggests an unfair power struggle where Mary, having little power as a young woman is at the mercy of the highest power. Despite this language of subordination, Mary does offer an apparent statement of consent according to the Gospel of Luke. Following the pronouncement above, Mary says, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). While Mary's statement here can be read as consent to become pregnant with Jesus, some feminist theologians like Jane Schaberg argue that Gabriel's response to Mary's question of how she is to become pregnant only promises "the presence of the Holy Spirit" and does not specify the act that will result in the pregnancy (130). According to this premise, Mary then consents to "a future pregnancy and motherhood" but not the actual act that will cause the pregnancy (Schaberg 130). Regardless of the level of consent interpreted from the original text, di Prima's Mary clearly offers no consent to pregnancy, motherhood, or sex.

In her revision of the Annunciation, di Prima makes it clear that Mary, who was “fifteen only,” has no agency and is ultimately raped at the conception of Jesus (101). According to Estibaliz Encarnación-Pinedo, “di Prima’s annunciation is not God’s favor, but a violent rape” (7). Unlike the original Annunciation story where Mary is greeted with a blessing, di Prima’s Mary only finds a strange, angry man waiting for her in her home:

the tall man, towering  
it seemed to me  
in anger. I was fifteen only  
& his urgency  
(murderous rage) an assault I  
bent under. . .  
. . .I had just  
gone to the well for water & when I returned  
he was there. A flat stone. Towering. (101)

Mary and the world around her become subject to the “murderous rage like the Law ” of “the tall man towering” over her with a harsh voice (di Prima 101). Even the house shakes during this assault: “the red tiles / shifted beneath me” (101). Mary attempts to evade the man but is eventually brought to her knees in tears. Di Prima’s depiction of the conception of Jesus as a violent rape underscores how Mary’s body in particular and women’s bodies in general are used without consent to further the mission of the patriarchal leaders.

In dramatic contrast to disembodied religious interpretations of the same story, di Prima maintains a sharp focus on Mary's physical experience throughout the Annunciation poem. While the original story presented in the Gospel of Luke refers to the Holy Ghost impregnating Mary, di Prima puts the angel sent to tell Mary of Jesus's conception in that role. This is evidenced by the man who rapes Mary repeating a similar greeting to the messenger angel's in the first chapter of Luke: "HAIL, FULL OF GRACE" (di Prima 101). The distinction di Prima makes here between the messenger angel and the holy spirit is crucial because an angel is often depicted with a corporeal presence that would be potentially capable of the act of rape, whereas the Holy Spirit is not represented by a physical body; thus, the angel's body can enact physical violence on Mary's body, consequently objectifying her body for his own purposes. While Mary remains an object to the angel only fit to be a vessel for his will, di Prima's revision tells the story with Mary's experience at the center. The centrality of Mary's physical experiences transforms Mary into the author and the subject of her own story, when the original story never mentions her physical experience. Di Prima repeatedly describes the man—or angel—as "towering" (101) and his voice as "thunder" (102). Mary, then, remains "bent under" (101) him throughout the poem. Her "body [is] / bent under weight of robes" and her "head too bent / under weight of hair" until she falls to her knees and weeps (102). The juxtaposed physical descriptions of the man and woman here highlight the woman's unjust subordination, made all the more heinous by her young age and innocence.

Di Prima emphasizes Mary's fragility, purity, and innocence in comparison to the man, through the image of lilies that experience the assault similarly to Mary. As the man

towers over Mary, “the lilies bend/ also” (101). Lilies are commonly used to describe people of “exceptional whiteness, fairness, or purity” (“lily, n. and adj”), which explains why they are traditionally associated with Mary. In the Greek tradition, though, lilies are associated with Hera, goddess of marriage, who is said to have created them with her breast milk (“Hera”). Throughout *Loba, di Prima* blends traditions like this as she reveals the many identities of the goddess. Often, she does this in separate poems or series of poems dedicated to a particular incarnation of the goddess like this series of poems concerning Mary. Other times, she weaves different incarnations together in the same poem. For example, she evokes both Helen of Troy and the Jewish Lilith in one of the final poems of the series titled “LILITH: AN INTERLUDE” (92). The premise of combining traditions allows for multiple interpretations of the same image regardless of the dominant tradition being explored in the poem at hand. Here di Prima’s use of lilies bent alongside Mary further highlights her purity through the Christian tradition and her potential for childbearing through the Greek tradition.

Besides the physical intimidation, the angel exploits his heavenly authority by hiding behind thunder and “blinding light” and an empty blessing of “HAIL, FULL OF GRACE” (101). In these instances, di Prima calls out the hypocrisy of the original story steeped in patriarchal religion. Angels are often described in relation to blinding light, and their arrival is usually announced by some loud noise. Such fanfare places the recipient of the angel’s message in awe, but di Prima’s Mary is so frightened that she only hears bits and pieces of the message: “his voice/ had turned to thunder, there was / no word to remember. But Womb” (102). The only word Mary remembers is directly tied to her physical trauma and the continuation of that trauma that pregnancy and

childbirth will bring. Her womb is the only thing of any importance to the structures that have perpetrated this assault on her: “He spoke of my womb. / The fruit of my womb” (102). These lines distinguish Mary the person from her womb, emphasizing the depersonalization inflicted upon Mary by those using her body as a means to an end. The angel hides behind “blinding light” and thunder, apparently honoring Mary through her womb, but Mary only comes out of it confused—not honored. Mary’s confusion only further emphasizes her lack of consent and solidifies her as a vessel to be exploited by the male angel. In the middle of the rape, as the world is literally moving beneath Mary, the angel shouts “HAIL, FULL OF GRACE” (101). The angel can shout that he is filling Mary with grace all he likes, but that does not justify rape. He attempts to hide his domination of Mary behind a wall of dogma, just as patriarchal religions attempt to hide the subordination of women behind scripture.

Mary remains forever changed by her trauma, but di Prima takes the last stanza of the Annunciation poem to remind us of Mary’s youth through the image of her “young girl’s hands” that spin not violet thread as she did before the rape but scarlet thread (103). In the end, Mary stands up “as one stands/ after earthquake” and continues her work spinning thread “for the temple” (103). According to New Testament scholar Lourdes García Ureña, purple or violet is associated with wealth and royalty but more importantly served as the color of the “holy tent of the tabernacle” and the priest’s robes among other religious objects (227). In the beginning of the Annunciation poem, Mary “had been spinning” violet thread “for the temple veil,” signifying her devotion to the church and worthiness to prepare holy vestments (101). By the end of the poem, she is weaving scarlet thread instead. While scarlet was also associated with wealth and worship, “its

symbolic meaning is related to blood and also sin” (Ureña 226). So, following her rape, di Prima’s Mary can no longer worship or prepare cloth for the church that is not tainted with blood and sin. Despite this change, though, she does return to her work signifying some degree of resilience. While Mary is clearly changed by her trauma as evidenced by the difference in thread color, di Prima still emphasizes Mary’s young age in her description of Mary’s “young girl’s hands” (103). We are left with an image of resilience as Mary continues on: “I stood again, as one stands / after earthquake” (103). The image of standing after an earthquake indicates that despite survival of said earthquake, Mary is not unchanged by it just as the land cannot remain unchanged by an earthquake. Her hands may still be youthful, but they spin scarlet thread now not violet.

After nine months of the pregnancy that resulted from her rape in the Annunciation poem, Mary faces her labor and childbirth, that unlike other depictions of labor and childbirth in *Loba*, which tend to be empowering experiences for the mother, leaves Mary helpless and physically violated again. On the whole, di Prima considers childbirth and labor a moment of empowerment for women where the mother should be allowed to be “conscious” and “present” through the whole process (*Recollections* 169). In “LOBA IN CHILDBED,” which appears well before Mary’s Nativity poem in *Loba*, di Prima depicts the Loba’s labor and birth as an active and empowering process. The Loba is determined that “remembering / [is] what she *should* do” as she tries “to open, to widen tunnel” despite “screaming” in pain (30). Here the Loba fights through the pain of childbirth to remember the spiritual and empowering experience of bringing life into the world. Di Prima refers to both the womb and the child as “spirit”: “Skull boat / carried her to the heart of her womb, red / pulsing eye of her spirit. . . / bright spirit hammered at

it w/his / softy foamy head” (30). For the Loba, childbirth becomes about actively opening up to this spirit on her own terms through her own consciousness. The same is not true for Mary in the Nativity poem later in the book. Mary, like the Loba, is in tune with her body as it goes into labor and desires to experience the birthing of her child: “Dark timbers of lost forests falling into my bed. / My hairs stirring, not asleep. . . Forced gas mask over mouth, / slave. I cd not / turn head” (107). Di Prima’s use of this natural imagery for labor connects Mary to the Loba and to nature itself revealing the same deep need to move forward with this birth just as the Loba did. Similarly, Mary’s clear attempt at resisting the gas mask by turning her head confirms her desire to be conscious and active in her childbirth experience. However, Mary is drugged to sleep by some unknown outside force and robbed of the spiritual and empowering experience of childbirth. She will not remember as the Loba does. The stark contrast of the Loba’s childbirth experience and Mary’s childbirth experience, despite both mothers’ desire to participate actively, further highlights Mary’s lack of agency over her body and the physical violation she undergoes.

In true confessional Beat woman fashion, di Prima’s revision of the Nativity directly reflects her own traumatic experience of being “strapped onto the delivery table” and having a gas mask forced over her mouth until she passed out (*Recollections* 170). Di Prima explores her own need to experience childbirth naturally and consciously—it was the custom to put women to sleep in the late 50s—in her 2001 memoir *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. This experience of natural childbirth was considered a rite of passage for hippy women and some second wave feminists like di Prima. She, however, was “not allowed to be Witness” to the birth of her first child (*Recollections* 170). She

made her desire to have a completely natural childbirth known to her nurses and doctors who respected her wishes—albeit with many attempts to persuade her otherwise—until the moment when the baby crowned when di Prima was forcibly put to sleep (*Recollections* 169-170). Mary’s revised birth experience is no less traumatic than di Prima’s, and she continues to have no say in how her body is used to bring Jesus into the world. According to Encarnación-Pinedo, Mary’s labor “becomes an oppressive, forced activity” (8) as she is tied to the table, forced to go under the gas mask, and “they tore child from” her (di Prima 107). The contrast of Mary’s experience to other depictions of childbirth in *Loba* that seek an “an alternative creative power which can be configured as feminine and maternal” (Friedman qtd. in Encarnación-Pinedo 8) serves to highlight the domination of women in the patriarchal myths of the Christian story.

Mary’s physical experience of childbirth is central to di Prima’s revision because Mary’s side of the childbirth story is never mentioned in the original text which obscures Mary’s subordination and physical trauma. The birth of Jesus as recounted in the second chapter of Luke pays no attention to the physical experience of Mary. It only states, “And she brought forth her firstborn son” (Luke 2:7). Such an oversight effectively places Mary, who has just labored sans medication or doctors in the middle of a barn to bring the Messiah into the world, in a position so inferior that her pains and sacrifice can be summed up in seven words. Di Prima’s revision gives voice to Mary so that as every contraction wracks her young body, as every scream escapes her silent mouth, as every drop of blood escapes her torn body, the veil of consent to submission is torn from the altar of Mary’s rape and subsequent birthing of her rapist’s offspring who comes “horned, like a king” and whose young mother does “not speak of this” or anything else (di Prima



108). This image of Jesus arriving “horned, like a king” could refer to a number of pagan deities represented with horns. However, given the king designation, it is likely this is a reference to Moloch the horned Canaanite deity to whom children were sacrificed. The name Moloch comes from the Hebrew word “Melekh,” which means king (Strom). Moloch also appears in Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, which, at the time of its publication, di Prima considered to be “proof that the work [she] was doing. . . could and would be published” (*Recollections* 163). In *Howl*, Ginsberg uses Moloch as a metaphor for how materialism, capitalism, and the American government takes away freedom of love and spirituality: “Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks!” (22), “Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog!” (21), “Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows!” (21). Di Prima uses the Moloch metaphor to represent Mary’s birth experience as the sacrifice of her childhood for the sake of man. Ginsberg and di Prima’s use of Moloch points toward a loss of freedom in one way or another. Furthermore, the sacrifice of children to Moloch was traditionally performed through fire, emphasizing both Mary’s transformation into a mother and woman—just as metal is transformed through fire—and her physical trauma following childbirth.

The last poem in Mary’s sequence depicts her coronation as the Queen of Heaven following her death—a story that does not appear in scripture but plays an important role in some Christian denominations. Despite no direct scriptural evidence, the Roman Catholic Church accepts the belief that upon her death, Mary “was assumed body and soul into heaven” (Pope Pius XII qtd. in Naumann). While this direct definition comes from Pope Pius XII in 1950, the belief in Mary’s assumption to heaven, body and soul, dates well back to the Middle Ages (Naumann). The rise of Mary’s body and soul to

heaven comes with celebration and joy including many feasts and prayers. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Mary appears on a "glorious throne" as the "Lady of Heaven" (*Par.* 32.28-29). In these patriarchal traditions, Mary operates as a crowned Queen of Heaven who remains seated on the throne bestowed upon her by God—by her own son.

Di Prima's revision of Mary's coronation tells the story from the point of view of a woman who even in death has had her own body and soul constrained in the trappings of ritual and dogma. Somewhat trusting in the good will of her son or blinded by the veiled promises of religion, she leaps "onto the safety of the iron rose" (117)—a direct allusion to Dante's rose-shaped Empyrean where Mary presides ensconced at the very top of the flower (*Par.* 30). While Dante uses the image of a white rose for Mary's court (*Par.* 30.117), di Prima explicitly depicts the rose as "iron". The image of iron juxtaposed with the image of a rose indicates an innocent, earthly thing essentially jailed, "clapped in irons" if you will, by that which should have protected it. These opening lines set a tone of submission and oppression for the entire coronation poem, which should be a moment of great triumph; however, because the coronation is forced and succeeds in trapping Mary where she does not want to be, it becomes a moment of bondage.

At her coronation, di Prima's Mary becomes subject to a position she does not consent to and remains the captive of a patriarchal religion. Following Mary's great leap of faith onto the iron rose, her son immediately "sets weight of metal/on [her] immaterial head" (117). At this moment of her crowning, Mary becomes forever stationary:

Monumental. I lack  
even the grace of that girl  
who bent to angels.

Flexible limbs of my flight

thru Egyptian desert (118)

She is even more powerless, with a crown atop her head, than during the rape or the flight for her and her son's lives through a wasteland. She grows wings that cause less pain than that of the crown and asks, "while the stars rush outward / to darkness, must I / remain still?" (117). Di Prima's Mary has been tricked by a religion and faith that "eternally promise[s] / perfection" but actually consumes her joy (118). Just as in the end of the "ANNUNCIATION" where Mary stands again in resilience despite her trauma, di Prima's revised Mary at her coronation promises to "Burst thru / Take now / milke of the stars / & rub it in my flesh / like sabbath ointment" (119). She insists that she "will fly / Broomless, unarmed, unready" into the star-studded darkness where she belongs. Di Prima leaves Mary enthroned in iron but envisions a time when Mary—and all women—should be finally free from the shackles of dogma veiled in such a coronation.

Eve: "the Name of Everything"

If Mary is blessed among women, then Eve is cursed among women in the traditional story. As the assumed perpetrator of the first sin, Eve becomes an example of who not to be as a woman in the church. Mary's virginity and submission make her the ideal of womanhood and more importantly motherhood, but di Prima's Eve recaptures her place as the first mother and establishes the creative power required to birth and raise the first offspring. In a much shorter series of poems titled "Loba as Eve" and placed at the end of Part 5, di Prima gives Eve back her status of "Materia, mother & matrix" that has long been overshadowed by her role in the fall of man (73). Since her encounter with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Eve has been largely reduced to a sinner—or

according to Dante, “she who / opened and inflicted” “the wound that Mary closed and anointed” (*Par.* 32.4-6). While Dante indicts Eve for her fall, he still places her in a position of honor in Mary’s Heavenly court just below the Virgin herself (*Par.* 32. 4-6). Similarly, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton makes Eve’s fall—despite being tricked with flattery by Satan—a clear result of her inferior intellect, vanity, and overall sinfulness but also allows Eve redemption in her reconciliation with her role as submissive wife and mother to all including Mary who will ultimately redeem Eve’s fall through the birth of Jesus (Gilbert). Despite such redemption in these two prominent literary depictions of Eve, according to feminist scholar Sandra Gilbert, many women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries lamented Eve’s fall “as a problematic construction that is also an obstruction for women”. Di Prima seems to adhere to this lamentation in her revision of Eve in *Loba*. In Genesis, Eve seeks wisdom and power against the wishes of God, and for this, she is cursed with pain and sorrow in childbirth (Gen. 3:16). When God asks Adam why he ate from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam blames his wife, saying, “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree” as if he did not know where the fruit came from (Gen. 3:12). With this accusation, Eve, despite being “the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20), lives the rest of her days under the rule of her husband and so do many women after her. That being said, many traditions and individuals today do not read Genesis as a justification for the subordination of women.

Eve’s revision positions her in the context of the Loba, who represents a desire to “preserve especially that which is in danger of being lost to the world” (Estés 27). La Loba collects and breathes life into “the indestructible life force, the bones” of the forgotten creatures (Estés 28). Di Prima re-envision the Loba as Eve so that the lost parts

of Eve, those parts deemed insignificant because of her sin, may be recovered and reclaimed. Unlike Mary's story that requires explication for the sake of her passed over physical and emotional experiences, Eve's story requires explication for the sake of her spiritual significance and feminine, maternal power.

Di Prima's Eve actively seeks an opportunity to redefine herself in her own words after being primarily defined as sinner by the words of men for so long. This revision of Eve begins with a short poem titled "i am thou & thou art i," in which Eve makes a series of statements about who she is and what she does beginning with the all-encompassing phrase "I am" (71). This phrase directly connects Eve to the God of Moses in Exodus 3, who, besides beginning his conversation with Moses with several self-defining "I am" statements, refers to his own name simply as "I AM" (Ex. 3:14). Di Prima's Eve, then, regains her position as the "name of everything" (73). Eve has never had the chance to define herself. She is first defined by God and then defined by her husband. The only choice she seems to make in scripture is to eat the forbidden fruit, and she does that in search of wisdom and under false claims from the serpent. Di Prima's revision finally allows Eve a say in how she wants to be defined. Eve defines herself in many ways: "I shine," "I chant," "I am pearl," "I am worm," and "I am sacred" (di Prima 71). In these simple statements, Eve regains agency in her actions and defines herself as special, of the earth, and sacred, ultimately putting herself on the same playing field as her husband and giving herself the attributes of a woman who is truly "the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20). Di Prima transforms Eve into the literal subject of her own story with these "I" statements in Eve's first poem. In the original story depicted in Genesis 3, the only "I" statement Eve makes is "I did eat" as her confession of disobedience to God (Gen. 3:13).

At this point in the story, she does not even have a name but is instead referred to as “the woman” until Adam names her (Gen. 3:20). Di Prima’s Eve, though, names herself over and over again and defines her own actions with the same authority Adam takes when he names her in Genesis and blames her for his actions.

As the poems go on, di Prima revises Eve to permeate all living things as “the mother goddess” rather than the “eternal sinner” she is usually depicted as (Encarnación-Pinedo 5). Eve tends to her children as the one “who picks / sorrows like lice from [their] heart” and “keeps the bats from flying in [their] window” (72). She is everywhere and is “the Name of everything” (73). Instead of Eve the temptress, di Prima gives us Eve the mother, the creator, the nurturer, the bringer of revolution. This Eve explodes “your certain myth” (74) that forgets her original place as the “Blue earth” where she has never been naked (75). Di Prima’s Eve “crawl[s] slimy from a cave beneath yr heart” and confronts the world with “the scroll of yr despair” (74). She “hovers / over the heavy waters of that Sea” (di Prima 75) repositioning herself as the creatrix, as “the Spirit of God [who] moved upon the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2) at their inception. In the end, Eve emerges triumphant and hurls “the shafts of dawn like agony / down the night” (di Prima 75).

Eve’s active liberation at the end of her sequence contrasts not only the original story but also the stationary ending di Prima leaves for Mary later in *Loba*. Where Eve takes control of her life and actively participates in the narrative, Mary remains ensconced in her iron throne at the mercy of a patriarchal religion. Di Prima chooses to let Mary tell her story but not completely liberate her. This choice provides a foundation of hope upon which Eve builds on by taking her agency one step further. Di Prima’s

Lilith further takes her life and body into her own hands refusing to be defined or used by man.

Lilith: “it is flesh”

If Eve’s being responsible for the fall of man was not enough, the Jewish legend of Lilith states that Adam actually had a wife before Eve who was made from the earth like him and so considered herself equal to her husband, which resulted in a fight. Lilith is said to have fled from Adam, who complains to God of her abandonment. When God sends angels after Lilith to bring her back, she refuses, and God curses her so that “she would have to give birth to a hundred demons every day, and they would die by nightfall” (Ostriker, *Feminist* 99). Lilith is viewed as a seductress who steals the semen of men in the night to produce her demon children. According to Michele Osherow, she is characterized as a devil dangerous to pregnant women and small children in the Jewish tradition (70). Feminist revisions of Lilith are common and began in the 1970s when Jewish feminists resurrected Lilith’s independence, courage, and power as a symbol for their movement (Osherow 71).

Di Prima’s revision of Lilith does not seek to expose the patriarchal myth in the same way her revisions of Mary and Eve do. In Mary’s case, the goal is to expose the terrible abuse of a young girl. In Eve’s case, the goal is to expose the forgotten heritage of the mother of all that has been lost to the more powerful inheritance of her sin. With the revision of Lilith, the goal becomes to reclaim parts of the demeaning myth in a way that highlights Lilith’s power.

Di Prima creates a Lilith who is celebrated for her powerful and sometimes violent sexuality. She “sits like sphinx on yr chest” challenging anyone who dares to

“win at her game” (85). In Egyptian myth, where the sphinx originated, the sphinx is considered to be a guardian of sacred places and usually depicted with the head of a man and the body of a lion. In Greek myth, the sphinx has the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle. The Greek myth tells a story of a single sphinx sent to terrorize the town of Thebes. She would only leave the city alone if someone answered her riddle correctly; she devoured those who answered incorrectly. When Oedipus eventually answered her riddle correctly, the sphinx killed herself (Cartwright). By comparing Lilith to a sphinx, most likely the Greek sphinx considering the game aspect of the simile, di Prima highlights Lilith’s violence and power and transforms it into agency. This sphinx Lilith who sits on the chest of man holds all the power in their sexual encounter; furthermore, she holds that power in her own intellect as a gatekeeper whose keys depend on the power of the mind not the body. She knows her own mind and does not tolerate men misrepresenting her with incorrect riddle answers so to speak.

Di Prima continually represents Lilith’s sexuality as her own. When di Prima’s Lilith is threatened with an infringement on her agency, particularly when it comes to her sexuality, she fights back with violence. In these cases, di Prima juxtaposes softness with sharpness, luxury with squalor revealing Lilith’s ambiguous nature. Unlike the original Lilith who is easily defined as demonic and predatory, di Prima’s Lilith’s ambiguity ensures that she, and only she, can define herself. Di Prima presents an image of Lilith sleeping “on sheepskins in” the dining room of a potential lover with her head resting on a “velvet pillow” that is torn as “lice writhe in her eyebrows” (89). This image of Lilith presents her as vulnerable in her sleep yet grotesque, perhaps in warning of her potential for violence should she be disturbed. Despite Lilith’s vulnerability in this moment the



instant the lover “slip[s] the fringed piano shawl / off her skinny shoulders, she sinks her teeth / in [his] wrist” (89). Her body is not to be exposed by anyone other than herself. She maintains control of her own story and determines how and when her body will express sexuality. This Lilith, like the sphinx and unlike Mary and Eve, has the power to enact violence on those who propose to violate the sacred temple that is her body.

The ambiguity of this Lilith protects her from becoming the object of other’s definitions. Di Prima’s Lilith vacillates between “fluid and conflicting representational narratives” (Encarnación-Pinedo 7). She is both male and female as a “soft / hermaphrodite” (87). She has “wings of a bat” (85), is “The horned lady” (86), has “succulent” flesh (88), is mother to “demon children” (85), and relishes in the thought of “the glorious vegetable soup / she will make, tomorrow” as she “shoots smack into her arm” (89). This Lilith is mythical, ungendered, and rough, yet she is also

Where land touches water; where fire meets w/air

where guts of earth burst out in coal, or diamond:

it is flesh, it is flesh, it is Lilith. Interface. (di Prima 92)

A revision of Lilith like this reclaims the female body and all of its sex, violence, and softness in a way that makes a woman’s need for earthly and fleshly experiences acceptable and even celebrated. Di Prima’s Lilith reclaims the violence projected on her by the patriarchal myths that created her. She uses that violence to vehemently protect her right to define herself and set the parameters for how her body will be used.

This research presents Mary, Eve, and Lilith in the reverse order of scripture while di Prima reverses Eve and Lilith but not Mary chronologically according to scripture and legend. Both approaches serve to highlight the varying degrees of liberation

and agency each woman fought for under varying degrees of oppression established by men. Di Prima's approach also depends on the surrounding revisions of texts outside of the Christian and Jewish traditions that are not included in the scope of this research. Mary, appearing last in *Loba* and scripture, carries centuries of women's subordination through faith and religion on her shoulders. It makes sense that di Prima's revision of Mary stops short of full liberation because, unlike Eve who has no established religion to fight against, Mary operates within a power structure slated against her. Di Prima's Eve, then, attains liberation but in a way that maintains her mother status within the family structure with Adam. She may reclaim her power as creatrix, but she is still "eternally in labor" caring for infants who "suckle at [her] tits" (di Prima 73-74). Lilith, who appears after Eve in *Loba* but before her in lineage as Adam's first wife according to Jewish legend, attains a more complete liberation from patriarchal religion in di Prima's revision of her story because she maintains control of her own body.

Regardless of their level of liberation, di Prima gives each woman the opportunity to tell her lost story. As reincarnations of the goddess—of the Loba—Mary, Eve, and Lilith gather up the bones of their forgotten stories and sing life into them with the express purpose of revealing the structures who buried those stories in the first place. Di Prima brings the often-overlooked physical experiences of women—violence, sex, pregnancy, and childbirth—back to the surface finally making each woman the subject of her own story if not the author.

## Chapter 2: Revisions of Greek Myth

The revisions of Greek myth in *Loba* are far more prevalent than the revisions of Christian or Jewish traditions. Besides a variety of allusions to other Greek gods,

goddesses, and mythical figures, di Prima devotes whole poems to Apollo, Eros, Aphrodite, and several others. Two Greek revisions stand out as different or more significant than the others when it comes to feminist revision in *Loba*: Helen of Troy and Persephone. Di Prima's revision of Helen of Troy comes from H.D.'s revision of Helen's story, *Helen in Egypt* and appears at the beginning of Part 5. This is significant because the other revisions explored here are revisions of male-authored texts. By revising H.D.'s Helen story rather than the original, di Prima expands women's literature to further emphasize the need to continually give female voices agency. Just as di Prima centers Mary's physical experience to make Mary the subject of her own story, she also emphasizes Helen's physical experience on the wall so that Helen is telling her own story rather than being the object of lust and violence in the story of Troy. Persephone appears in two poems named after her—one just after the Lilith series and the very last poem of the book. Persephone's poems are unique in the group of five women this research examines in that di Prima's theme for Persephone's revised stories focuses less on Persephone's physical experiences and more on her inner dilemmas regarding her personal relationships. These two poems explore the intricate balance of Persephone's complicated relationships with her husband, her mother, and her work. Di Prima creates a space in both the Helen and Persephone poems for each woman to take control of her own story rather than be defined by her relationships to men. Furthermore, the Persephone poems represent an important theme of significant woman-woman relationships, which are often written out of or ignored by male-authored texts but are crucial to the lived experiences of women.

Greek myth says that Helen is the result of Zeus's rape of the mortal Leda while he was in the form of a swan. Helen was courted by many men but eventually married Menelaus, King of Sparta. One myth says that when the goddess of discord presented an apple engraved with "to the fairest" at a wedding attended by Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, each goddess claimed the apple for her own. Zeus asked Paris to make a judgement at which point each goddess offered him gifts to choose her as the fairest. Paris eventually decided to accept Aphrodite's gift of the most beautiful woman in the world—Helen. This myth suggests that Paris abducted Helen and took her back to Troy. Other myths say that Helen eloped with Paris of her own free will. Either way the disappearance of the Queen of Sparta with the Prince of Troy began the Trojan War.

Diane di Prima's revision of Helen is actually a revision of H.D.'s famous revision of Euripides' Helen story. Just as in Euripides' story, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* places Helen in Egypt instead of Troy so that the war is fought over a woman who is not even there. H.D. creates a phantom of Helen that lives on the wall of Troy and has her own thoughts and feelings. According to Polina Mackay, the poem explores how others especially Achilles, who is Helen's main love interest in H.D.'s revision, perceive Helen (5). *Helen in Egypt* questions the identity of Helen including all of the myths surrounding her presented through the voices of other featured characters of those myths. In the end, H.D. presents Helen "as both an idol and as nothing like the woman who everyone adored or hated" but finally able to envision her own story (Mackay 5-6).

In di Prima's first Helen poem at the beginning of Part 5 of *Loba*, she places Helen on the wall in Egypt but removes Helen's idol status and gives her substance beyond how others may define her, ultimately creating space for Helen to define her own

existence later on. Di Prima's Helen is neither a phantom nor an idol: "Helen on the wall / not real, not eidolon" (di Prima 79). The word "eidolon" means "an insubstantial image, spectre, phantom"; however, it also derives from the ancient Greek word for idol ("eidolon, n"). The word "real", though, has two possible definitions. There's the most common definition of "having an objective existence" ("real, n.3"). However, "real" can also be defined as "actual", "significant", or "able to be grasped by the imagination" ("real, n.3"). This second definition of "real" combined with that of eidolon presents Helen as an insignificant yet substantial image that is not idolized. She cannot be grasped by the imagination but is "a shell / of tortoise, heart / of abalone, wind / in the northern spruce" (79). She shines faintly upon the wall— "disempowered made to look fragile and elusive" (Mackay 6). By beginning the poem with this image of Helen as a substantial insignificance, di Prima calls attention to H.D.'s text and sets up the rest of the poem to emphasize Helen's physical experiences on the wall. Furthermore, since Helen is not held aloft as an idolized version of womanhood defined by a patriarchal structure of love and power in di Prima's revision, Helen's lived experience as a real woman becomes the central focus of her story.

Through the rest of the poem, di Prima focuses on Helen's physical experience on the wall—an experience this Helen will not be silent about or permit others to bastardize for their own ends. It does not matter what materia Helen is made up of: "none the less, wraith, eidolon or woman / I walk that wall" (80). All that matters is that she walks the wall as "the wind / carries the night of [her] tresses" (80). More importantly, di Prima's Helen neither receives or entertains any attention or love from men. She is a "shivering loveless" single mother "wrapping the infant in [her] silver robe" (80). In di Prima's

Helen, the laboring mother emerges from tragic patriarchal myths of the seductress and adulteress (Mackay 6). This Helen births the dawn from the earth in triumph:

I draw the dawn  
I rip it bloody from the laboring earth  
we shout; in pain & triumph / the stars  
hide, at last, is this  
sacrilege? I hold  
the bloody dawn aloft, it screams (81)

This passage emphasizes the physical experience of woman making Helen a real woman free from the elusive musings of myths written by men. The bloody truth of birth questions every myth of Helen including H.D.'s where Helen exists merely as a phantom whose story is subject to creation by others. Di Prima gives Helen the “bloody dawn” to hold “aloft” as “it screams / earth moans” (80) in the presence of fellow goddess Hecate—goddess of night and moon—as a testimony to the real experiences of women who can and will write their own stories.

The choice to revise H.D.'s revision here reveals di Prima's larger goal in feminist revision, which includes examining and ultimately revising the ways women's literature portrays women rather than only the ways literature by men portrays them. Furthermore, di Prima's decision to revise a piece of women's literature suggests a move towards “a women's literature which need not be defined entirely through its resistance to patriarchal narratives of gender in men's literature” (Mackay 6). She does not need to search out any preexisting patriarchal myths of Helen because she already has source material from another woman. This revision of Helen of Troy presents di Prima with the

perfect opportunity to build upon the already established tradition of feminist revision and push it even further in typical Beat woman fashion.

### Persephone

Di Prima emphasizes a distinct lack of relationships by which Helen may define herself, but her revisions of Persephone do just the opposite, centering around Persephone's relationships first with her husband and her work and then with her mother. While Persephone appears in several poems throughout *Loba*, her first and last poems are the only ones that carry her name in the title. Both poems provide important themes to *Loba* as a whole. The first poem provides a look at Persephone outside of the somewhat all-consuming mother-daughter relationship allowing Persephone to explore her marital relationship and her relationship to her work. The last Persephone poem titled "PERSEPHONE: Reprise" is the last poem in the whole book. In this final poem, di Prima reunites Persephone with her mother so that mother and daughter exist in a perpetual dance of life and death joined as completely as they were before Persephone's marriage.

Persephone—goddess of death—was the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, the goddess of earth, agriculture, and fertility. As a young maiden, Zeus promised her to Hades without her or her mother's permission and arranged for Hades to kidnap his daughter as she picked flowers with Artemis and Athena. Once Demeter realized her daughter was gone, she went in search of her. Seeing Demeter's distress, Zeus insisted that Hades return Persephone to her mother. Hades agreed but before Persephone ascended from Hell, he tricked her into eating a pomegranate seed dooming her to a life in the underworld. Zeus struck an agreement with Hades that Persephone would spend

part of the year with him in the underworld and the rest of the time with her mother and the rest of the gods. Because of this cycle, her ascension from the underworld is associated with spring and the onset of new vegetation while her descension into the underworld is associated with winter and the death of vegetation (“Persephone”).

Persephone first appears in *Loba* directly after the Lilith series in “PERSEPHONE” that begins with an epigraph from the “Imaginary Jungian Scholar”. According to Grace and Trigilio, the “Imaginary Jungian Scholar” serves as a foil to the speaker of the poem while the epigraph itself removes the attention on Demeter’s fury and her daughter’s rape both of which are not mentioned in this first poem (240).

for it is at dawn  
we comprehend the night  
& in the spring  
Persephone remembers Hades  
relives her winter sojourn  
she walks  
moaning over dry & stony fields;  
her tears  
raise primroses (di Prima 94)

This Persephone loves her husband and does not have a mother she longs to return to. Instead, she mourns being pulled back to earth, yet her tears create life in the form of flowers. This Persephone can only understand her love for her husband once she is pulled from him. By removing the mother-daughter relationship and the rape from Persephone’s



story with the epigraph, di Prima sets up an opportunity for Persephone to grapple with her own feelings without guilt, judgement, or familial affection at play.

In the poem that follows the epigraph, Persephone expresses both grief and anticipation in the moment that she must leave earth to return to Hell highlighting her need to exist both as a loving and devoted wife and a hardworking, accomplished woman with skills of her own. She asks, “And must I return again to that / long hell?” (94) signifying her sense of obligation to her husband but desperation to remain above ground with her life’s work, her offspring—literally the spring. She laments that she must leave when she has “just thawed” and has “barely tasted fruit [she] brought to ripeness” (94). During her descent back to Hell, di Prima’s Persephone loses all her warmth “in vast darkness of galactic air” (94). Because di Prima has removed Persephone’s mother from the picture leaving her without a familial connection that would pull her to stay on earth, Persephone’s grief becomes a struggle between the obligations and affections within a heteronormative relationship as a wife and the desire to be a woman with work to do separate from those obligations and affections. Persephone’s struggle represents a larger struggle for women everywhere as wives and mothers try to find balance between familial obligations and meaningful work outside of the family structure, which is itself a patriarchal structure traditionally designed with the husband as the worker outside of the family and the wife as the caretaker inside of the family with little overlap or gray areas particularly during di Prima’s upbringing in a traditional Italian-American family. Di Prima’s depiction of Persephone’s internal struggle for balance gives Persephone the power to at least consider where she devotes her energy despite the existing structures that ultimately funnel her in a particular way.

The traditional myths of Persephone depict her as a helpless victim, but di Prima's revision complicates her character with competing desires of domesticity and work and an attempt to reconcile those desires. Here Persephone lacks a certain amount of free will as she is still forced to return to Hell. According to Grace and Trigilio, "powers greater than her own, including those of the man she loves, have constructed her life" (240). However, there is a part of this Persephone that "relives her winter sojourn" with her husband and mourns her separation from him (94). The speaker of this poem, presumably Persephone herself, expresses her descent back into Hell as a decision she has made of her own accord. She simply says, "I leave. I go" (94). She may be pressured and reluctant to leave her work, but she goes when her love calls her. She knows that her "love is there. / Not on this softened earth. / Not in the life I quicken" (94). The conflict between a need to return to a relationship that is "desperate" and filled with "ecstasy screams thru unrelenting winter" (94) and a desire to remain where she flourishes as a woman complicates the idea that woman must either be a slave to her heteronormative relationship or completely devoted to her own work or even her children. Di Prima's revision of Persephone in this poem eliminates the need for such a dichotomy. This Persephone can love Hades and long to be with him while also wanting a full life outside of him.

The final poem of *Loba* centers around Persephone's two most important relationships—with her husband and with her mother. More importantly, this final poem explores the Buddhist principle of nonduality through each relationship with emphasis on the female-female relationship Persephone cultivates with her mother. The first stanza, in particular, emphasizes the Buddhist concept of nonduality of human nature and for di

Prima, womanhood specifically. In an interview with *Insight Journal*, David Loy, Zen teacher and author of *Nonduality: In Buddhism and Beyond*, explains that nonduality “literally means ‘not two,’ that two things we have understood as separate from one another are in fact not separate at all. They are so dependent upon each other that they are, in effect, two different sides of the same coin” (Loy). The first stanza of “PERSEPHONE: Reprise” harkens back to the first Persephone poem’s theme of being a person separate from your spouse while also participating fully in your relationship: “one ‘life’ is not more real than the other / not in ‘deflowering’ do we come / into bloom; we have been always” (314). Persephone was a whole person before her marriage. Her existence does not need to be defined by her abduction, rape, or relationship. She has always led a vibrant life at her mother’s side or on her own that is not more real than the life she leads as the wife of Hades and Queen of the Underworld.

In the case of Persephone, she is simultaneously woman and wife as well as wife and daughter. Each of her identities depend on the other in such a way that one cannot exist without the other. Di Prima’s larger point is that when a woman marries or enters into any relationship, she does not suddenly stop being an individual woman. Similarly, she does not stop being a daughter when she becomes a wife. In the traditional myth, Persephone literally must give up her original relationship with her mother to fulfill her relationship with Hades in what seems to be a complete separation during her time in Hell each year. Di Prima’s revision, though, argues that for a woman to truly be the subject of her own story, she must realize, as Persephone does, that her essence is non dualistic. This nonduality allows a woman to define herself in as many ways as she wants to at the same time rather than being defined by the people around her. As Grace and

Trigilio say, it empties her female body of “the essentialized subordinate figurations assigned to it by sacred and historical fathers” (245).

The idea of nonduality extends to the mother-daughter relationship prevalent in the rest of the poem that was distinctly absent from the first Persephone poem demonstrating the ultimate importance of female connections to the revision of myth. The nonduality of the mother-daughter relationship between Demeter and Persephone provides the vehicle for another important theme in *Loba*: the female-to-female relationship where one continuously gives birth to another who gives birth and the cycle of life and death repeats itself over and over (Grace and Trigilio 245). This birthing happens “at the fluid boundary of Hades” where the mother-daughter pair “spring continuously into life & death” (di Prima 314). At this fluid boundary, the “fruit & seed & flower dance equally” (314). Even though life and development happens in these stages, they still exist simultaneously where one cannot exist without the other. Similarly, the mother and daughter cannot exist one without the other nor can they be separated by outside forces: “this is no knife can sever me from her / where I go down to bleed, to birth, to die” (314). At this sacred place of female connectedness where life and death constantly coexist, the mother-daughter pair continually regenerates itself.

Persephone and Helen of Troy are only two of the many revisions of Greek myth in *Loba*. These particular revisions highlight the mission of di Prima’s feminist revision. In the revision of Helen, di Prima makes Helen the subject of her own story by emphasizing her real physical experiences as a woman. Helen is no longer the object of men’s affection and wrath, but a woman responsible for only herself and the children birthed from her own body. She is not subject to her story being told from the perspective

of others. Just like di Prima's Eve sheds her label of sinner, this Helen sheds her previous label as seductress and adulteress. Eve's redefinition of herself turns her into a creatrix and mother of all while Helen's redefinition frees her from the very act of continually being defined by others. In the revision of Persephone, di Prima first gives Persephone room to experience her own feelings regarding her relationship with Hades by removing the mother-daughter relationship and the abduction and rape that began her marriage in the first place. Here Persephone gets a chance to tell her own story in a way that complicates her character and removes some of her victimhood. Finally, di Prima reunites Persephone with her mother so completely that the previous dualistic nature of every relationship in Persephone's life is cast aside allowing her to exist in every form as a whole person who can dictate her own story. Both of these revisions of Greek myth in *Loba* center around identity and a woman's ability to define, articulate, and change her identity as she sees fit.

### Conclusion

Feminist revisions have been an important part of women's literature and the feminist movement throughout the twentieth century. Diane di Prima's *Loba* represents a long history of women rewriting older texts, usually male-authored, from a female perspective. For di Prima, a female perspective means emphasizing the lived experiences of women, especially physical experiences, when they have been suppressed, lost, or hidden in the past. It also means recentering women's stories so that the women are the subjects of their own stories rather than the objects. Her retellings of Christian, Jewish, and Greek stories provide the female protagonists with an opportunity to redefine their own identities. Feminist revision, like that employed in *Loba*, resists patriarchal

narratives that subordinate and silence women. For di Prima, though, resisting patriarchal narratives is not enough. Feminist revision must also begin to examine women's literature as it works to define itself independently of male-centered and male-authored narratives.

Many of the revisions in *Loba* discussed here focus explicitly on the physical experience of women. Di Prima's revision of the Virgin Mary stands out as the most explicit of the five revisions in this research because it begins by calling everything Christian religion believes and teaches about Mary and the conception of Jesus into question. In di Prima's version, Mary is raped by an angel figure, and Mary's lack of consent to the sex or subsequent pregnancy is prominent. While many Christian thinkers accept that Mary gave consent in the original scripture, di Prima makes it clear through vivid descriptions of what happens to Mary's body that her Mary does not give consent. The emphasis on Mary's physical experience in the "ANNUNCIATION" poem serves to expose how women and their bodies have been and are used by patriarchal religions as a means to an end. Women's bodies become vessels to be used at the discretion of those with power with no need for consent for the women. The analogy of rape used in this revision does not mean that di Prima's point is that women's bodies are only misused when it comes to sex, though that is part of it. The larger feminist idea of bodily autonomy and independence are the center of di Prima's use of physical violation in Mary's revision. These are issues still being debated today. Women's bodies are still being used as bargaining chips by religious and political leaders in America who wish to take away the same bodily autonomy di Prima's Mary fights for but loses. This revision is the perfect example of feminist revision becoming an act of survival.

After Mary goes through an entire pregnancy that resulted from a loss of bodily autonomy, she attempts to regain control over her body when she goes into labor. Di Prima revises the Nativity scene to provide detailed descriptions of labor and delivery that do not allow the mother any say in the process. Mary's fight to maintain consciousness and have a natural birth are thwarted by outside forces who strap her down and drug her. This particular poem reflects di Prima's confessional female Beat style because Mary's experience with childbirth directly mirrors di Prima's in the late 1950s. Once again, Mary is unable to give consent for what happens to her body. Yet, this depiction of childbirth contrasts with di Prima's own views and her other depictions of childbirth throughout *Loba*. She provides this counter experience to include real experiences of women, including herself, and expose how women are stripped of choice, agency, and freedom when it comes to their own bodies.

The final revision of Mary explored here is of Mary's "CORONATION" into Heaven after her death. The story of Mary's coronation does not exist in scripture, but the Catholic church accepts that Mary was crowned in Heaven after her death. Also, significant literary accounts like that in Dante's *Divine Comedy* depict Mary as the Queen of Heaven. Di Prima draws from these traditions that honor Mary as a Queen and the Virgin Mother. In her revision, though, di Prima makes it clear that, at her coronation, Mary only appears to be honored. What the revised coronation really represents is the successful jailing of Mary hidden behind praise and honor. Mary longs to fly free and hopes to finally do so in death, but the crown on her head prevents her from doing so. She remains the object of adoration, but di Prima gives Mary space to express her

dissatisfaction with a position that holds no real power and only serves to further oppress her.

Di Prima's revision of Mary's narrative exposes how women lose power within patriarchal power struggles, but her revision of Eve's narrative creates a space of creative power for women within the patriarchal structures they already live in. Di Prima gives Eve space to define herself as a woman and regain her original power as the first mother. Eve speaks for herself through the short series of poems and centers the narrative around herself using the pronoun "I" from the beginning signalling that this time we will hear her side of the story. Di Prima uses natural images and Biblical allusions to reinfuse Eve with creative power. Di Prima's Eve insists that she be recognized as the origin of all, as the creatrix. This emphasis on maternal or feminine creative power comes from di Prima's own feeling that childbirth and motherhood are great sources of female empowerment and creativity. While Eve expresses this female creativity so clearly, Mary is denied the opportunity to experience creative power through childbirth despite giving birth to the Messiah. In this way, Mary's revised narrative provides a more realistic experience—at least for di Prima—of what could happen for women at their most vulnerable yet most powerful moment. Eve's revised narrative, on the other hand, explores how women might take back their feminine and maternal power by insisting on defining themselves for themselves. The Eve sequence of *Loba* gives us the "tools to dwell in the patriarchy and to fight from within" (Encarnación-Pinedo 14). Di Prima's revision of Eve reveals that the ability to define ourselves and call ourselves what we determine we should be called is the first step to reclaiming creative power that has been lost.



While di Prima's revision of Mary portrays the female body as vulnerable and abused through Mary's rape, her revision of Eve focuses on the body as a life source. In her revision of the Jewish legend of Lilith, di Prima depicts the female body, and its sexuality specifically, as a source of power, independence, and holiness. This Lilith takes all of the negative images and beliefs of her and turns them into power. She becomes violent when man attempts to violate the sacredness of her body. She mingles power, intellect, and sex in a way that fights back against subordination at the hands of men. Di Prima's Lilith stands for a celebration of women's bodies and sexuality and the power they wield.

The idea that sensuality and flesh should be considered holy and therefore should be infringed upon by no one is not new to the Beat generation. In his epic *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg spends the "Footnote to Howl" exclaiming that everything is holy including the flesh: "The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!" (27). While Ginsberg's expression of the idea is quite different from di Prima's, the celebration of the holiness of bodies is the same. Maintaining the body and its sensuality as holy serves to uphold female sexuality as a natural and powerful part of the female experience when women's sexuality has been deemed everything from inappropriate to criminal in the past.

Di Prima's revisions of Greek myths explore similar themes of making women the subject of their own stories and recentering lived experiences of women. The revision of Helen of Troy serves to highlight the lived experiences of women similarly to the revision of Mary. Di Prima's Helen comes from an already revised version by H.D. that turns Helen into a phantom. Di Prima focuses on Helen's walk along the wall in Egypt as

a way to center her physical experiences. Because women's experiences of pain, illness, childbirth, and life in general have been hidden, dismissed, or deliberately misinterpreted for so many years, the continued focus on women's lived experiences serves as a resistance. Helen's presence on the wall demands that she is real, she takes up space, and that she will not be silenced.

More than focusing on Helen's physical experiences on the wall, di Prima removes Helen's position as an idolized version of womanhood and sought-after love interest. By the end of Mary's sequence of poems, she was still an idolized version of womanhood, and it was this idolization of her that left her trapped as the Queen of Heaven. In Helen's case, di Prima makes it explicit that Helen is just a normal woman which gives Helen the freedom to define herself and make choices about her own life. Furthermore, di Prima's Helen has no male suitors. In H.D.'s version of Helen's story, multiple men who are in love with Helen take turns telling her story as she exists as a phantom on the wall. The removal of these suitors gives Helen room to finally tell her own story where she is the subject with agency rather than the object of affection.

Di Prima's revisions of Persephone focus less on her physical experiences and more on her lived experiences as a daughter, a wife, and a woman with work to do. For Persephone, all three of these roles clash continuously. If she is in Hell with Hades, she wants to be on Earth with her mother and vice versa. Also, she wants to maintain her skills as the bringer of spring. Di Prima presents these struggles so that each role is validated for Persephone as a genuine and equally important aspect of her identity. Di Prima writes out Persephone's mother in the first Persephone revision to create space for Persephone to explore feelings of grief about being separated from her husband without

feeling guilty about leaving her mother to be with him. This removal of Persephone's mother also emphasizes Persephone's desire to maintain balance between her relationship with her husband and her dedication to her work. However, in the final Persephone poem, di Prima intentionally brings the mother-daughter relationship into the spotlight as a life-giving force required for the cycle of life to continue.

Di Prima's Persephone sequence also explores the Buddhist principle of nonduality. As a practicing Buddhist, di Prima believes in nonduality, which states that two seemingly separate things actually rely on each other for existence. Persephone's identity as wife relies on her identity as daughter and both rely on her identity as the bringer of spring. The principle of nonduality allows Persephone to be all three things at once without diminishing any one particular role. This kind of cohesive identity can be difficult for women to achieve because the societal structures we operate in do not often allow room for a woman at work to also fully maintain her role as mother. Sometimes, caretaking responsibilities for women can overtake their ability to do their work or vice versa simply because women are expected to separate their identities into boxes. However, a crucial part of regaining power and equality as a feminist depends on our ability to define ourselves, and we cannot do that if we are not allowed space to be complete women with all of our identities operating together.

Di Prima articulates this very Beat idea in her statement of poetics: "The requirements of our life is the form of our art" (*Recollections* 227). The Beats do not separate their lives from their art. One cannot exist without the other. However, as evidenced by Jack Kerouac's insistence that if di Prima did not forget about her babysitter she would never be a poet, Beat women's roles as mothers and caretakers were

not always considered to be crucial components of their identity or their art (*Recollections* 202). Di Prima's revision of Persephone demands that women deserve to include all of their roles in their identity with no exclusion just as she did by allowing her identity as mother to fuel her work.

As Diane di Prima's master work, *Loba* requires much more attention than it receives from scholars of her work. Some scholars, like myself, come to know di Prima through her connection with the larger, predominantly male Beat generation. *Loba* takes a backseat because it was written after the Beat generation's peak period and therefore reflects less of the traditional Beat style that scholars were initially attracted to. Beat is only one part of di Prima's identity as a woman and as a writer, but her experience with the Beats certainly informs how she writes *Loba*. More importantly, *Loba* represents the confessional yet spiritual writing that both male and female Beats are associated with. As perhaps the most known female Beat writer, di Prima needs to be known for her epic poem, her magnum opus, equivalent to Ginsberg's *Howl*, rather than only her life writing. The inclusion of *Loba* and other significant works of poetry by Beat women in the traditional Beat canon will redefine the women as artists on the same level as the men. Such an inclusion will bring legitimacy to the confessional form that has long been an important part of women's writing in general and dismissed by the larger literary community as inferior or unworthy of canonization. *Loba*'s act of resistance to the male canon creates a space for women to speak out unapologetically in language that reflects their true nature and does not pander to patriarchal ears.

The *Loba* herself acts as an archivist of lost, hidden, destroyed, and suppressed women's stories. She, like di Prima, seeks to gather the true stories of her "lost moon

sisters” and amplify them in a way that demands they be heard (di Prima 3). Di Prima’s revisions of traditional Christian, Jewish, and Greek stories work towards a women’s literature that amplifies the female experience and prioritizes women telling their own stories. *Loba* remains defined by the male canon as “the great female counterpart to Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*,” which lends credibility to the epic but takes away its true essence of female creative power. Part of di Prima’s feminist mission with *Loba* lays in a women’s literature that is not defined by men but relies solely on female experience and language. While she and other feminist revisionists may have to revise male stories to survive patriarchal structures and literature, di Prima seeks to create and contribute to a tradition of women’s literature that only includes the stories of women for themselves and of themselves.

This research only covers a small portion of the feminist revisions in *Loba*. Further research should be conducted to include all of the classical, religious, literary, and other types of revisions present in *Loba* to include a wider spectrum of women’s voices. Also, this research was conducted with di Prima’s place in the Beat generation in mind but places her primarily in relation to other female writers who conduct feminist revision. Additional research should include a more in-depth context of the Beat generation regarding di Prima and *Loba* that explores how di Prima’s voice fits into the Beat generation and contributes to the revision of the Beat generation from a woman’s perspective. The discussion of the larger cultural movement of second wave feminism, while briefly included here, should be expanded upon in further research to include more examples of other female writers from the feminist movement that also participate in feminist revision and the impact feminist revision had on the movement. Finally, the

Buddhist and other spiritual components in *Loba* should be explored at greater length in an effort to connect di Prima's spirituality with her feminist mission in *Loba* and situate *Loba* within the Buddhism of the Beat generation as a whole.

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