

Representations of Gender and the Body in Diane di Prima's *Loba*

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While Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs are the most well-known male Beat writers, Diane di Prima is one of the most familiar female writers of the movement. Di Prima was born in Brooklyn to Italian parents. As a single, independent woman who took her writing very seriously (she knew she wanted to be an author from a young age), Ronna C. Johnson describes di Prima as a 'brazen repudiation of prescriptions for female behaviour' and 'a paragon of artistic independence for many of the women Beat writers' (Grace & Johnson 2004, 83). Di Prima's first collection of poetry, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards*, was published in 1958; one year after Kerouac's *On the Road* was published. Her frequently cited insistence that 'the only war is the war against the imagination', coupled with her fervent commitment to a life of poetry from the age of fourteen, highlights that di Prima viewed the life of an artist as a serious vocation. She espouses the Beat perspective of sharing and promoting not only her own art, but that of her acquaintances. She co-founded the New York Poets Theatre and founded the Poets Press, which published the work of many new writers of the period who had trouble getting published elsewhere. She also co-edited *The Floating Bear* with Leroi Jones from 1961-1969, a pamphlet which contained experimental new poets and was widely circulated among literary colleagues and friends. Thus, di Prima's involvement with the Beats is not confined to her own creative output or her friendship with Ginsberg, Jones or Kerouac; she also had a direct impact on avant-garde literary production and circulation.

Di Prima is concerned with modifying representations which designate difference and Otherness, particularly in terms of gender. She often proposes new

forms of signification by reconsidering the body, female sexuality, and normative gender roles throughout her texts. Lucé Irigaray examines the constructed nature of female sexuality found in western culture by examining Freudian theory. Freud argues that male and female, when young, both encounter the same libidinal stage — the phallic stage — but there are numerous gaps, including his failure to establish any miniscule postulation of a possible vaginal stage, or anything to do with the female body, in fact. In her *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray observes that:

He will never refer to the pleasure associated with the sensitivity of the posterior wall of the vagina, the breasts, or the neck of the womb. All organs, no doubt, that lack masculine parameters? (Irigaray 1985, 29).

She challenges the western notion of a purely referential female sexuality by highlighting the exclusively female body parts which are sensitive and sexually charged in ways distinct from but equivalent to the phallus. Thus, Irigaray encourages a modified debate regarding the pleasure of the female body in an autonomous manner, devoid of the ‘masculine parameters’ favoured by Freud. Di Prima openly admits the importance of bodily energy as a driving force behind her poetics, citing that ‘poems can come as image or heard words or a rhythm in my head or in the pulse/ body’ (Di Prima 1998, 28) The text comes from a place of mobility and natural vibrations, in tandem with the rhythms and cycles of the universe.

Loba, published in 1978, could be called di Prima’s life work; her *magnus opus*, perhaps. Part II was published in 1976, and then Books 1-8 in 1978, but it is a never-ending poem; a continuous work-in-progress. The *Loba* itself is an incarnation of the feminine manifested as a beast, a wolf-like creature. The physical appearance of the creature evolves across the poem, at times appearing as a woman. The animalistic protagonist is indeed mistaken for a woman on a handful of occasions throughout the text:

were it not for the ring of fur
 around her ankles
just over her bobby socks
 there's no one
wd ever guess her name. . . (Di Prima 1998, 28).

The characterisation of the feminine in animal form refutes the tendency in western philosophy to displace the animal side of the human persona. Di Prima re-inscribes this notion by associating herself with the Loba. The various incarnations of the Loba reject comfortable categorisation as animal or woman. She is multitudinous and, like the author, seeks to re-inscribe tropes of femininity by overlapping the boundaries between such tropes. The Loba is a bodily incarnation of the natural, the organic:

you are the hills, the shape and color of mesa
you are the tent, the lodge of skins, the hogan
the buffalo robes, the quilt, the knitted afghan (Di Prima 1998, 5).

The speaker in this instance depicts the Loba as akin to the vibrancy of indigenous American cultures, which arguably fall outside of mainstream culture. The Loba is also those mysterious, breath-taking aspects of nature: 'you are the hills'. One imagines the Loba as an omnipresent being gazing down at culture yet somehow remaining outside of it. The Loba is comprised of all these elements. The speaker is not certain of the Loba; she cannot be defined conclusively:

Is she city? Gate she is we know
& has been (Di Prima 1998, 12).

These lines refer to the subordinate role the feminine has played throughout history. The feminine has been the passive medium, through which the masculine passes, metaphorically speaking. The poem suggests that the masculine has entered 'the city' through the feminine, where the city is metaphorically a place of power and embodies the cultural sphere. Thus, the masculine is categorically

placed in the positive dichotomous position, whereas the feminine appears as the negative, and the dichotomy between these key signifiers has secured the primacy of the former:

She left
the flickering ice for the candlelight to watch
him bending his head w/ the weight
of invisible antlers. It was a role
she was tired of playing (Di Prima 1998, 12).

The Loba is passively watching the man by candlelight. It seems he is contemplating and problem-solving while she is looking on, a consolatory presence. The Loba is uncomfortable in this passive role, and note how the antlers (perhaps a metaphor for responsibilities) are invisible. The role of consoling and placating the male is deprecating for the feminine Loba, who appears to view his 'invisible antlers' with disdain: 'it was a role she was tired of playing'. These lines re-iterate the idea of the feminine slotting into certain roles in accordance with western philosophical tropes and reveal how these roles are monotonous and restrict the female to a subordinate position.

Di Prima encapsulates the ethereal presence of the Loba through the use of elemental imagery:

she moved, her face, her mouth, her voice
fell like water on him (Di Prima 1998, 17).

The Loba's fluid sexuality, perhaps ambi-sexuality, is classified by the element water. Her femininity is empowered and her physicality is ambiguous. It is 'like water', it is mobile and fluid, and possesses a power over the masculine presence. In the poem 'THE LOBA DANCES', Di Prima employs ambiguity to challenge the reader's perception of feminine sexuality; the feminine as temptress, predatory and overpowering, is contrasted with the feminine as sophisticated and as delicate as a pearl:

ghoul lips of

masculine presence is trapped by the feminine ('caught in black womb spasm') denoting a predatory element in the feminine character: it is reminiscent of a spider trapping a fly in its web.

In 'THE LOBA SINGS TO HER CUB', a poem which celebrates female reproduction (the Loba's offspring coming from the womb is described as a 'sudden and perfect / golden gopher tunnelling / to light'), the author visualises a very different aspect of the nature of femininity, one which partially complements western constructions of tenderness and a motherly instinct:

you lie warm, wet on the
soggy pelt of my
hollowed
belly, my
bones curve up
to embrace you (Di Prima 1998, 36).

This example serves as a sharp contrast to the predatory aspect of femininity also dramatised by the poet. The 'hollowed belly' of the Loba suggests that her body feels that perhaps something is missing when she is not with child, that motherhood completes and fulfils her and is an important element in the composition of her identity. Most importantly, this example highlights the multi-dimensional nature of di Prima's texts. She is neither definitive nor rigidly conclusive regarding her authorial intentions or the representation of her theoretical perspectives. It would perhaps be more useful to consider di Prima's texts in a manner which focuses on the author's recurring thematic concern of challenging and re-inscribing preconceived notions about the nature of femininity.

In 'THE LOBA CONTINUES TO SING', the Loba is searching for her lover, her 'black lord'. The Loba is depicted as a determined temptress who will 'lure' her lover 'into being' until he stands 'flesh solid against my own'. Femininity, in its powerful associations with the body, can potentially be re-inscribed through the flesh, as the following lines demonstrate:

I will make you flesh again
(have you slipped away)
think you to elude, become past
& black & white
as photographs (Di Prima 1998, 39).

Di Prima validates the vibrancy of the body and compares the living, breathing immediacy of it with the suggested stagnancy of history (which is itself a major discourse) and dichotomous logic ('black & white as photographs'). The poet's celebration of the body is outlined in its appearance as this immediate vibrant presence. The speaker alludes to the masculine presence as being steeped in the past, steeped in dichotomous logic, whereas the feminine is enveloped in the physical manifestation of the body.

The speaker wishes to make history into flesh, to form a hybrid between the dichotomised mind and body which will encourage a shift of balance in this locus of western philosophy:

stripping yesterday
to glowing
white bones & their shadows (Di Prima 1998, 42).

'Yesterday' is the past, history, the mind. The 'white bones' encapsulate the fleshly nature of the body while also serving as a powerful reminder of archaeological history. The author captures the impact of history on the body and the constructions imprinted on it by her choice of imagery ('& their shadows'). In other words, the author is, on the surface, optimistic with an underlying pessimism regarding the relationship between the body and history, which symbolises the mind in its relation to chronology, the recording of facts and so forth. It is suggested that the body makes history into flesh. However, there will always be the 'shadows' of history haunting the body. This is the power of discourse — regardless of the specificity of discourses, they will possess a strong influence over the will of the body.

The Loba exists in a place outside of culture, akin to the speaker in weiss's *Desert Journal*:

Her door
cannot be found, it is close-shut, it crumbles
it wafts in wind (Di Prima 1998, 44).

The Loba is mysterious and ghost-like, as dramatised in these lines. The author depicts the Loba as other-worldly by juxtaposing the various facets of the feminine character throughout the poem. Her door 'crumbles / it wafts in wind': the Loba resists definition, she is fluid, foraying between different and often seemingly contradictory modes of signification. As soon as she appears, manifested in her physical body, she will again disappear. The author subtly refers to an autonomous femininity, a femininity which aims to exist outside the realm of patriarchal constructions, as manifested in the authorial representation of the Loba. The Loba is also 'the wind you never leave behind' (Di Prima 1998, 45). She resembles the movement of the wind in her forays between discourses which seek to define femininity in accordance with a system built on essentialism and feminine subordination.

The animalistic and human facets of the Loba's character are emphasised in the following stanza — she lies on the mat like an animal, while thinking about love, which is arguably a primal facet of the human condition:

She lay
on the straw mat
in the warm room
thinking about love, all the
afternoon, at least
remembering, not thinking
at all (Di Prima 1998, 47).

Love is an emotion which stems from the passion of the body. Thus, the Loba does not think about love, she does not reduce it to logic and reasoning derived from the mechanics of her mind. Instead, she remembers love, where memory is

associated with the physical senses attributed to the body; remembering familiar smells, sights and sounds, or memories triggered by these bodily senses. Thinking is of the mind; remembering, it suggests, is from the body. The poet also invokes the formulation of a hybrid dichotomy through this comparative methodology as memory is a way of reliving history. Although she celebrates the body, she leaves the debate open-ended.

Di Prima continues to simultaneously depict the human and animal aspects of the Loba:

she lay
slightly absurd, headband askew
daydreaming, a silly smile
on her lips, her legs
akimbo (Di Prima 1998, 47).

The multi-dimensional facets of the Loba and the powerful presence of the feminine are conveyed by portraying the creature as an idle daydreamer, almost like a blushing schoolgirl. This subtly invokes the notion of multiple identities — the poststructuralist theory of a fluid subjectivity, thus re-working western philosophical tropes, often by creating an extreme caricature of them as a quiet but effective ridicule.

The poem 'CHILDHOOD OF THE LOBA', is divided into five separate sections. It illustrates the Loba's relationship with her father, the patriarchal figure in her life. He is represented as a well-respected person whose 'gentleness overruled the rest'. However, he is also tyrannical and authoritarian as 'his hands / close around the bars, as they closed / on the spirit of his wife, breaking her / coral necklace'. Di Prima further expands her ridicule of civilisation in its authoritative domination of the earth and sky by depicting the Loba's father as a symbol of the reign of the masculine:

for what else is man
but to span, like a wrought-iron bridge

what but to bind
the sky, unto the sky (Di Prima 1998, 60).

Di Prima questions the dichotomous division between nature and culture, such logic a microcosm for the general construct of western normalising modes of appropriation. Man inhabits the earth and inevitably controls it. Culture is a pursuit centred on the control and/or exclusion of nature. Man spans the earth 'like a wrought-iron bridge' — masculine primacy is associated with power and the potential destruction of nature caused by culture. Nature according to phallic imperatives is perceived as an obstruction to the progression of culture. Di Prima subverts this representation by arguing that it is culture which imprisons nature by 'binding the skies' through globalisation and industrialisation.

Whereas man has colonized the earth and saturated it with culture (displacing nature), some Native American cultures (such as the Pueblo Indians and the Machinguenga of Peru) promote a matriarchal ordering of their home and community. The Loba signifies a return to this pre-colonial cultural status of the female:

Protectress
great mystic beast of European forest.
green warrior woman, towering.
kind watchdog I cd
leave the children with
Mother & sister.
Myself (Di Prima 1998, 68).

The Loba manifests itself in various ways which denote the mystical, protective and motherly tendencies of the feminine character. The Loba protects the forest, aligning the feminine with the natural, a recurring discourse throughout western civilisation. The Loba also protects the children of the speaker. The Loba is authoritative; a 'warrior woman', a revised conception of the notion of the helpless, delicate female needing protection. She shares a commonality of

femininity with the speaker by being revealed as ‘Mother & Sister / Myself’. The feminine, therefore, is no longer the Other, the derivative; instead, she is interwoven with the speaking subject. She is the same; there is no division drawn between the Loba and the narrator of the poem.

Di Prima attempts to reconcile the masculine and feminine by presenting the character Lilith (from the poem LILITH: AN INTERLUDE) as a hybrid of gender characteristics:

Or is she soft
hermaphrodite
holds you against his chest
you suffocate; yr cunt
pulses w/ weird, green hunger you wd not
acknowledge.
The deal she offers in her business suit
seems straight enough (Di Prima 1998, 87).

The elusive quality of these lines validates the juxtaposition of familiar signifiers to articulate a revision of homogenising tropes. The narrator remains uncertain about the sequence of events (‘Or is she’), signifying di Prima’s modification of the normative third-person perspective, in which the narrator appears to be all-knowing, objective and omnipotent. The ‘business-suit’ is an allusion to the cultural sphere dominated by the male, while the ‘deal she offers’ connotes the homogenous stereotype of the female as a seductress or whore; the amalgamation of the two tropes presents a distorted hybrid of gender constructions. The hermaphroditic figure of Lilith is both soft and strong, indicating an alliance between characteristics which are usually dichotomised according to gender, and indeed, the male and female body. Thus, the author validates the revision of gender definition into a more fluid realm, which would inevitably expand the possibilities of signification and the more generalised debate of the relative usefulness of dichotomous logic.

caricature of the ideological constructions which portray the feminine as highly domesticated: Lilith will show off her cooking skills, but not until she has injected herself, a means of escaping the constructions which, on the surface, she hopes to fulfil. Di Prima also presents Lilith with the aim of dismantling the idea of the female as idle and slothful, relaxing in the private sphere. Her head rests on a velvet pillow, a symbol of luxury, but the pillow is torn and ‘the lice writhe in her eyebrows’. The grotesque imagery intensifies the validity of caricature as a method of subverting cultural mechanisms which typically endorse female subordination.

Lilith, as strong and as complex a character as she may be, remains vulnerable to patriarchal mechanisms which aim to subordinate by positioning her as the negative, the Other:

She is the bolstering Other, backside
of the coin. Underpinning of stage set
you love. Whatever play you’re doing (Di Prima 1998, 89).

Denoting the female as the Other represents the normalising logic which situates the female solely as a derivative to the male. The stage denotes the public sphere where the male typically makes his mark, while the female is restricted to the private sphere attributed to the physicality of her body.

The masculine presence is domineering and aligned with the Law, the word, and the *logos* as in the following lines from the poem ‘ANNUNCIATION’:

he was there. A flat stone. Towering.
Murderous rage
like the Law. They call it
love (Di Prima 1998, 101).

This dramatises an association with the cultural aspect of dichotomised logic, interwoven with the empirical reasoning connected to the mind. Thus, di Prima’s treatment of the body throughout her texts at times excludes the masculine

presence, highlighting the ambiguous and sometimes conflicting nature of attempting to establish a coherent debate outside of the restrictions of gender and the body.

Furthermore, the angry, towering presence of the masculine is compared to the virginal feminine, with particular reference to the body, specifically the virginal body:

He did not move, his voice
had turned to thunder, there was
no word to remember. but Womb
He spoke of my womb.
The fruit of my womb (Di Prima 1998, 102).

The site of fertility found in the female body (the womb) is a tangible manifestation of the cultural dichotomy between the masculine and the feminine, as it invokes feminine associations with the body. Conversely, the voice of the male presence ‘turned to thunder’ reverses the normative depiction of masculinity; the male is connected to the natural realm which deconstructs the boundaries between the male and female gender. He reminds us of the voice of God in Christian ideology at the beginning of the creation of the world— it was the vocalisation of his ideas which created the universe. This reinforces the idea that language is an expressive force. Similarly, the masculine voice, although indistinguishable (‘no word to remember’) possesses the power to create reality, indicating that di Prima recognises the compelling authority of western binary divisions and linguistic paradigms. Such rationale can be opposed, but it remains intricately woven and embedded in every aspect of civilisation.

The poem ‘CORONATION’ depicts the female in a position of helplessness who then determines to control her own fate, reminiscent of the speaker in Sylvia Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ who rises out of the ash and eats men like air (Plath 2005, 94). Di Prima alludes to the loneliness of a woman restricted

to the private sphere, peering out at the public sphere through her doorway in the following lines from the poem 'CORONATION':

and I stand in these structures of angelic sound
alone as any woman in her doorway
in the rain. . . (Di Prima 1998, 117).

Di Prima draws attention to the body as a site for the inscription of homogenising discourses. It is the patriarchal foundations which influence western culture which categorically cite the body as inferior to the mind. Thus, the female, in her association with the body through foetal growth and development, is situated as inferior to man. The speaker sympathises with the female who perceives the world outside her body from afar, as an outsider to the public sphere. However, the female then questions her stationary role and status ('while the stars rush outward / to darkness, must I / remain still?') which develops into a fervent determination to rise above her situation ('I will fly / Broomless, unarmed, unready / I will fly') highlighting di Prima's reconsideration of signature gender discourses.

Di Prima does not always employ a feminine speaker to articulate her gender-related theoretical and poetical perspectives. At times, the speaker is imbued with characteristics of the masculine. From this position, di Prima is able to question the governing philosophical principles from a different angle. The poem 'THE CRITIC REVIEWS LOBA' takes this approach:

*Where is the history in this, & how
does geometry of the sacred mountain give strength
to the metaphor* (Di Prima 1998, 138).

The critic in these lines is a personified manifestation of arbitrariness, derived from logic and empirical reasoning, in direct conflict with the bodily passion and destabilisation of the mind/body dualism found throughout *Loba*. The voice of the critic dramatises an association with the mind, while the forays and rhizomatic structure of the text signify an alliance with the body. The metaphor is an

important aspect of attempting to write outside the realm of discourses as it displaces and distorts signs and signifiers, thereby challenging the normative meanings produced by language. The invisible voice questions the use of the metaphor, focusing instead on geographical and spatial boundaries which are typical fixtures of empiricism. Thus, di Prima highlights the obstacle of attempting to efface cultural constructions via a system of language which produces these modes of meaning and signification. Di Prima demonstrates an awareness regarding the difficulty of such a pursuit, acknowledging that one must somehow operate outside of these limitations in order to grasp the underlying precepts which govern the continued idolisation of the masculine.

The speaker in the following, taken from 'FOR CAMERON', identifies the problematic of the feminine and questions the restriction of the female to the private sphere of the household:

How did we come to be contained
in rooms? Which room

holds the jewels which buy us (Di Prima 1998, 152).

Di Prima reconsiders the idea of body as commodity; that the body of a female can be bought. The feminine is like a slave, 'contained in rooms'. This reinforces the idea of women being slaves to their bodies, as bodies are the sites on which the cultural constructions which enslave the individual are imprinted:

path of the priestess
leads thru
the double helix (Di Prima 1998, 167).

Di Prima portrays the Loba in another form, that of priestess. The double helix symbolises biological essentialism and the modes of science which cite masculine superiority (in regards to strength and body mass, for example) as a natural scientific fact. The science of genetics specifically claims that gender is innate,

that we are born male or female. This is in direct opposition to the feminist project of uncovering the constructed nature of gender. Thus, the priestess incarnation of the Loba bypasses biological essentialism by passing through the double helix, thereby challenging the boundaries of genetics and reinforcing the idea that gender is constructed.

Di Prima puts forward a challenge to the essentialism of science and somatophobic philosophical tropes by depicting the body as a vessel of cultural imprints. These imprints stem from the mind, presented as the will in Book Two Part Two of *Loba*:

The body itself is the vector
carried thru time
curve of the Will imprinted
on linear air (Di Prima 1998, 213).

This example endorses Foucault's idea of the body being imprisoned by the mind, which lies in direct opposition to the dichotomous logic which claims that the body imprisons the mind. The will of the mind is imprinted on the body, and the body has been subjected to the constructions adopted by the mind throughout history. Foucault's theoretical perspective denotes the impulses shared by Weiss and di Prima in their poetic exploration of the body as a medium of cultural influence.

Throughout *Loba*, di Prima highlights the constructed nature of female sexuality and pursues a vision of autonomous female pleasure. The carnal, primeval side of human nature is celebrated by di Prima in her depiction of the Loba, whose physical appearance evolves throughout the narrative, denoting the elusive visage of femininity. The Loba cannot be comfortably identified as a woman or a beast; she encompasses characteristics of both. Di Prima makes use of elemental imagery to represent the fluid identity and ethereal qualities of the Loba goddess. The Loba represents the existence of normatively dichotomised

attributes on one subject, thereby challenging western conceptions of the Other. Like the isolation and vastness of weiss's desert space, the Loba symbolises that which is outside of phallic culture. Overall, di Prima's *Loba* returns to a time before civilisation and endeavours to reconcile binary opposites, particularly the mind/body, masculine/feminine and nature/culture divisions. The reconsideration of the body in this text is a direct insurrection against the prevalent western philosophical mode which is predominantly somatophobic, thereby promoting gender difference and a more general prognosis of Otherness resulting from this perspective.

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