

“Who did we pray to’? Diane di Prima’s *Loba*”

Tony Trigilio
Columbia College Chicago

In “The Critic Reviews *Loba*,” Diane di Prima invents a reader hostile to the entire project of her book-length poem, *Loba*—a reader whose skepticism can serve as a map for reading the book as a whole. “Where is the history in this,” her critic asks in the opening lines, “& how / does the geometry of the sacred mountain give strength to the metaphor” (138). “History” is invoked immediately as something presumably missing in di Prima’s syncretic visionary poem, echoing the distress of twentieth-century critics, Eliot the most notable in his attacks on Blake and Whitman, that the visionary mode is flawed for allegedly transcendental compulsions that neglect the material reality of history. The mock-critic’s emphasis on a lack of “geometry of the sacred” suggests, too, that the long visionary poem lacks the immanent particulars of the real—here, “the sacred mountain”—and instead privileges a ghostly demarcated world of the sacred. Di Prima’s invented critic bemoans how such a mapping of space, a geometry, fails to ground metaphoric language in the tactile word in *Loba*. Di Prima’s mock-critical assertions can serve as a productive starting point for my discussions of *Loba*’s impulse to merge the otherwise oppositional impulses of historicity and vision, especially at the level of female visionary consciousness. In what follows, I will examine how di Prima deliberately distorts the geometry of language—its Aristotlean either/or unities of propositional logic—in favor of a unified disunity that owes significant debt to di Prima’s longstanding Buddhist practice, first as a Zen practitioner and, more recently, as a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. I would argue that a more productive

question to ask of the poem is not “where is the history?” or “how is the poem grounded in metaphor?” Instead, a more complete experience of *Loba* begins with a question di Prima herself asks in an earlier poem in the book, one that combines revisionary spiritual poetics with a concern with material time and history: “who did we pray,” her speaker asks, “who did we pray to then” (125).

Like most contemporary long poems, *Loba* requires that readers disentangle multiple voices and personas, multiple streams of consciousness, and a tapestry of allusions—all of which, to remember the words of one of di Prima’s influences, Ezra Pound, project a fragmented, recursive “consciousness” into its historical era rather than construct a singular persona at the center of the poem. A brief look at the origin of *Loba* can provide one important example of the poem’s recursive mode of identity-formation. Di Prima has discussed elsewhere that the idea for the *Loba* poems emerged from a dream in which she and her children were hunted by a she-wolf. As the dream unfolds, it becomes clear that the she-wolf is both hunter and comrade, both destroyer and muse. In traditional epic verse, the gesture to the muse would appear at the opening of the poem, as an authorizing visionary construct, suggesting a path for the speaker underwritten by the transcendental muse. But di Prima’s version of this invocation, in “DREAM: The Loba Reveals Herself,” appears one-fifth of the way through the book, as part of Book I, the section of *Loba* that concerns itself with the physicality of di Prima’s collocation of female archetypes. This placement suggests that the unfolding of consciousness in the book is recursive rather than linear. It forecasts, too, that the language of the poem, set in breath-determined fragments in the Projectivist tradition, will follow a similar recursive path. The Loba mantra emerges from this poem, a spell-like utterance that is part-name, “Loba,” and partly the sound of the she-wolf’s

footfalls. However, in the poems that build toward “DREAM: The Loba Reveals Herself,” the book suggests that the names for things cannot decisively be frozen in historical time, nor can the particulars of historical time be evaded or superseded. Di Prima’s many names for the goddess—conventional Christian, Gnostic, Buddhist, Native American, to name several—are chanted in an earlier poem not long after the Loba appears as a young woman dancing at a contemporary Western bar; and this chant poem sits between two poems that imagine the death of the Loba, as if to suggest the continual rebirth of female avatars in cyclical rather than linear time. Di Prima’s invocation in “DREAM: The Loba Reveals Herself,” then, is to a muse who inspires a language that can resist linear, paternal structures of religious power through the use of linguistic fragmentation and the counter-force of Projectivist line trajectories.

In this way, I would argue, *Loba* develops a textual body that inhabits conventionally gendered social codes in order to empty them of their social force: it is both stereotypically female-coded (in its evasion of linearity) and male-coded (in its privileging of force). This focus on the material, concrete experience of visionary consciousness in language would seem at odds with the conventional understanding of the visionary poem as an epic drama of a poet’s privileging of transcendence over immanence. Di Prima’s simultaneous emphasis on the primacy of vision and on tactile cause-and-effect relationships in the world suggests an historical urgency that incorporates, rather than opposes, transcendental idealism. As I discuss in detail later in this essay, di Prima’s Buddhist influence creates an intersection where the poem’s historical underpinnings and visionary urgings meet.

In this poem that dramatizes the origin of the book, the speaker is the “hunted turning hunter.” The speaker is not passive prey, nor was di Prima herself in the dream that triggered

this poem. Significantly, the occasion for this poem is one of maternal protection; the categories of hunter/hunted are transposed as a means of reading the transposition, in turn, of motherhood as a primal category for that which is alternately nurturing and feral. The Loba “came to hunt, but I did not / stay to be hunted,” she asserts: “Instead / wd be gone again. silent / children in tow.” Her movement is more than reactive or protective; instead it actively tames the she-wolf: “She came to hunt, she strode / over that worn stone floor / tailgating, only a step or two / behind me” (67). Transformed from predator to tailgater, the Loba eventually becomes a “kind watchdog I cd / leave the children with. / Mother & sister. / Myself” (68). The poem prepares us for what follows, the “Loba as Eve” sequence. But by the time Loba is Eve, the archetype herself is historicized in ways that enact di Prima’s epigraph from the Gnostic Gospel of Eve: she is caretaker of the beast, the Loba, and simultaneously she is the Loba herself; she is a manifestation of male-coded fierceness within a female-coded nurturing framework; and she is a mother goddess, Loba as Eve, who “stands on rocks / like a shaky boat” and is product and producer of “the winking eye of God” (73). Di Prima re-envision the historical status of women in Western religious traditions as one that is inextricable from the everyday lived experience of women. The Loba is “eternally in labor,” and this experience is the “Materia”—the materials, coded as mother or “mater”—of living in the historical present. Di Prima’s poem, furthermore, recasts what Foucault terms the persistence of “biopower,” the total control of body and gesture in late capitalism, into a religious sphere that, too, must be resisted, and especially by women, from whom contemporary religious practice too often demands submergence rather than spiritual seeking. In each case, economic or religious, the body is held in check by systems of control—in *Loba*, the essentialism of the sacred word—that suggest no checks and balances

for debate and counter-discourse. Di Prima's unraveling of this system of religious-based control is crucial to the unfolding of the poem's counter-discourse of vision.

Yet the poem is not an anarchist free-for-all, despite di Prima's own characterization of herself in interviews as a fusion of anarchist and Buddhist. As a Buddhist, di Prima might characterize the "historical present" as *samsara*, the everyday world of causes and conditions that, to translate loosely, can be seen as the Buddhist version of the "fortunate fall."

Buddhist practitioners try to free themselves, and others, from *samsara* by study of, and meditation on, the impermanence and non-duality of all phenomena. Such a process, in Buddhist mythos, began when Shakyamuni Buddha, the first Buddha, gave his initial teaching, known as the turning of the "wheel of dharma." In *Loba*, the transgression of Eden is reimagined as the beginning of the Buddhist path to enlightenment. As Di Prima's Eve, her Loba-goddess, asserts, "[T]he fruit I hold out / spins the dharma wheel" (73).

Buddhism is central to the poem, as it is in di Prima's life. Di Prima began as a Zen Buddhist practitioner and now practices Tibetan Buddhism. Differences of course exist between these two traditions, as such differences exist in the multiple forms of Buddhism practiced all over the world. At the same time, a starting point for thinking through contemporary Buddhism would be the shared empirical focus of all Buddhisms: the primacy of body, speech, and mind in understanding sacred experience as that which evades the essentializing impulse of subject-object distinctions, such as those between self-other, history-vision, and, of vital importance in *Loba*, the consequences of the distinction between male and female. However, focusing on Buddhist conceptions of identity risks an ahistorical positioning of the feminine outside of the scope of the poem: that is, if identity is essentially beyond the fixities of categorizations of language, then so, too, is gender—a move that

potentially relegates women to, at best, an outsider's role within Buddhist "no-self" discourse. Thousands of years of masculinized spiritual traditions are interwoven in a poem that dramatizes the allegedly outcast feminine in order to re-stage this identity as simultaneously fierce, feral, nurturing, and redemptive. The poem implies, then, that the "no-self" of Buddhist nonduality is untenable until the speaking subject actually can claim agency over her sense of "self." Di Prima's primary method of re-staging female identity as subject rather than object is through an emphasis on the female body thriving in its outsider relationship to masculinized religious cultures. The female body is, to borrow from her Buddhist sources, a space that di Prima "empties" of the subordinate figurations assigned to it by the sacred fathers.

In Buddhism, the *empty* self is present *in full*: that is, emptiness (*shunyata*) refers to phenomena that are empty of essentialist identity and full of unmediated, non-hierarchized frames of reference. A useful illustration that emphasizes these fluctuations in the material body of an historicized self can be found in "The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare." The poem reminds us, too, that *Loba* is both a visionary excursion and a Beat Generation internalized pilgrimage. The mare "has been hunted / but not w/in recent / memory." The compressed, sparse lines of the opening two stanzas contrast remarkably with the sprawling lines that dominate the rest of the poem, and suggests that the quiet rescue of the mare with "anxious / eyes of a doe" is only the beginning of a *noisy* recovery, a loud re-assertion of something that once was lost or buried. The poem echoes the form and content of Ginsberg's "Howl," with the repetitive-strophe lines of each stanza anchored anaphorically by the word who, as in "Howl"; but in di Prima's poem, the protagonists are not self-styled "secret heroes" —willing outcasts driven underground by a culture of containment—but instead their

presence is secretive because they have been submerged. Still, I do not mean to suggest that we can only understand di Prima because of the preceding fame of her male Beat counterpart, Ginsberg. Nor do I wish to suggest that “The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare” is somehow an antagonistic response to Ginsberg’s “Howl.” A quick look at the biographies of di Prima and Ginsberg demonstrates their deep and lasting friendship through the very last days of Ginsberg’s life. Moreover, in a 2000 reading at Columbia College Chicago, di Prima recited this poem as a tribute to Ginsberg. What is more important even than the carefully crafted stylistic resemblance to Ginsberg is di Prima’s effort to recover a visionary female Beatitude in this poem.

As the poem unfolds, it seems clear that di Prima’s mare has not lived a life much differently than her counterparts in Ginsberg’s poem. Di Prima’s poem dramatizes a Beat experience in which the protagonists, those Beat(en) down themselves, write graffiti in lipstick, contend with “white slavers” in their quest for free love, seek a way to make a living for both themselves and infants they have been consigned by their men to take care of—and in doing so, sometimes have to entrust the care of their babies to gangsters. Di Prima’s mare is a forgotten woman:

who walked across America behind gaunt violent yogis
 & died o-d’ing in methadone jail
 scarfing the evidence

 [who] wrote lipstick ‘save yourself’ on tin rail of furnished room bed
 eloped w/white slaver & died Indiana of unmentioned griefs
 or in love again peaceful scrawled candle smoke ‘there is salvation’ triumphant

on borrowed ceiling

while friends coughed in the kitchen (125, 126)

The mare is still “unrooted” as the poem ends: that is, everywhere she looks for tradition, for roots, for foundation, she finds nothing but groundlessness—something akin to *shunyata*—and the best she can assert is actually a question directed back at readers, asking them who the male and female archetypes of their childhood look like:

oatmeal & grist while the old man

naked in bed / read Bible / jerked off

& who was the whore of Babylon in the

kerosene lamp of yr childhood? (126)

“The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare” suggests the recovery of a female Beat tradition as it questions the male-centeredness (or male dominance) of this tradition. At the same time, it celebrates Beat experience as a sacred outsider’s experience, as a life lived on the margins because the life of an insider during the Cold War is for the Beats, of course, a life that stifles the imagination rather than expands it. As with other Beat spiritual quests—“Howl” in particular—the traditions of Asia are invoked, but, here, they are re-invigorated as a woman’s experience, suggesting that a Beat tradition that has been dominated by men and professes to speak beatifically for the entire world is an outlaw tradition that simply does not go far enough in its outlaw response.

For di Prima’s speaker in *Loba*, the female body of her outlaw response is a space of interdependence rather than independence. Like the “fluid boundary of Hades” that she re-imagines as a sacred space in the book’s final poem, the female body “is the province of the co-emergent mother,” where mother and daughter—and, by extension, sister and sister—are

“fruit within fruit” (314). Within its syncretic religious framework, *Loba* incorporates, significantly, a Tantric Buddhist understanding of the singular body as really *two* bodies: an individual body that, in its tactility, exists in an historical moment, and a sacred body that exists as an individual presence only by virtue of its interdependent relation to other bodies. In this larger, nondualistic figuration, the body is a middle-way between self and no-self, a mode of reciprocity. As Ann Weinstone describes it, the Tantric body is a pluralistic collection of “participatory capacities” rather than a static entity (128). A fuller experience of the body, then, is one in which individualism is subsumed into a matrix of expressivist potential “based on the premise that matter, consciousness, and energy are copresent, differing expressions of each other, extant in varying intensities within individual manifestations of creation and without absolute delimitation” (Weinstone 121).

This copresence can be extended to relations between gendered bodies in *Loba*. The ambisexual union of deities in Hindu and Tantric Buddhist practice is, of course, part and parcel of this coemergent gendered space. What’s more, though, this space is critical to di Prima’s re-envisioning of Western and Asian traditions that would privilege gods over goddesses. In “The Loba in Brooklyn,” the she-wolf goddess pokes her snout through wrought-iron gates, suggesting that, as a goddess, she is barred from the insider knowledge of the gods. She sees her subordinated position expressed in the sacred language of Buddhist mantras: “Every man a seed syllable / every woman its unfoldment” (246). The Judeo-Christian creation myth is reiterated in the Asian tradition of the mantra, where the sacred seed syllable of mantra speech is male and the expressive language that follows is a second-generation, and decidedly female, embodiment of the word. Yet, in this poem’s transgressive reinterpretation of the Book of Job, di Prima’s unfolding of seed syllables echoes and affirms

Job's protest that God needs humans as much as they need their God, destabilizing the authorizing primacy that would place men above women (and, in this poem, the gods above the goddesses) as part of a naturalized, self-evident order of things: "you yearn toward us / to see / your own," di Prima's Job states. From the mouth of a man comes a reminder that categories of "men," "women," "gods," and "goddesses" are coemergent, and one cannot exist as a category of value without the equal presence of the other. Indeed, as the frame of reference, and the trajectory of the poetic line, shifts back to the she-wolf goddess, the last vision of this opening section of "The Loba in Brooklyn" is nearly an ambisexual one: "soft feminine face / (the snout) // animal eyes" (246).

This emphasis on Job's lament could suggest, of course, that the poem proffers a reading of spirituality in which the gods do not have all the answers—but humans do. I would argue, however, that such a reading would simply offer facile reversal of the dualisms that di Prima, as a serious Buddhist practitioner, would rather destabilize as part of the struggle of Buddhist practice—the struggle to experience a nondualistic world within linguistic and conceptual formations that otherwise depend on binary oppositions for making sense of everyday lived experience. The primary question asked in *Loba* is "who did we pray to"; more importantly, the book also invites a corollary: what did we say, and how did we say it, when we prayed? The poem is not a relativistic withdrawal from the material world into a heaven of the individual imagination. Instead, invoking di Prima's incorporation of Asian and so-called heretical or pagan Western religious tradition, and of her visionary poetic influences, prayer is uttered from a place that proceeds from the nondualistic space of *shunyata*: a space she dares call "love" in her poem "Deer Leap" (dedicated to one of those visionary influences, Robert Duncan)—a space "where light /

twinkles in the gap / between the Law / & ourselves” (197). The Law is not underwritten by the propositional, either/or logic of the fathers. Instead, as in the work of one of di Prima’s important influences, the modernist avant-garde poet H.D., and in di Prima’s own Buddhist practice, this is a poetics that fuses seemingly incompatible immanent and transcendent modes of representation. Writing of H.D.’s influence on her work, di Prima states that on one hand, “the quality in her which has most value for me as an artist, especially as a woman artist [is] the willingness to speak of what cannot be proved.” At the same time, though, she asserts of H.D.’s work: “*What can be seen* is at stake. And the willingness to report *with precision*” (*The Mysteries* 7, 9). Sacred experience in the poem takes place within this gap, between the Law of fathers, both religious and material patriarchs, and the “fruit within fruit” of sisterhood. The *Loba* might finally pass through the wrought-iron gate here, and, here, find “the same flat / plain on either side” but one in which “the Laws are different” (199). In reading *Loba*, it is not enough to highlight what di Prima has called elsewhere the process of “magickal invocation,” nor is it sufficient to posit a materialist counter to this process. Instead, a more useful reading of *Loba* works with both these poles of discourse: the body as a force that is pressed upon by social mechanisms of discipline—the dimensions of religious biopower, foremost—and the effort to use Tantra/magick to portray the body as a series of forces, a multiplicity of vectors, that are imagined as free, albeit temporarily so, from social and religious institutions that otherwise would hoard them as a means of control.

Works Cited

di Prima, Diane. *Loba*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

_____. *The Mysteries of Vision: Some Notes on H.D.* Santa Barbara: am here books, 1988.

Foucault, Michel. "The Birth of Biopolitics." *The Essential Foucault*. Ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose. New York: New Press, 2003. 202-07.

_____. "The Subject and Power." *The Essential Foucault*. 126-44.

Weinstone, Ann. *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004.