

## Article

# Intertextuality in Diane di Prima's *Loba*: Religious Discourse and Feminism

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**Abstract:** The last three decades have witnessed a significant increase in the academic interest in the Beat Generation. No longer seen as “know-nothing bohemians” (Podhoretz 1958), scholars have extended the scope of Beat studies, either by generating renewed interest in canonical authors, by expanding the understanding of what Beat means, or by broadening the aesthetic or theoretical lens through which we read Beat writers and poets. Among these, the transnational perspective on Beat writing has sparked careful re-examinations of Beat authors and their works that seek to recognize, among other things, the impact that transnational cultures and literatures have had on Beat writers. Diane di Prima’s long poem *Loba* (Di Prima 1998), a feminist epic the poet started writing in the early 1970s, draws on a vast array of transnational texts and influences. Most notoriously, di Prima works with mythological and religious texts to revise and challenge the representation of women throughout history. This paper explores di Prima’s particular use of world narratives in light of a feminist poetics and politics of revision. Through the example of “Eve” and the “Virgin Mary”, two of the many female characters whose textual representation is challenged in *Loba*, the first part of the paper considers di Prima’s use of gnostic and Christian discourses and their impact on her feminist politics of revision. The second part of the paper situates *Loba* in the specific context of Second-Wave feminism and the rise of Goddess Movement feminist groups. Drawing from the previous analysis, this part reevaluates di Prima’s collection in light of the essentialist debate that analyzes the texts arising from this tradition as naïve and apolitical.

**Keywords:** Beat Generation; Beat women; Diane di Prima; feminism; *Loba*; Goddess Movement; intertextuality; religious discourse

## 1. *Loba* in the World of Textual Reference

Much has changed since Beat writers and poets were criticized on the grounds of an alleged lack of intellectual depth sustained by either a laid-back laziness or a system-directed violence (Podhoretz 1958; O’Neil 1959). Although such an ill-informed view was somewhat endorsed over the years by the mainstream media through its perpetuation of the shallow Beatnik, and by the academia, which for decades hindered the inclusion of Beat Studies as a serious field of research<sup>1</sup>, this trend has been shifting progressively. Sixty-odd years after the publication of the first Beat works, new paths and points of entrance, “notably feminist criticism and cultural studies” (Theado 2004, p. 748), have extended the scope of Beat studies, either by generating renewed interest in Beat canonical authors, by extending and expanding the understanding of what Beat means, or by broadening the aesthetic or theoretical lens through which we read Beat writers and poets. Ground-breaking anthologies,

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, a notorious and fairly recent example includes the case of former Connecticut teacher David Olivo, an English literature teacher who was fired in 2015 for reading Ginsberg’s “Please Master” in class.

such as Brenda Knight's *Women of the Beat Generation* (Knight 1996) and Richard Peabody's *A Different Beat* (Peabody 1997), expanded the Beat canon by introducing the, at the time, mostly unknown work produced by women associated with the Beat Generation. Fueled by an increasing interest in sociological studies of gender in post-war America (see Ehrenreich 1984; Breines 1992, 1994), pioneering work on Beat women and gender, such as Charters (1985), McNeil (1996) or Friedman (1996, 1998), was followed by more comprehensive studies that have helped to position female Beat authorship at center stage. Works such as Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson's *Girls Who Wore Black* (Johnson and Grace 2002) and *Breaking the Rule of Cool* (Grace and Johnson 2004), or, more recently, Frida Forsgren and Michael J. Prince's *Out of the Shadows* (Forsgren and Prince 2015) and Mary Panicia Carden's *Women Writers of the Beat Era* (Carden 2018), attest to the still growing interest in the artistic and literary production of Beat women.

In addition to the shifting discourse on female authors and poets, the transnational perspective on Beat writing<sup>2</sup>—brought into the spotlight by collections, such as *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond* (Van der Bent and Van Elteren 1999) or *The Transnational Beat Generation* (Grace and Skerl 2012)—has also challenged previous conceptions of Beat literature by exploring the legacy of the movement outside the United States (U.S.) and by increasingly recognizing the impact other cultures and literatures had on Beat writers. No longer seen as “know-nothing” bohemians, the work produced by Beat writers is recognized as part of a diverse literary, philosophical, and multicultural heritage that simultaneously influences their work.

Diane di Prima's oeuvre, spanning over five decades and multiple genres—mostly poetry, fiction, memoir, and theater—perfectly illustrates the extent to which the Beats incorporated an array of philosophical, religious, or literary influences from around the world into their works. Indeed, the impulse to transcend national boundaries is everywhere in di Prima's body of work; from the collection of world-wide folktales and legends in *Various Fables from Various Places*<sup>3</sup> (Di Prima 1960), to the impact of Italian anarchism in *Revolutionary Letters* (Di Prima 1971), or the use of trigrams of the I-Ching in *The Calculus of Variation* (Di Prima 1972). Diane di Prima's *Loba* (Di Prima 1998), the long epic poem she started writing in the early 1970s, gives ready testimony of the impact of world literatures in her poetry. As a case in point, Book I starts with two quotes that bear witness to the diverse origin of the textual influences in this text. The first one—“It would be very pleasant to die with a wolf woman/It would be very pleasant” (p. 7)—is a quote from a Tlingit Indian song di Prima took from Jerome Rothenberg's anthology *Shaking the Pumpkin* (Rothenberg 1972); the second one—“A clever man builds a city / A clever woman lays one low” (p. 7)—is a Chinese ode from the Shih-ching. Through these and other direct and indirect quotes, *Loba* weaves a complex tapestry of intertextual reference that can be useful to reevaluate di Prima's poetics and politics and that remains mostly unexplored. Indeed, despite often being referred to as one of di Prima's major works (Gray 2002, p. 103; Varner 2012, p. 78; Raskin 2017, p. 43), close studies and analyses of *Loba* have been relatively scarce—though the number has increased notably in the last decade.<sup>4</sup> While Thomson (2011) concentrates on bodily representations of femininity in *Loba*, Quinn (2012) uses H  len   Cixous's writings as a framework to examine di Prima's radical

<sup>2</sup> This trend is still relevant and recent works with clear transnational approaches include Jimmy Fazzino's *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature* (Fazzino 2016), Erik Mortenson's *Translating the Counterculture: The Reception of the Beats in Turkey* (Mortenson 2018), or A. Robert Lee's *The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature* (Lee 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Predating the transnational turn in American Studies, Kirschenbaum writes that in di Prima's *Various Fables*, “[t]he thrust is for a longer history than that of the United States, for transcending national boundaries, and for turning in to lasting stories that preserve experience of the whole human race” (Kirschenbaum 1987, p. 57).

<sup>4</sup> An early exception is Ann Charters's “Diane di Prima and the Loba Poems: Poetic Archetype as Spirit Double” (Charters 1985), where she reads parts I–VIII of *Loba* as proof of the poet's maturation, connecting di Prima's use of mythology to the influence of Robert Duncan. In this article, Charters also reads *Loba* as a female parallel or feminist twist of the American Indian coyote. Proof of the current and increasing interest in Diane di Prima is David Calonne's *Diane di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions* (Calonne 2019), the first volume focusing on Diane di Prima to be published next year by Bloomsbury. Similarly, and although not entirely devoted to di Prima, Max Orsini's *The Buddhist Beat Poetics of Diane di Prima and Lenore Kandel* (Orsini 2018) also shows the relevance of di Prima's work. In the latter, Orsini leaves

poetics through *Loba* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik*<sup>5</sup> (Di Prima 1969). Although this collection is not her main focus of attention, Quinn notes how *Loba* draws “from many myths, cosmologies, philosophies” (p. 28), which often create a complex web of intertextual references, beginning with the title itself and its connections to “the she-wolf of Roman mythology” (p. 27), but also “the Mexican ‘la loba’, or bone woman, collector of wolf bones who represents the reverse cycle of life from grandmother to mother to laughing maiden” (p. 28). With a clearer focus on feminist revisionism, Mackay (2016) reads *Loba* in the specific light of second-wave feminist revisions of mythology, expanding her analysis to also include di Prima’s critique and revision of women’s literature through the example of H.D., a major influence in di Prima and a strong presence in *Loba*. On a similar note, Nancy M. Grace and Tony Trigilio have recently explored the Greco-Roman allusions within *Loba*, connecting these with the poet’s “own identity as a female Buddhist poet of the modern age” (p. 226). Enumerating some of the threads in *Loba*’s “tapestry of allusions” (p. 228), Grace and Trigilio’s essay highlights the complexity of *Loba*’s textual connections.

Certainly, much in the tradition of epic poetry, Diane di Prima’s *Loba* is full of intertextual references to world literatures. Notoriously woman-centered, the more than two hundred short poems that are included in this collection address the she-wolf goddess in its many incarnations and shapes, creating a feminist mapping of multiple representations of women through historical, mythological, and religious texts. An illustrative example of this expansive and transnational approach takes place near the end of part three in *Loba*, where di Prima composes, or rather compiles, a poem that is entirely based on a list of female names, apparently following no logical order and without commas to separate one from the other. Forming one big block occupying half a page, these women—“Belili Ishtar The White Lady Mother of All Living Cerridwen/Olwen Blodeuwedd Achren Danu Nana Brigit” (p. 54)—stand for different representations of female power in the popular and historical imagination. These include goddesses, nymphs, monsters, and other fantastic creatures from world mythologies, religions, folklore, or legends from different origins—Greek, Latin, Egyptian, Sumerian, Navajo, Japanese, Hopi, Irish, Welsh, Celtic, Etruscan, Indian, Hindu, Buddhist, Hebrew, Jewish, Christian, Yoruba, etc. Without elevating one over the other, the enumeration of names acts as a catalogue of pre-established female identities, both positive and negative, which has been kept alive by men and women mostly in the retelling of myths. While myth has served various functions over the centuries, such as offering “an explanation of something in nature; how, for instance, any and everything in the universe came into existence” (Hamilton [1942] 2011), one of the most appealing characteristics of the mythical discourse, especially for writers and artists, is that myths “only really achieve significance in the telling: in this sense they are open structures differently filled by each generation” (Babbage 2011, *Revisioning Myth* 4). Beat women, who have themselves been absorbed by the now mostly-debunked myth of a closed, white, and masculine, Beat Generation, naturally felt attracted to the embodied qualities of myths, gladly accepting the invitation to use their poetry to rewrite not only mythological texts, but any other kind of discourse that has been used to perpetuate the subordination of women in socio-political or artistic realms. Works such as Joanne Kyger’s *Descartes* (Kyger 1968) or *The Tapestry and the Web* (Kyger 1965), and, more recently, Anne Waldman’s *The Iovis Trilogy*<sup>6</sup> (Waldman 2011) or *Gossamurmur* (Waldman 2013), contain direct and indirect intertextual references to classical and modern literature—such as the epic poems by Homer, Pound, Carlos Williams, Olson, etc.—and to western and eastern philosophical and religious discourse that range from Descartes’ *A Discourse on*

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*Loba* outside the scope of his study, but complains about the lack of attention paid to “di Prima’s employment of hybrid spiritualities and hybrid mythologies in *Loba*” (p. 113), naming Tony Trigilio as an exception.

<sup>5</sup> Quinn focuses on *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, *Loba* and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* in her article “‘The Willingness to Speak’ Diane di Prima and Italian American Feminist Body Politics” (Quinn 2003), where she complains about the lack of critical attention paid to di Prima up to that point and reads her work “as representative of a distinctly Italian American feminist theoretical consciousness” (p. 176).

<sup>6</sup> For a study of the intertextual references and the tension between genre and gender in Anne Waldman’s *The Iovis Trilogy* see Encarnación-Pinedo (2017) “Reconfiguring the Epic Space in Anne Waldman’s *The Iovis Trilogy*”.

*Method* (Descartes [1637] 2008) and Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (Derrida 1995) to Tibetan Buddhism and the practice of *tonglen*.

Much in the spirit of Adrienne Rich's "re-visioning" (Rich 1972), Beat poets often use these narratives "not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold" ("When We Dead" p. 19) on them. This often political movement is especially true in the case of Western religious and mythological discourse, and it is particularly relevant to di Prima's *Loba*, as the poet takes up Rich's challenge to counteract "the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (p. 18). Like Joanne Kyger's clear re-writing of *The Odyssey*<sup>7</sup> in her first published collection, in *Loba* this looking-back translates in the poet's conscious revision of mythical or religious discourses that have, as Mackay writes, "contributed significantly to patriarchal culture's narratives of gender." (p. 3) Two of these narratives are "Loba as Eve" and "The Seven Joys of the Virgin", both included in book I of *Loba*. At a basic level, these poems reveal di Prima's engagement with intertextuality, exemplifying one of the many instances in which world texts and discourses are incorporated into her poetry. In addition, in the context of a collection written at the zenith of feminist revolt, di Prima's interpretation of Christian<sup>8</sup> and Gnostic texts illuminate the poet's overall connection with feminism, especially in the context of Second-Wave feminism and Goddess-movement, a trend that is often criticized as essentialist and apolitical.

## 2. Patriarchal Discourses: Eve and Mary

The inclusive search of female identity that is carried out in *Loba* takes readers on a journey across a composite of texts and images that map the poet's extensive reading of world literature. Shifting across ages and hemispheres, di Prima's textual journey results in the comprehensive collection of images of women—ancient and contemporary, as well as fictional or real—that the poet uses to sketch the multifaceted and fluid portrait of the she-wolf goddess. Within the larger structure of *Loba*, these female archetypes serve different purposes, acting, for instance, as incarnations of the goddess, or as counterparts through which the poet challenges the inscription of female subordination in history. As "a poem of multivalent lineage, one that by its very nature asks us to reenvision the texts and authors about which it coalesces" (Grace and Trigilio 2018, p. 227), *Loba* asks readers to reinterpret its textual layers. In both "Loba as Eve" and "The Seven Joys of the Virgin Mary", di Prima uses intertextual reference to question a very specific creational myth that has been historically employed to subordinate women by reducing them to sinners—Eve—or holy mothers—Mary. In keeping with the shifting nature of the goddess, these sections expose di Prima's revision of female power in religious texts and her conception of a freer, less restrictive, mystical discourse that stands in opposition to more rigid patriarchal religious narratives.

The first of the two texts, "Loba as Eve", is influenced by a lost text from *The New Testament* apocrypha, from which just a few fourth-century quotations by Epiphanius survive (Epiphanius 2009). To further complicate the study of this text, Epiphanius only quoted from the original gospel to condemn the text as a celebration of unmoral behavior. Diane di Prima, quoting from Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion*

<sup>7</sup> For analyses of Kyger's *Tapestry* and the Web in connection with the rewriting of myth, see Michael Davidson's "Appropriations: Women and the San Francisco Renaissance" (Davidson 1989)—chapter 6 of *The San Francisco Renaissance*—and, most notably, Linda Russo's "To Deal with Parts and Particulars: Joanne Kyger's Early Epic Poetry" (Russo 2002), where she stresses Kyger's mixture of "layers of both personal and mythic history" (*Girls Who Wore Black*, Johnson and Grace 2002, p. 182) and Robert Duncan's influence in the poet's artistic approach to myth. Although not specifically focusing on *The Tapestry* and *the Web* Amy Friedman's "Joanne Kyger, Beat Generation Poet: 'a Porcupine Traveling at the Speed of Light'" (Friedman 2004), highlights Kyger's revision of the epic and transformation of Penelope into a figure that allows her to explore "burgeoning female creativity" (*Transnational Beat Generation*, Grace and Skerl 2012, p. 80). Recent publications include Elizabeth A. Manwell's "Penelope's Web: The Early Poetry of Joanne Kyger" (Manwell 2016).

<sup>8</sup> For simplicity's sake, in this article I refer to di Prima's denunciation of sexism in the Bible as an example of "Christian discourse". Though this term might be problematic or too vague, di Prima denounces women's subjugation in specific "Christian" terms in other works such as *Revolutionary Letters* (see "Letter # 66"). As far as *Loba* is concerned, the "Christian" discourse or the "orthodox Christian" discourse acts as a counterpart to the gnostic and mystic discourse established by other representations of female characters that are also analyzed in this article.

(Jonas 1958), uses one of the surviving quotes as a preamble to the five poems in “Loba as Eve”, a quote that she later breaks down into verses that act as the titles of, and as inspiration for, each individual poem. The surviving quote is the following:

I stood upon a high mountain and saw a tall man, and another of short stature, and heard something like the sound of thunder and went nearer in order to hear. Then he spoke to me and said: I am thou and thou art I, and wherever thou art, I there I am, and I am sown in all things; and whence thou wilt, thou gatherest me, but when thou gatherest me, thou gatherest thyself. (Panarion 26.3.1.)

Though the lack of information concerning the original source complicates the interpretation of the text, it is commonly believed that Eve is the witness and/or reporter of the encounter (Schneemelcher 1991, p. 360). As Deese writes, “[l]ike many texts produced by the political, cultural, and religious ferment of the early Christian era, this fragment is both intriguing in its imagery and maddeningly obscure in its meaning” (Deese 2017, p. 449). In “Loba as Eve”, di Prima complements this vague meaning with mystic and gnostic discourses that often interpret Adam and Eve as embodying two sides of a same being—Adam the soul and Eve the spirit. Hence, di Prima’s recreation of *The Gospel of Eve* is impregnated with a mystic view of a transcendental divine—“a divinity that is enmeshed in the fabric of the universe and within ourselves” (Deese 2017, p. 449)—through which the poet wishes to shift power hierarchies.

In the first poem in this section, “I am thou & thou art I”, Loba as Eve writes herself as an omnipresence that embodies everyone and all things, containing, as such, the male too. Dissolving the already faint corporality of the masculine presence in the gospel, Loba shifts the discourse to inhabit his actions—“your words/slip off my tongue, I am pearl/of yr final tears, none other/than yr flesh, though it go soft” (p. 71). Not yet the downfall of man, this still incorporeal Eve acts as creatrix, and stands for the fabric of the universe itself. Similarly, in “and where thou art I am”, she inhabits all places, whether they are mystical and esoteric—wind, stones, galaxies, etc.—or quite real and contemporary—“held/by two hoodlums under a starting truck./crocheting in the attic.” (p. 72) Di Prima keeps dissecting the direct quote and expanding on its meaning in the poem “& in all things am I dispersed”, where she positions Eve as creator of the universe, as “‘our’/Materia, mother & matrix/eternally in labor” (p. 73), and the starter of life, the one who “spins/the dharma wheel” (p. 73), imbuing the text with her own Buddhist studies. In these poems, Eve embodies many of the mystic qualities that are attributed to the Loba goddess throughout the collection. Like Loba, who at times acts as “a kind of spirit of all things” (Mackay 2017, p. 190), Eve is “the Name of everything” (p. 73) in this section, and exhibits characteristics that often stand in opposition with a situated denunciation of the position of women in society. Still untouched by the subsequent Hebrew and Christian transformations of Eve into the eternal sinner, the mystic discourse of the gospel allows di Prima to depict her as the mother goddess, even if the threat of subordination is not far from the poet’s world of textual references and, therefore, not far from *Loba*. Indeed, the last two poems introduce the premonitory apple and snake, and they depict a masculine energy taking advantage of her power—“suckle at my tits. Crucify/me like a beetle on yr desk” (p. 74). Placing Eve as Loba in opposition to the sinful Eve of Orthodox Christian discourses, these poems challenge the representational imposition performed by the Bible. Di Prima’s Eve, aware of her vantage point in the world of textual recreation, counters these discourses: “I explode/your certain myth. [ . . . ] I spit oracles at yr door/in a language you have forgotten.” (p. 74) To women, this powerful Eve is potentially liberating, not only because she represents an alternative to this “certain myth”, but also because she dwells in a space of, hypothetically, unlimited creativity:

It is for this you love me.  
It is for this  
You seek me everywhere.



Because I gave you apples out of season  
Because I gnaw at the boundaries of the light. (p. 74)

Finally, in the last poem—"but in gathering me thou gatherest thyself"—the otherworldly state of Loba as "[b]lue earth [ . . . ] never on this earth" (p. 75) is juxtaposed with the specifically bodily-situated female sin on earth that dominates the religious representations of Eve, and that is in tune with di Prima's own revision of the Virgin Mary as the culmination of female subordination in religious discourses. The deconstruction and expansion of the original quote in "Loba as Eve" anticipates di Prima's preoccupation with exposing the mechanisms through which religious and mythical discourses are adapted to accommodate political interests. From the dualistic, mystical power of Eve as "creatix" from which women can more easily benefit, the poems lead us to an increasingly reductionist interpretation of Eve as the eternal temptress, as the "apple you eternally devour/forever in your hand" (p. 75).

The impact that different discourses have on di Prima's revision of *The Gospel of Eve* illuminates the poet's understanding of the mechanisms and power relations that operate in the interpretation of texts. This is particularly revealing in "Lilith: An Interlude", a section that includes seventeen short poems through which di Prima builds from existing narratives to construct a polymorphous image of Lilith. Historically a product of Jewish mythology, Lilith has been portrayed as a winged and fanged demon—eternal threat of dangerously uncontrollable sexuality—and as an independent, powerful, role model for women—first wife of Adam, created from the same clay and thus unwilling to be subjugated.<sup>9</sup> The painter Siona Benjamin has stressed Lilith representational ambivalence stating that, throughout history, she:

has been called and has represented a mother of demons, slayer of newborns, corruption, indulgence, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and the seductress of men. Lilith has made a return in feminist history many a time as an iconic symbol that represents the oppressed, both as a goddess and as an example of female strength, power, and mystery. (Benjamin 2009, p. 16)

Di Prima reproduces and reacts to these various narratives by creating multiple and contradicting images of Lilith that simultaneously celebrate and fear her sexuality and violence, present Lilith as decadent and pitiful, or as a deceiver the poet turns away from, or even move from the physical to the cosmological domain to find alternative sources to describe her.<sup>10</sup> Together with the sketch-like nature of the poems, which favors the juxtaposition of images, di Prima further highlights the historical construction of Lilith by introducing poems with the conjunction "or". As if presenting a menu or catalogue from which we can choose the Lilith that we like the most, Lilith appears to us as "winged &/flanked by owls" (p. 86), an image put into question the next poems, where the poet asks "Or is she soft/hermaphrodite" (p. 87), introducing a softer, less aggressive image that is, yet again, complicated by the following poem—"Or she takes yr shape, she bites/yr old man on the shoulder while he sleeps" (p. 87). Like the discourse that di Prima uses to describe Loba, which often forays "between different and often seemingly contradictory modes of signification" (Thomson 2011, p. 8), Lilith dwells in fluid and conflicting representational narratives.

Lilith's example, besides adding an extra layer to the discourse on the position of women in religious and mythological texts created in *Loba*, attests to the poet's own abilities to use her poetry to perpetuate and/or oppose these narratives. While di Prima's interpretation of *The Gospel of Eve* takes advantage of the obscurity of Gnostic and mystic discourses, which the poet sees as offering women more space for self-representation, in "The Seven Joys of the Virgin", di Prima launches the offensive

<sup>9</sup> One of the earliest feminist appropriations of Lilith is Judith Plaskow's "The Coming of Lilith" (Plaskow 1974), an essay that coincides in time with di Prima's writing of *Loba*. For a summary of feminist revisions of Lilith see *Which Lilith? Feminist Writers Re-create the World's First Woman* (Dame et al. 2004).

<sup>10</sup> See "Lilith of the Stars", the poem that concludes Book I.

against the Christian dogma, as it represents yet another narrative the poet writes her *Loba with or against*. The title of this section alludes to the popular devotion and celebration of certain events in the life of Mary that have been widely represented in literature and painting, and which conventionally include the Annunciation, the Nativity of Jesus, the Adoration of the Magi, the Resurrection of Christ, the Ascension of Christ to Heaven, the Pentecost, and the Coronation of the Virgin in Heaven. Just as di Prima did in “Loba as Eve”, in this section she revisits each scene through the eyes of Mary, offering an alternative space where it is Mary herself, and not God’s messengers, who recounts the events.

The first event revisited is “Annunciation”, which describes the moment when the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and informs her that she will bear the son of God. The way that Mary recounts how she experienced this event clearly challenges the external imposition of “joy” as a suitable adjective to describe what happened. Indeed, in a language similar to the one Mary Daly would use to describe this event in *Gyn/Ecology*<sup>11</sup> (Daly 1978), di Prima’s annunciation is not God’s favor, but a violent rape:

the tall man, towering,  
it seemed to me  
in anger, I was fifteen only  
& his urgency  
(murderous rage) an assault I  
bent under. I saw the lilies bend  
also. (p. 101)

The poem keeps focusing on the adolescent’s fear and inferiority to the angel—“[a] flat stone. Towering./Murderous rage” (p. 101). Although “They call it/love” (p. 101), what Mary experiences in this poem is an unnatural force that takes her to the ground, moving tiles and bending plants with the harshness of his voice. Quite significantly, Mary’s recollections gather on the man’s voice resonating in her physical body, more concretely, and acting as a warning sign, in her womb—“Sound trembled in my gut, my/bowels spoke w/fear [ . . . ] my bowels caught/w/fear.” (p. 101). Unable to comprehend what was happening, all Mary remembers is the man’s recurrent allusion to her womb—how it is going to be put to use:

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.  
Sunlight & thunder. I had not  
heard thunder before  
in such blinding light. (p. 102)

In “VISITATION: Elizabeth & Mary”, di Prima recounts Mary’s first job as the bearer of Jesus, which consists of visiting Elizabeth, at the time also pregnant through divine intervention, and acting as “Mediatrice” or mediator between God and the human race. In the poem, the women’s pregnant bodies are contrasted with the description of the dead, infertile, ground that they walk:

Not small woolly grass  
not furze  
will cover us.

<sup>11</sup> Daly reads the annunciation as an example of the patriarchal myth of the rape/defeat of the Goddess—a recurrent theme in analyses exploring Greek myth through Zeus’s frequent raping rampages. For Daly, this theme, “[i]n christianity [ . . . ] is refined—distinguished almost beyond recognition. The rape of the rarefied remains of the Goddess in the christian myth is mind/spirit rape” (p. 85).

(yr belly leaps & mine is still as stone)  
 Not the wild prairie grass  
 that hides  
 white antelope. (p. 104)

Their unnatural conceptions are depicted as harming nature—"the babes/have melted all" (p. 105)—and their babies as alien beings growing inside them. Because of their imposed status as holy vessels, they now inhabit a dualistic position as bringers of faith and desolation; their babies represent the tension between the Christian discourse and the worship of nature often associated with the goddess: "all nations/calling as holy/bringers of desolation/calling us blest." (p. 106). The disassociation with nature, especially in the larger context of *Loba*, emphasizes the idea that although both Mary and Elizabeth are portrayed as the living carriers of God's faith, they do not participate in his divinity, acting merely as vessels. The passive, instrumental, position of women in religious discourses has been analyzed by authors such as Luce Irigaray, whose analysis in "Divine Women" (Irigaray 1986) sits comfortably with di Prima's revision of mythological and religious discourse throughout *Loba*:

We are still and always between different incarnations, and are devoted to the task of assisting man in his incarnation: a terrestrial and marine place for man's conception and gestation, with the mother feeding him, guiding his steps, fostering his growth, aiding him to develop in relation to his established gender, his Man-God. (*Women, Knowledge, and Reality*, Irigaray 1986, p. 478)

Di Prima keeps analyzing Mary's instrumentality in the Christian discourse and the unnaturalness of her pregnancy in "NATIVITY", the poem that depicts Jesus' birth. In the context of *Loba*, this poem provides a sharp contrast with other depictions of childbearing and childbirth. As a case in point, in "LOBA IN CHILDBED," di Prima describes childbirth as a very empowering experience for women, both physically and spiritually, which is part of the poet's overall "search for an alternative creative power which can be configured as feminine and maternal" (Friedman 1996, p. 207). To this end, Loba's childbirth experience is inscribed within a larger and specifically feminine cosmology as she "lay back, panting, remembering/it was what she should do" (p. 30). Besides being something "she should do", a statement that resonates strongly with essentialist discourses, the poem emphasizes Loba's active, physical, participation in the birth; that is to say, childbirth is something that she *does*, rather than something she just goes through. Thus, labor is described in this poem as a physical effort in which both the woman's and the baby's bodies swing into action:

she  
 screamed, for him, for herself, she  
 tried to open, to widen tunnel, the rock  
 inside her tried to crack, to chip away  
 bright spirit hammered at it w/his  
 soft foamy head. (p. 30)

The references to natural elements, intertwined with the physical description of the bodies, endow the process of childbirth with a magical energy based on Loba's connection to earth and nature. Transnational traditions and world imagery shape the portrayal of the child, who is described as "stone head monolith/lying in Columbian jungle" (p. 31), or "line drawing bird soul/as in hieroglyphs or in/Indian drawing" (p. 31). The mother's physical effort and pain are described in similar terms: "she cried out/bursting from the heart/of the devastated/mandala/skull boat grew wings/she fluttered/thru amniotic seas to draw him on" (p. 30). In clear contrast, and now drawing from a much more westernized discourse Mary's natural "Loba" instincts in "NATIVITY", are completely suppressed and her labor becomes an oppressive, enforced activity. Quoting before the poem the



story of the Great Wolf Fenri<sup>12</sup> from *The Edda*, the poem depicts how the natural, animal instincts in the Virgin Mary that let her know the labor is coming—“Dark timbers of lost forest falling into my bed./My hairs stirring, not asleep” (p. 107)—are soon suppressed by the instrumentality forced by the narrative in the Bible. Unlike the wolf Fenri, Mary’s bondage was real rather than mythical:

They fettered me  
w/leather straps, on delivery table. I cd not  
cry out. Forced gas mask over mouth,  
slave. I cd not  
turn head. Did they fetter me  
w/breath of a fish? These poison airs? I cd not  
turn head, move hand, or leg  
thus forced. They tore child from me. Whose? (p. 107)

Chained and drugged, unable to move or participate actively in labor, Mary is denied the physical and spiritual empowerment associated with childbearing in the mystic feminist discourse that predominates in *Loba*. In addition, di Prima extrapolates Mary’s position within the established discourse to other women, so that Mary’s labor in a manger in Bethlehem becomes any modern hospital’s delivery area. After birth, Mary is surrounded by “[w]omen/who knew same outrage” (p. 108), who saw their children “shackled & numbered” (p. 108), who could do little but console themselves<sup>13</sup>—“We breathe/in our rags to keep each other warm” (p. 108). This double vision of childbirth and motherhood—as a deeply feminine experience, or as a disconnection from their bodies—can also be appreciated in di Prima’s memoir *Recollections of my Life as a Woman* (Di Prima 2001). In this text, di Prima’s own experiences in giving birth to her five children lead to each of these contrasting poles. On the one hand, labor is described as an intimately feminine way of developing physical self-awareness, providing women with a deeper knowledge of their bodies:

This of childbirth, of being opened from inside out, I thought, was how you truly lost your virginity. Torn open so the world could come through. Come through you. Not that semipleasant invasion from a man, excursus from the outside in. Now I felt the joy, the power, of being OPEN. Something unconquerable and deep about it. Place from which I live. Twice-torn. (p. 190)

This image of labor as a means of self-empowerment is, on the other hand, contrasted in the memoir with the description of other childbirths that are closer to the one in “Nativity” than to “LOBA IN CHILDBED”. For example, at one point di Prima relates a scene in the delivery room awfully similar to Mary’s experience in “Nativity”:

I found myself strapped onto the delivery table, my hands and arms strapped down, and my body in the most unlikely position possible for producing a child: my pelvis and legs way higher than my stomach, my legs tied onto the stirrups of this contraption. (p. 170)

<sup>12</sup> In Norse mythology, Fenrir is the son of Loki, and was foretold to kill Odin, for which the Gods tried to chain him two times unsuccessfully until they used mythical elements to build the chain—readily: the footfall of a cat, the roots of a rock, the beard of a woman, the breath of a fish, the spittle of a bird, and bear’s sinews.

<sup>13</sup> In *Recollections of my Life as a Woman*, a similar scenario is described as di Prima relates how she was “wheeled into an elevator and shoved onto a cot in a ‘labor room’—where [she] was surrounded by six or eight screaming, moaning, or semi-unconscious women” (pp. 168–69).

Just like Mary,<sup>14</sup> and although she also felt nature calling and had told the hospital that she wanted a natural birth to be present and conscious at all times, she was denied the experience:

As Jeanne crowned and just as I was about to push her out, an invisible demonic being standing somewhere behind my head forced a gas mask over my mouth. I twisted my head as far as I could to get it off, I held my breath (all the while still trying to produce this infant). But to no avail. I finally did have to breathe, and the mask being over my face, I did pass out. At that crucial moment I was not allowed to be Witness. (p. 170)

Much like the poet herself, Mary in *Loba* cannot escape the situation she is in. Trapped in the discourse that has perpetuated her passivity, she can only lament the events that made her “come, world-weary here to lay / this final seed” (p. 108). In any case, rather than just complying with the female passivity of a traditional reading of Mary, di Prima’s revision of “The Seven Joys of the Virgin” exposes the powerful and domineering control mechanisms that operate in the patriarchal myth the Bible represents. If Mary “did not/question” (p. 108) God’s actions, it is because she was literally and literarily unable to escape his power, or to exist outside his representational universe. Nevertheless, by giving Mary a voice of her own, di Prima is able to challenge her supposedly willingness, even if it means ultimately leaving Mary in a state of eternal victimization. Without radically altering the events from the Bible, di Prima allows Mary a less restrictive self-representational space. For instance, in “FLIGHT INTO EGYPT”, the event that recounts Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod’s baby-killing-spree, the poet allows Mary a little bit of black humor, as she portrays the new mother pondering the possibility of having saved the wrong child:

Pursued  
by cries of 200 infants  
each of whom  
might have been the Christ.  
I do not know  
Which one I have carried away  
on this aging burro. (p. 109)

After “RESURRECTION”, where the just-resurrected Jesus “blasts/unhealing force” (p. 116), the last poem in this section, “CORONATION”, completes Mary’s objectification with her coronation as the Queen of Heaven. To further deprive her of the body that was previously used as a vessel, with her coronation, an event that was similarly described in imposing terms, she is completely robbed of her corporality. While Jesus has returned to his body, she is stripped from it: “implacable son sets weight of metal/on my immaterial head/o he is actual, it is now I/become wraith” (p. 117). Turned into an involuntary image of devotion, she becomes a statue that now yearns for “the grace of that girl/who bent to angels./Flexible limbs of [her] flight/thru Egyptian desert” (p. 118). Di Prima’s statuesque solidification of the Virgin Mary is reminiscent of H.D.’s *Trilogy*, where she revisits and revises religious and mythical narratives and characters in search for a unifying divine presence. Through the image of “the Lady”—who encompasses different mythical and religious traits—H.D. denounces the objectification of femininity in these discourses. In “Tribute to the Angels”, she draws attention to the different representations of this female figure:

Our Lady of the Chair;  
we have seen her, an empress,

<sup>14</sup> The similarities between di Prima’s description of her own childbirth in *Recollections* and the Virgin Mary’s in *Loba* are many: they both want a natural birth but are anesthetized against their will—the words “forced gas mask” appear in both texts—in addition, they are both strapped so that they can hardly move, and even fed soup afterwards—“They fed thin soup & sour/reliant milk” (*Loba* p. 107), “It took a fair bit of growling and general heavy-handedness to get something to eat, but they finally came up with some soup”. (*Recollections* p. 170) The main difference will be that although di Prima’s pregnancy is described as sought for—a conscious decision of her part—Mary’s conception is not.

magnificent in pomp and grace, [ . . . ]  
 we have seen her head bowed down  
 with the weight of a doomed crown,  
 or we have seen her, a wisp of a girl  
 trapped in a golden halo. (Doolittle 1998, p. 93)

In her poem, H.D. uses these and other representations to disassociate traditional depictions from the way the Lady appeared to her in a vision: “But none of these, none of these suggest her as I saw her” (p. 96). Dispossessed “of her usual attributes” (p. 97), in *Trilogy*, this female divine presence is allowed to create new stories, carrying a book with “the blank pages/of the unwritten volume of the new” (p. 103). In *Loba*, it is now that Mary has been solidified into the Christian myth, that di Prima allows herself to more radically revise Mary’s story, transforming her into a less tangible being with a newfound power that is reminiscent of mystical discourses. Just as the *Loba* benefits from an elusive, ever-changing nature throughout the collection, Mary finds that the “perks” of being a celestial being include a freedom of movement that she did not have when she had a body, especially when it was so evidently not her own. Indeed, this poem ends with Mary’s determination to flee from her new position as Queen of Heaven, an action that conveys the conversion of her body into a symbol of feminine power inhabiting the universe:

O, I shall burst  
 Burst thru  
 Take now  
 milke of the stars  
 & rub it in my flesh  
 Like sabbath ointment  
 I will fly  
 Broomless, unarmed, unready  
 I will fly. (p. 119)

Unlike “*Loba as Eve*”, in which the double-meaning and elusive nature of the Gnostic gospel permitted a more open, gender-equal, reading, in “The Seven Joys of the Virgin” the rigidity of the Christian discourse prevents the poet from freeing Mary from her position. Joanne Kyger adopts a very similar strategy in *The Tapestry and the Web* (Kyger 1965), in which the poet opts not to completely erase or re-write Penelope’s subjugation to patriarchy. Unlike more radical rewrites of *The Odyssey*, such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (Atwood 2005)—which transports the Greek heroine to the 21st Century—Kyger’s Penelope is very much still trapped within Homer’s epic. As Davidson has noted, “Kyger writes from within those [patriarchal] stories as a woman who finds herself inscribed into a myth that she wishes to interrogate in her own terms” (p. 192). Like Mary in *Loba*, Kyger’s Penelope functions within these structures only to subtly destabilize them because, as Manwell points out, through “her re-weaving of the tale a deliberately ambiguous story emerges” (p. 67). In any case, despite the more flexible space for self-determination, Kyger’s Penelope still finds herself entrapped in Homer’s patriarchal myth.<sup>15</sup> In much the same way, Mary in *Loba* cannot resist the events—the joys—that she is traditionally praised for, even if through di Prima’s revision these are reinterpreted and rewritten as acts of violence. However, as this last poem has shown, di Prima does provide Mary with the power to escape the patriarchal imposition that came to her on the form of veneration. The fact that it is only outside the canonical construction of Mary that she is finally granted some power should

<sup>15</sup> On Kyger’s style, Johnson and Grace state that her “poetry manifests an interest in the burdens imposed and the perspectives permitted by gender and the feminine, as in her revision of Penelope’s story in ‘The Odyssey Poems’ (*Tapestry* pp. 53–61). However, her gendered emphasis is more understated than the pronouncements of di Prima, or the insistences of Johnson, or the decrees of Martinelli. She takes an oblique way through women’s experiences and perspectives and tells it slant in the Dickinsonian tradition”. (*Breaking the Rule of Cool* Grace and Johnson 2004, p. 134).

not be read as the celebration of an escapist, goddess-centered utopian universe. On the contrary, di Prima's *Loba* functions within different patriarchal structures—like Mary's textual bondage to the discourse of the Bible—only to show that women can, or rather have to, make use of the tools that are provided to fight back. After all, if Mary can escape at the end and find a different/feminine source of energy, it is only because she subverted the supposedly position of inferiority that she was “crowned” into.

### 3. Religious and Mythical Discourse: The Essentialist Debate

“I have been a graveyard these last thousand years I shall rise, like the full moon, from that cemetery” (“Litany” p. 48).

Eve's and Mary's examples are just two of the many world narratives that di Prima takes up in *Loba*. Despite the differences that arise from the freedom the poet attributes to the more obscure mystic discourse over the now widely perpetuated and well established Christian rhetoric, both examples are far from the explicitly female/feminist power attributed throughout the collection to the multiple incarnations of the Mother Goddess, who sustains an alternative female myth that functions in *Loba* as a freer space for female subjectivity. Di Prima's different uses of myth and other world narratives in *Loba* are useful to investigate the relationship between the creative and literary renditions of the Goddess in her poetry, and its appropriation for feminist or political discourses. Indeed, the influence and presence of the goddess in di Prima's *Loba*—most of which was written in the 1970s—coincides chronologically with a growing concern over the lack of a space for the development of a female agency not determined by the way that it has been defined by men. As Thelma J. Shinn put it:

[i]n the twentieth century, faith in patriarchy and its myths has been seriously undermined. While those in power are inevitably threatened by any breakdown in cultural values, the oppressed members of society—women and minorities in the United States in particular—might find such a breakdown to their advantage as they see the stereotypes which have predefined their characters and their society disintegrating. (*Worlds within Women* Shinn 1986, p. 9)

The worship of the Goddess, closely linked to Second Wave feminist groups, comes out from a period of growing political and personal dissatisfaction with the position of women in a world ruled by men. The Goddess, supposedly preceding the Christian construction of femininity that di Prima explores in poems such as “Loba as Eve” and “The Seven Joys of the Virgin”, offers an alternative space that connects women with a feminine, primordial, creating force. Fueled by the work of anthropologists, such as Marija Gimbutas, the cult of the Goddess was articulated not so much as an escapist fantasy towards a utopian world where women were powerful, but as a historical second-coming of a rightful female power. Other authors have supported this view, arguing that the power traditionally attributed to a male God, and, by extension, to men, has been nothing but a conscious misreading of actual evidence to undermine women's historical authority (Markale 1999). Leaving aside the actual historical truth behind the cult of a pre-Christian Goddess,<sup>16</sup> the poetical uses di Prima makes of the goddess worshipers' discourse, analyzed in light of the larger intertextual references in *Loba*, reveal di Prima's position in this debate and her overall feminist politics in the collection. Like goddess worshipers, di Prima acknowledges in *Loba* the Goddess' right to power through poems in which the speaker channels her voice—“I have been a graveyard these last thousand years/I shall rise, like the full moon, from that cemetery” (p. 48)—or by invoking her presence in poems such as “THE POET PRAYS TO THE LOBA”:

<sup>16</sup> Although Gimbutas's book has proven to be very influential for feminists thinkers and artists, it has also been greatly criticized, especially in the archeological and anthropological fields. One of these critiques is Phillip G. Davis's *The Goddess Unmasked: The Rise of Neopagan Feminist Spirituality* (Davis 1998).

Lady fling your bright drop to us, emblems  
 of your love, throw  
 your green scarf on the battered earth once more  
 O smile, disrobe for us, unveil  
 your eyes. (p. 49)

Speaking to the Goddess on behalf of women, the poet initiates through rite the search of an ancient divine power that is articulated as central to female independence, as it offers women the possibility of opening paths that are not marked by men: “All things are possible within the mother [ . . . ] The Roads not taken./Opening to us/as She opens/shd we dare” (p. 166). Worshipping a female Goddess empowers women in so far as she allows them to see themselves through her, to have her as a role model, something that did not happen with a masculine God. If in the phallogocentric universe represented by the narratives in which Eve and Mary are trapped, women lack subjectivity and they can only occupy object positions, connecting with the Goddess through the female body would finally grant women access to an identity that is not construed in masculine terms—an argument put forward by Luce Irigaray:

The (male) ideal other has been imposed upon women by men. Man is supposedly woman’s more perfect other, her model, her essence. The most human and most divine goal woman can conceive is to become man. If she is to become woman, she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity. (*Sexes and Genealogies* Irigaray 1993, p. 64)

Although for di Prima the connection to divinity is not as explicit and theological as Irigaray’s, *Loba* does seem to stress the necessity of recognizing and developing from a female divinity in order to achieve a female subjectivity uncontaminated by patriarchal impositions. This divine feminine, however, is not necessarily articulated as a regressive turn into the magical or idealistic; rather, it means understanding the female god as “an other that we have yet to make actual, as a religion of life, strength, imagination, creation, which exists for us both within and beyond, as our possibility of a present and a future” (*Sexes and Genealogies* Irigaray 1993, p. 72). Closer to Irigaray’s philosophical approach than to the rather utopian stance that is adopted by most goddess worshippers, di Prima heightens the need of turning away from a naive reading of the Goddess, into a psychological and potentially political position that would grant women the power to continually construct themselves in specific socio-political situations. This might explain why di Prima opens up a collection that is so markedly concerned with liberating women’s spirituality and sexuality with a poem that addresses Loba through her relationship with men—“If he did not come apart in her hands, he fell/like flint on her ribs [ . . . ] if he was not/daisies in her soup he was another/nettle in her hair” (p. 11). Situating Loba in a representational universe that is dictated by a masculine presence creates, in di Prima’s collection, a point of departure from a broad understanding of Goddess Movement feminism. Kathryn Rountree has referred to the relation between feminism and the Goddess Movement as “[o]ne of the thorny issues for feminist within the academia” (Rountree 1999, p. 138), a tension that is mostly generated by the connection between goddess worshipers and restricting, naïve, and apolitical essentialist discourses. Just as the variable and multiple images of Loba defy easy classifications, di Prima’s *Loba* resists the apolitical critique that reads Goddess Movement’s texts as utopian, inwardly tuned, and ignorant of the external social and political circumstances under which women become oppressed.

While *Loba* contains instances of matriarchal, pre-Christian culture, the acknowledgement of a female divinity does not automatically translate into the erasure of history; quite the opposite, di Prima makes sure to clearly name Loba’s oppressor and to delimit female subordination. Mixing contemporary and ancient times, as well as lived-experience and myth, di Prima includes poems that aim, for instance, to expose women’s subordination through domesticity, as in “FOR CAMERON”, where the speaker laments women fell “out of attention,/Wiping gnarled fingers on a faded housedress./Lying down in the puddle beside the broken jug” (p. 152). Fully aware of her own



power to re-inscribe female experience where it belongs, that is to say, fully aware of the position of her text within the cosmos of references she has created, di Prima exposes the malleability of historical discourse, refocusing the attention now on women:

Shall we remember the half-mad whores  
who walked on them  
Eyes black as Egypt: al-Khem  
the women  
of that Night?  
Shall we  
recall the quarter moons of that era  
their desperation  
the hopelessness of the wind. (p. 263)

For the poet, then, the remembrance of women's subjugation becomes a necessary measure for the development of a female history—in order to learn from the past, one must expose the mechanisms through which women have been historically subordinated. Quinn refers to this movement as di Prima's "steadfast feminist aesthetics—that her literary art would not sacrifice revealing the material realities of women's lives" (Quinn 2012, p. 22), a political position that complicates an essentialist readings of *Loba*. Indeed, even in the poems in which the goddess acts as a representative of the category "woman" using a discourse that is dangerously close to essentialism, the threat of patriarchal violence keeps transporting the reader to the factual world and to events as lived by women throughout history. For instance, in "LOBA, TO APOLLO, AT THE FOUNTAIN OF HEALING," Loba recalls instances in which women have been abused by men—confronting her pain in order to free herself from it. Some of the abuses reported include persecution and death—"were we not killed, out of jealousy, run thru/w/a black lance, every moon?/did I not burn?" (p. 147), as well as slavery and sexual violence—"was I not sold & my daughters broken?/I remember/yr teeth on my half-formed breasts/welts on my legs" (p. 147). Directly addressing patriarchy, Loba does not create an alternative cosmos where women did not suffer, but acknowledges her abused past and struggles to move on:

can you laugh, father  
can you deny  
mouthfuls of blackened blood  
I spit out  
each morning  
to sing? (p. 148)

More than an escapist movement, the goddess in *Loba* provides women with tools to dwell in patriarchy and to fight from within. Though the mystic discourse that was used to describe the goddess represents a freer space for female empowerment—the mystic has been celebrated by feminist thinkers such as Toril Moi, Simone de Beauvoir, and Luce Irigaray—di Prima's collection works in an intermediate state between transcendence—Loba is "she whose face we have never seen" (p. 193)—and immanence—as she manifests herself in the material world through different women, goddesses, objects, etc. In this sense, 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. The female body is indeed crucial to di Prima's representation of the divine power, because through their bodies women connect to the Goddess, but the Loba goddess also transcends corporality. Although Loba often uses the mystical discourse as a tool to escape the rigidity of other mythological and religious discourses, many poems in the collection carefully inscribe the female body within a specific socio-political context, that is to say, within the patriarchal universe that they inevitably inhabit. Through this conceptual dualism, women perform their independence through their bodies, but are also given the means to move beyond that, as reducing women to their body—as the example of the Virgin Mary shows—might make them vulnerable to patriarchal control.

To conclude, di Prima's uses and appropriations of religious and mythological discourses in *Loba* draw attention to her own position as a poet and a woman participating in the web of world narratives. Just as Loba faces her oppressor and uses her language to "explode/your certain myth" (p. 74), di Prima uses her poetry to collect, rearrange, and expose the benefits as well as the dangers of perpetuating these discourses. Although *Loba* has often been analyzed in marked essentialist terms,<sup>17</sup> di Prima's mixture of world narratives and mythological and religious discourses complicate this reductionist view that was often associated with the cult of the goddess that would read di Prima's "representations of the goddess, the mother, the artists, and others shape-shifting into an essentialist female community"<sup>18</sup> (*Breaking the Rule* Grace and Johnson 2004, p. 86). Insistently exposing the impact of these and other texts in the representation of women throughout history, di Prima's *Loba* reminds us that it is precisely in its malleability that myth, just as any other discourse, becomes potentially liberating. As Babbage has asserted, "to turn to myth is not of itself to disconnect from history; to invoke mythic metaphor in exploring femininity is not to assert an unchanging or universal female self" (*Re-Visioning Myth* Babbage 2011, p. 28).

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<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote that, "[i]n the twentieth century, Woman has liberated herself from the pedestal upon which she has been 'set up', mostly by men. Loba enthrones her again, only this time it is done by herself". (*Loba* back cover) Referring to the collective category of "woman"—which he writes in capital letters—Ferlinghetti's words point to a reductionist approach in which di Prima, as the poet speaking for women and about women, gives form to an alleged shared female essence. Advertisement copy editors at Penguin must have felt the same way, as they blurred the book as "a visionary epic quest for the *reintegration of the feminine*" (my emphasis, back cover), which also points to an essential, uniquely feminine of way or being a woman. Even di Prima herself has pointed out in interviews towards this reductionist view: "So now when people say 'What is Loba about?' I'm able to say it's about the feralness of the core of women, of the feminine in everything. In everyone". (Peter Warshall, "Tapestry of Possibility" *Di Prima* 1999, p. 22).

<sup>18</sup> In a more recent article, Grace and Trigilio oppose this view, stating that "di Prima's simultaneous emphasis on the primacy of mythic vision and on tactile cause-and-effect relationships in the world suggests a historical urgency that incorporates, rather than opposes, transcendental idealism" (p. 232).

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