CHAPTER 11

Troubling Classical and Buddhist Traditions in Diane di Prima’s Loba

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Introduction: Practices and Lineages

In the syncretic visionary long poem Loba, Diane di Prima, the most prominent female writer associated with the Beat literary movement, addresses the underlying principle of her poetics through an epigraph attributed to the depth psychologist Carl Jung: “What myth are you living[?]” (1967, 125). Used to invoke the confluence of revisionary spiritual poetics with a concern for material time and history, the question summons Loba’s desire to merge the oppositional impulses of historicity and vision through a recovery and restructuring of mythic materials within the context of her long-standing Buddhist practices. While di Prima draws upon many mythological traditions in Loba, Greco-Roman narratives function prominently throughout the poem cycle, and, in fact, conclude it in such a way as to imply the centrality of these stories to her own identity as a female Buddhist poet of the modern age.

Loba features 205 short poems divided into fifteen parts, which are themselves divided between two books, the first published in 1978, the second added in 1998. The author’s note to Loba identifies the series as a “work in progress” with di Prima “reserve[ing] the right to juggle, re-arrange, and osterize . . . in future editions. As the Loba wishes, as the Goddess dictates.” As a long poem, Loba functions much like seminal Western epics, such as Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, as well as their modernist descendants, such as T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, Ezra Pound’s The Cantos, Charles Olson’s Maxi-
mus poems, William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, and H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*. Pound—a major influence on di Prima’s poetics—called the genre a “tale of the tribe” or a story encompassing an entire culture’s values and history. This definition aptly suits not only the subject matter of *Loba* but also di Prima’s persistent representation of the Beat/Digger/Hippie familia as a tribe, a repudiation of both the post–World War II nuclear family and the nation-state.

The syncretic impulse permeating *Loba* has long centered di Prima as a writer and a woman. Born on August 6, 1934, into an Italian, middle-class family in Brooklyn, she has spent her adult life as an autodidact, reading widely across authors, genres, geographies, and historical periods. To know di Prima—and to better understand the classical/Beat/Buddhist maneuvers in *Loba*—is also to know that she, like many of her Beat compatriots, refuses to suffer separations between her life as an artist and her other lives, including those of mother, wife, teacher, daughter, spiritualist, political activist, and now in her ninth decade, a body dying from Parkinson’s disease. Deeply cognizant that all poets are products of syncretic processes, she believes that “the one influenced casts a selective light on the influencer. Creates or re-creates,” as she writes in *R. D.’s H.D.*, “the Daemon or Genius or Star under which s/he is working by seeing and highlighting those aspects which speak to her/him. No two poets have ever been ‘influenced’ by the same Dante, or the same Shake- speare” (di Prima 2011, 1). The poetics of influence, then, works dialectically as poets draw upon those who have come before but also sculpt readers’ visions of those very precursors through the artist’s aesthetic appropriation of them. Defying the trope that Western art comes from “a broken, an incomplete, tradition” to which we remain blind, di Prima credits Western poets with the practice of recognizing “a precision of lineage” and frequently addressing it in their art/lives (2). The poem as she perceives it “stands at a juncture of planes—of whatever lineages have become manifest at a given point” (3). With respect to *Loba* and di Prima’s work in general, this statement means that she adapts particular lineages, such as Greco-Roman mythologies, not as a scholar to explicate or historicize them but rather for the purposes of her own work as an artist.

In this light, several features distinguish *Loba* as a poem of multivalent lineage, one that by its very nature asks us to reenvision the texts and authors about which it coalesces. For instance, John Keats has remained one of di Prima’s most consistent muses since she first read his poetry in high school, affirming for her the supremacy of poetry over philosophy and the “holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of the imagination” (di Prima 1978, x). After leaving Swarthmore College, which she briefly attended in the early 1950s, to live and write in New York’s Lower East Side, di Prima has gravitated
toward an eclectic mix of classical, medieval, and modern texts, among them the poetry of Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg. Of particular importance, as she noted in her journal for October 1956, have been Greco-Roman authors including Euclid, Ptolemy, Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, and Sophocles. From the first two, she intended to learn mathematics; from the others, language (Special Collections, University of Louisville).

Di Prima has also spoken directly about the way her writing processes grew out of early twentieth-century radical art movements. In a 1989 interview with Tony Moffeit, she explained that “all those European elements that we'd been cut off from during the war, late Surrealism . . . were all there. You'd see [for example] Blood of a Poet six times, eight times” (Moffeit 2004, 98). She credits Dadaism, in particular, with promoting her reliance on “non-random randomness,” realized as “looking at the wall and letting the images arise and following any image only as far as it went, not trying to make sense out of it, not trying to complete the sentence and holding on to whatever next image arose” (99). These processes remain di Prima's primary form of writing, influenced as well by Jack Kerouac's theory of spontaneous composition, John Cage's aesthetics, and Jimmy Waring's choreography (103). Eventually di Prima developed deep interests in Eastern religious and spiritual traditions, leading her to study Zen and Tibetan Buddhism focused on the impermanence and nonduality of all phenomena; when she moved to San Francisco in 1967, she sat Zazen with Shunryu Suzuki (90). To this day, she remains a Buddhist, expanding her interests to include the magical practices of Tantric Buddhism. Di Prima has also had a long-standing interest in the Hermetic tradition of alchemy, which can be traced back to Hermeticism as an ancient spiritual, philosophical, and magical tradition named for the God Hermès Trismegistos (Greek, “Thrice-Greatest Hermes”), a Greco-Egyptian form of the Egyptian god of wisdom and magic, Thoth.

With respect to the project of this essay, while di Prima's earliest works reveal little of the classical materials that dominate Loba, her developing attention to collecting fables (Various Fables from Various Places, 1960), translating Latin texts (Seven Poems from the Middle Latin, 1965), and incorporating characters from classical myths and histories into her surreal/absurdist plays (e.g., King Minos in Rain Fur, 1959) presaged her modernist/Beat/Buddhist philosophy, grounding material reality in paradigms of mythic narratives, blending cross-cultural texts and traditions to serve transcendental and physical epistemologies. Of all her works, Loba pulsates most vibrantly across these poles.

Like many contemporary long poems, Loba requires that readers disentangle multiple voices and personas, multiple streams of consciousness, and a tapestry of allusions. These project fragmented, recursive “consciousness[es]”
(to borrow a term from Ezra Pound) into the poem’s historical era rather than constructing a singular persona at the center of the poem. In other words, di Prima is not manipulating the language, history, and reception of a particular classical author as Ed Sanders did with Sappho for Lower East Side purposes (see Skerl in this volume); nor is she using the Greco-Roman traditions as a model of aesthetic expression, as Ginsberg did in “Molest Cornifici tuo Catullo” (see Pfaff in this volume); nor is she writing her own anthology of classical texts as did Rexroth (see Nesbit in this volume). Instead, di Prima’s vision of multiple historical eras impregnated with heterogeneous consciousnesses expands Western religious, political, and aesthetic traditions with a countercultural sensibility and a characteristically Beat fusion of West and East. In particular, her manipulations of classical narratives serve to restage female identity as subject rather than object through an emphasis on the female body thriving in its outsider relationship to masculinized religious cultures.

More specifically, Loba’s seemingly ever-changing names for the Goddess—Native American (e.g., Loba, Canyon Lady, Spider-Woman), conventional Christian (e.g., Eve), Gnostic (e.g., Eve, Sophia), Buddhist (e.g., Tara, Prajna), Hindu (e.g., Kali), Middle Eastern (e.g., Ishtar), and Greco/Roman (e.g., Athena, Persephone, Calypso, Aphrodite)—place the poem within the realm of feminist revisionist mythmaking. This process, explained by Alicia Ostriker in her seminal essay “Thieves of Language,” exposes a woman’s need to steal male-centered language in order to create and communicate her own perspectives: “Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture,” Ostriker states, “the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends . . . ultimately making cultural change possible” (Ostriker 1982, 72). In this project, di Prima joins writers such as Anne Sexton, A. S. Byatt, Adrienne Rich, Angela Carter, and especially H.D.

Feminist literary approaches to revisionist mythmaking differ widely. Some choose to reshape individual narratives or traditions with feminist form and content while keeping the masculinist form intact or at least partially visible—as say Sexton does in Transformations or as Joanne Kyger, a Beat-associated writer, does with her long poem The Tapestry and the Web, a revision of Homer’s Odyssey. Others, and Loba belongs in this group, use mythic materials to create a bricolage, that is a structure, much like a mosaic, built from a seemingly endless cache of many different fragments that unmask the poem’s intertextual construction. While flaunting the essentialism of influence and lineage, di Prima deconstructs and rearranges these materials to such
an extent that the emerging artifice seems to erase, at least in part, the discrete historical and patriarchal pedestals upon which many of the formative narratives stand, rendering the poem an ahistorical space suitable for female emancipation.

Revisionist approaches such as these have served women (and other) writers well, but they are also subject to the critique that reliance upon myth leads only to a superficial escape from its ideological constraints, that revisionist mythmaking is at its core a charlatan's trick passing off as new the garb of the old, a “fancy-dress version of tradition” (Deane 1992, xxxix).1 Understandably, readers in this camp may read Loba as transparent cross-dressing, the putting on of others’ identities to hide what cannot be hidden and thus a failed effort to effect genuine transformation. However, Loba’s mythic materialities align themselves more closely to Judith Butler’s concept of the drag queen whose outlier performances lay bare gendered identity as a cultural construction created through behavioral and stylistic repetition, under which no essential identity exists.

In drag parody, Loba’s appropriation of Carl Jung’s query about myth and the lived experience ironically—and sardonically—promises to disrupt notions of gendered identities reified through myth and to replace them with the equally troubled starting point for thinking through contemporary Buddhism, especially for women, that is, 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 distinction between male and female. This journey, one grounded in what we have termed “the Greco-Roman Thread,” is, in turn, the basis for a truly feminist experience of the Buddhist path to enlightenment, a novel revisioning of classical (and other) traditions.

The Muse(s)

Like many epic poems, Loba opens with an invocation to a muse, which reflects a more broadly incantatory tendency throughout the poem rooted in

1. Cf. Marx’s observation in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: “The tradition of all the generations of the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem involved in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never before existed, it is precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis that they conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow names, battle cries and costumes from them in order to act out the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language” (1963, 15, emphasis added).
the realm of magic and reflecting a classical precedent evocative, as critic Dale Smith notes, of female voices, particularly that of “Sappho, who appealed also to Aphrodite with simple, earnest direction” (Smith 2010). That connection, however, is so opaque that unless one seeks it intentionally, it remains invisible, especially since Loba’s invocation explicitly undermines the very forms of which Smith speaks. First, the invocation is titled “Ave,”2 from the hail or hello addressed to the Virgin Mary (“Ave Maria”), a gesture that partially replaces the classical foundation of female mythology with a female-centered version of Christian mythology, rendering the classical Muse a muted, palimpsestic figure. Furthermore, di Prima’s invocation is addressed neither explicitly to the Virgin Mary nor implicitly to Calliope, the classical muse of epic poetry, but rather to the speaker’s “lost moon sisters,” fittingly, Beat figures wandering Bleeker and Fillmore streets, mid-twentieth-century souls relegated to the margins of patriarchal, capitalist culture (1978 1998, 3).3

Bridging the East (Bleeker) and West (Fillmore) Coasts of the United States, these visionary sisters assume more ancient forms of female materiality, withstanding male dominance and violence through the female ability to give birth, while ecstatically expressing androgynous power through acts of masculine physical prowess. In the mythic night of visionary encounters, the speaker calls out to them, and in the echoes of her voice, they morph into the earth upon which she walks, the skins of the tents they inhabit, and the evening star itself. The speaker comes to realize that her “moon sisters” comprise the very nourishment of her body and the very vehicle of her transcendence. Eventually, they aggregate into the “she” who is herself (“I am always you / I must become you” [di Prima (1978) 1998, 6]). The supplicant’s apostrophic “O” announcing the invocation becomes in the poem’s conclusion a polyphonic, polycultural chant to an out-of-body source for all that is true as well as all that is false: “om star mother ma om / maya ma ah” combines the primal, mantric sound “om” with “star” and “mother,” both symbols in many traditions of primordial life, with “maya,” the Buddhist term for illusion, and the Sanskrit symbol “ah” (6). In form and content, di Prima’s address to the Muse recognizes the power of ancient forms of poetry and spiritual beings, while situating her invocation in a liminal world between the soma and the noumena, a space populated with both the geometric and the surreal, the true and the false, thus allowing the singer to express herself as a physical individual in human time and an all-encompassing force outside of time. This poem, as do many in Loba, also suggests that names—be they “Calliope,” “Mary,” or the

2. Di Prima has said that “Ave” (1971) was the first of the Loba poems (Moffeit 2004, 93).
3. All references to Loba refer to page numbers in di Prima [1978] 1998.
all-inclusive “she”—cannot be decisively frozen in historical time, nor can the particulars of historical time be altogether evaded or superseded.

Continuing “Ave’s” project of troubling form, di Prima introduces a second opening address later in the sequence: “DREAM: The Loba Reveals Herself” appears in part 4 of book 1. Its placement, approximately one-fifth of the way into the collection, suggests that the unfolding of consciousness in Loba is recursive rather than linear. The invocation forecasts as well that the language of the poem, set in breath-determined fragments in the Projectivist tradition of Charles Olson, will also follow a recursive path. Most importantly for the purposes of this essay, the second address connects the classical and Christian allusions with another muse, the she-wolf Loba for whom the cycle is titled.

Di Prima has stated that the idea for the Loba poems emerged from a dream in which she and her children are 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. The she-wolf recalls a prominent figure in classical legend, the lupa that suckles the twins Romulus and Remus, thus saving their lives so that Rome can be founded, but also the less well-known she-wolf of Native American lore, who travels through the desert, gathering the bones of dead wolves, assembling them into full skeletons, and then singing them back to life—at which point they gallop off toward the horizon where they morph into free human females.

“DREAM,” unlike “Ave,” is not directed to a set of muses but appeals indirectly to a “she” who materializes as the Loba and inspires a language that resists linear, paternal structures of religious power through the use of linguistic fragmentation and the counterforce of Projectivist line trajectories. The Loba mantra that emerges is a spell-like utterance, partly name, “Loba,” and partly the drumming sound of the she-wolf’s footfalls. In this way, Loba develops a textual body that inhabits conventionally gendered social codes in order to empty them of their social force: it is both stereotypically feminine-coded (in its evasion of linearity) and masculine-coded (in its privileging of force). This focus on the concrete experience of visionary consciousness in language may seem at odds with the conventional understanding of the visionary poem as privileging transcendence over immanence. But di Prima’s simultaneous emphasis on the primacy of mythic vision and on tactile cause-and-effect relationships in the world suggests an historical urgency that incorporates, rather than opposes, transcendental idealism.

The speaker of “DREAM” is not passive prey, nor was di Prima herself in the dream that triggered this poem. Rather, the categories of hunter/hunted are transposed in a context of maternal protection in which motherhood emerges as that which is alternately nurturing and feral. The Loba “came to
hunt, but I did not / stay to be hunted,” the speaker asserts: “Instead / wd
eventually becomes a “kind watchdog I cd / leave the children with. / Mother
& sister. / Myself” (68). Di Prima’s real dream and the poem “DREAM” echo
alike the Loba myth about the panentheistic link between wolf and woman,
both of whom hold the power of resurrection through song. The speaker
becomes at once the caretaker of the beast (the Loba) and the Loba herself, a
manifestation of masculine fierceness within a feminine nurturing framework
and a mother goddess.

Di Prima reenvisions the historical status of women in Western religious
traditions as inextricable from their everyday lived experience. 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. In doing so, she chal-
lenges what Foucault has termed the persistence of “biopower,” the total con-
trol of body and gesture in late capitalism, which she relocates in a religious
sphere that must be resisted, especially by women, from whom contemporary
religious practices still too often demand submergence rather than spiritual
seeking. Whether in the economic or the religious realm, the body is held in
check by systems of control—in Loba, the essentialism of the sacred word—
that afford no opportunities for debate and counter-discourse. Di Prima’s
raveling and unraveling of these systems of religious-based control is crucial
to the unfolding of the poem’s counter-discourse of female/feminist visions,
encapsulated in the initial invocations to different yet identical muses.

The Greco-Roman Thread

Central to this unraveling is a persistent pattern of allusions to and revisions of
Greco-Roman mythic characters and narratives. The poems that focus on clas-
cical materials, approximately ten percent of the whole, constitute a subcycle
within Loba in which the poets/speakers/singers create visionary analogues for
the muses to whom the two invocations above are addressed. Woven amongst
these are sections devoted to a panoply of goddesses and female heroes from
across other cultural traditions, as we have noted above. Stitched throughout
are surreal, visionary images of wolves, dogs, horses, snakes, and owls, which
situate Greco-Roman mythology within a vexing (con)fusión of history and
transcendence. Many of the individual parts within the two books and some
of the poems themselves are preceded with epigraphs, such as the Carl Jung
interrogatory; several of these epigraphs are attributed to an “Imaginary Jung-
ian Scholar” who at times serves as foil for the speaker’s message, at other
times as a spokesperson for the speakers’ perspectives. All of these elements are combined with frequent allusions to both human consciousness and narrative as labyrinthian, web- and maze-like tapestries.

Granted, Loba itself reads like a maze, with multiple entrances and exits and a confusing mix of interconnecting pathways, some of them actual dead ends. Nonetheless, there exists a distinct line of Greco-Roman allusions, that is, the Greco-Roman Thread, that not insignificantly, as we will demonstrate, concludes di Prima’s 1998 structuring of the cycle. The Thread is introduced in the epigraph to part 3, a line from Ovid’s Fasti (6.102) implicitly describing Cardea, the goddess of the door hinge: “Her power is to open what is shut / Shut what is open” (39). In other words, the epigraph implies that di Prima, through the Greco-Roman Thread in addition to other mythological components, reveals and conceals knowledge of poetry itself and the essence of all mutable forms.

In the remainder of this section, we present a brief analysis of the major allusions in the Thread, ending with a more lengthy discussion of the constellation of Persephone figures who dominate the finale, laying the foundation for our concluding exploration of Loba’s Buddhist turn. Themes expressed in the thread include, but are not limited to, birth and death, androgyny, erasure of female and male power, queering gender, female relationships, and the Buddhist concept of nothingness (no-thingness of the universe). They also, we note—and cannot emphasize enough—do not move in any particular linear progression but appear and disappear as twinkling lights in a flat night sky, akin to di Prima’s definition of poetry itself. Since Loba is such a complex and nonlinear poem, to help a reader navigate this terrain, we introduce each element of the Thread with the names of particular poems and the pages on which these figures appear.

1. Goddess (untitled, book 1, part 3, 54)—The first direct reference to figures from classical mythology is a simple eighteen-line list poem presenting in paragraph form the names of many goddesses and historical female figures from across global cultures. Several from Greco-Roman cultures, including Circe, Ariadne, Hera, Aphrodite, and Artemis, appear in the poem.

2. Nemo (“FOUR POETS SPEAK OF HER,” book 1, part 4, 63–64)—“Nemo” in Latin means “no one” and thus is not at all a mythological figure but an allusion to the absence of human or divine character—and to the eternal mystery. Nemo is juxtaposed with “she”: “she was, herself, the dweller in the shrine / Nemo & elsewhere & her priest it was who walked / sword in his hand” (63). Through enjambment, “Nemo” fills linguistic and historical
space as both the name of the shrine of the goddess and the name of the Loba herself, she who sends forth her male servant, a warrior priest named “He-Who-Must-Die.” “No One” is all things and all powerful—or “no-thingness,” the nothingness of Buddhist traditions that negates gendered and all other dualities. The poem continues with four disembodied and unnamed poets who recount the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, the last of which obtusely ends with the narrative of the Fisher King. In this scenario, the goddess still exists but now only “RULES OVER THOSE / WHO HAVE PASSED OUT OF HISTORY” (64). In other words, she, Nemo, rules over Nemo, the “no ones” who no longer exist. Female power, which once controlled earth, is now merely a subordinated element in an endearing and enduring masculine myth, her essence converted into a stylized object of desire and domination: a jeweled cup described as a ghostly “memory of the goddess in her glory” (64). Her erasure, however, is neither permanent nor absolute, as the poem concludes with a fifth voice that grounds the poem in a realistic tableau, setting forth the condition upon which the myth of female disempowerment is predicated:

Was it sake cups or wine they
passed around? Hashish, tequila, bourbon, opium?
Talk rose & fell, & stopped. Lightbulbs grew dim
in the cold light of dawn. A Chinese scroll:
four poets /
    nodding out
(64)

This distinctly contemporary and informal voice—it too disembodied and unnamed—might well be that of the Loba herself, who in whatever guise she chooses remains a firm presence in the world, a counter to the poets’ drug-induced narrative, an historical reminder of who also lives on “in the cold light of dawn.” But even this coded refutation of the poets carries within it the validation it seeks to destroy, since in keeping with di Prima’s own use of magical thinking to produce her poetry, the poets’ use of mind-altering substances links them to the authority of a transcendent space. Nemo and the fifth anonymous poet, then, are one and the same, the symbolic omphalos that generates all.

3. Aries (“Loba as Eve,” book 1, part 4, 69–75)—This third allusion, almost as oblique as that of “Nemo,” appears in the “Loba as Eve” section, a series of five poems based on the short apocryphal Gnostic “Gospel of Eve.” The fourth poem in the subseries, titled with a line from that gospel, “& from
wherever thou willst thou gatherest me,” (74), begins *in medias res*: “steel, from the belly of Aries” (emphasis ours). Refusing clarification, the poem creates reader uncertainty as to whether *Aries* refers to the destructive Greek god of war (a near homonym, *Ares*), or to the golden-fleeced ram sought by Jason and the Argonauts, or to the first sign of the Zodiac. The poem suggests all three, as the speaker (female, male, both, beyond?) lets loose an overwhelming tirade of military and animalistic images, daring the “Thou” (male, female, both, beyond?) to suckle at her tits, “crucify [him] like a beetle on yr desk,” and “drink [her] blood” from a vein in its leg. In retribution, the speaker, ultimately transgendered, transforms into a horse and then into a snake who has the power to predict “Thou’s” future. In a final declaration comprising the last two stanzas, the speaker explains to “Thou” that this brutal oracular power (e.g., giving “Thou” “apples out of season” and engaging with the darkness) drives “Thou” to love and seek the other, in other words, to transgress patriarchal law.

4. Epigraph to book 1, part 5, 77—“He who listens to her fearing for the safety of the city which is within him should be on guard against her seductions” is from book 10 of Plato’s *Republic* and warns against the fallacious nature of poetry, gendered as “she.” In the context of Loba, the epigraph affirms the potency of women’s voices to destroy those who attempt to enslave them, while ironically underscoring the necessity for all men to learn to listen to the wisdom of women’s songs.

5. Helen (untitled, book 1, part 5, 79–80, 92)—Immediately following Plato’s warning against the evils of poetry and women, di Prima introduces two untitled poems that connect Aries with gendered/sexualized transgressions through the image of the apple. Helen, of course, is associated with the apple of discord, which led to her abduction by Paris under Aphrodite’s sponsorship and, ultimately, to the Trojan War. These poems we designate “The Bridge of Helen,” since (1) they foreground Helen of Troy, the half-mortal and half-divine beauty born to Leda after her rape by Zeus in the guise of a swan, and (2) they directly link the preceding elements of the Thread with the beginning of the Persephone cycle, which concludes Loba.

The first Helen poem presents Helen as witch, specter, and woman—an “unholy trinity” repeatedly walking back and forth along the top of a wall in the company of Hecate. It is not clear what the wall separates, but the presence of Hecate—the goddess of magic, the moon, and the night—situates the wall as a liminal zone of transgression. From this place apart, the hybrid Helen births the world and its human inhabitants as “bloody dawn” and an “infant in [Helen’s] silver robe” (80), respectively. Just as di Prima transgenders Aries,
she does the same with Helen, since Helen stands as a parthenogenetic vessel that needs no fertilization, and her “infant,” identified as neither male nor female, apparently replicates its parent.

The second half of the “Bridge” mentions Helen only once—and this time as a negative: The goddess “is not Helen,” not the half divine/half human symbol of beauty, lust, and betrayal. Instead, the goddess is Lilith—called “Interface” (92), an explicit allusion to the myth that before God created Eve he created the twins Adam and Lilith, who were joined at the back. As one of the myths of Lilith goes, when she failed to acquire equality with Adam she broke free of him—hence her popularity today as a symbol of female autonomy. Di Prima’s revision keeps Lilith attached but as an equal, although often invisible, like “flying moon in the clouds / on all the foggy coastlines of the earth” (92), a living presence, akin to skin or air, binding the human and all other bodily and natural worlds as a single whole. Although brief, and thus easily overlooked, the Helen poems significantly advance the themes of female power, bodily and metaphysically; the conflation of disparate mythic traditions; a critique of the stereotypes of feminine beauty, passivity, and feminine dishonesty; the fallacy of the self-other/virgin-whore dichotomy; and, most significantly, sisterhood as well as the mother-daughter relationship in a liminal space.

6. Apollo (“Loba, to Apollo, At the Fountain of Healing” and “Reprise,” book 1, part 8, 147–48, 150–52, respectively)—While female forms dominate Loba, the god Apollo emerges as the object of female truth-telling. In both Apollo poems, the Loba—despite her historic identity as wolf, an animal sacred to Apollo—castigates the god of music and intellect, refusing to ignore the brutality to which Apollo has subjected her. In “Loba, to Apollo,” accusatory interrogatives describe the dark side of masculine glory:

were we not killed, out of jealousy, run thru
w/ a black lance, every moon?

............................................
was I not sold & sold & my daughters broken?
............................................
can you laugh, father
can you deny
mouthfuls of blackened blood
I spit out
each morning
to sing?

(147–48)
Lines such as these recount thousands of years of experiences that have set women against their own bodies and denied them their own histories. The speaker, claiming the right to use and overpower the language of the fathers, confronts this excruciatingly real abjection. The poem implies that Apollo cannot refute the tragedy of female history through myth, but through his silence—a privilege that comes with the patriarchal voice, which the patriarch can turn on and off at will—he refuses to acknowledge and accept it. In the face of his silence, Loba generates her own “fountain of healing,” using her intellect to “slough off this pain” of her body, end the commonality of woman’s “rage,” and recreate herself as a unique being. In turn, the next poem, “Reprise,” presents similar images and concludes with renewed anger as Loba refuses to give up her animalistic fury and her human voice, declaring that her healing will come about only as she drinks from an ancient well filled with “the black water / Apollo / abhors” (151).

Whether or not di Prima intended this, both Apollo poems can be read as counters to Keats’s *Hyperion*, in which Apollo’s knowledge of suffering (through conventional male-centered narratives of “names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions, / Majesties, sovran voice, agonies”) transforms him into a god, and thus the true poet (Bush 1963, 125). As a pair, the poems force a reader to consider the possibility that masculinist myths of culture, language, reason, and immortality—as well as aesthetics—are acts not of knowledge but of ignorance and ego, repeatedly performed on the back of female silence, subjugation, and invisibility. “Loba, to Apollo” uses the pain of the female body to reveal Apollo’s true self and then refuses to allow such bodily pain to create Woman as a category, negating the essentialist trap of apotheosizing Woman as Nature in opposition to culture (i.e., male intellect). “Reprise” returns Loba to the underworld, the land of death and darkness, a transparent representation of passive Nature, but also the realm of Hades, where Apollo’s light of intellect has no power. In presenting Apollo as a false god whose focus on intellect as opposed to imagination must be resisted, “Reprise” subtly evokes the Titans who, in a myth retold in Keats’s *Hyperion*, are defeated and replaced by Apollo as sun god; here they are resurrected as a female who through dream and poetry defeats him, replacing him with a very different kind of light.

16, 312–13; “PERSEPHONE: Reprise,” book 2, part 16, 314) — Some may find it surprising that Loba concludes with Persephone, since Penelope seems a more likely iconic figure to dominate a text so tapestry-like in nature. Medusa, the snake-haired Gorgon monster of ancient lore and Hélène Cixous’s icon of feminine écriture, could also function to close the collection — and she does make a cameo appearance in the poem,4 since much of Loba validates female anger and the necessity to write the female self. But for all the Penelopean cunning and patience, and for all the Medusa-like transgression and rage, Loba’s Greco-Roman Thread pays them little attention. In fact, the thread repudiates marital fidelity and the honoring of a dead patriarch; neither is it solely a reclamation and transformation of the female grotesque nor a manifesto for female language. Opening like a widening gyre to encompass Aphrodite, Ariadne, Demeter, Athena, and Psyche, this concluding thread serves as a constellation revolving around the more liminal, plastic, and troubling figure of Persephone.

The Persephone cycle is foreshadowed a number of times, beginning with the initial classical allusion to Ovid’s characterization of the goddess Cardea. Cardea is not named in the epigraph, nor in a poem in that same section bearing Ovid’s lines as its title. By identifying no specific female, mortal or divine, the poem reinforces a cloaked presence envisioned through alchemical symbology of air, water, wind, and fire, as well as allusions that function as a veiled homage to Persephone. Her home is the labyrinthian underworld, a place rimmed with “ice-cut walls” but filled with a “dark fire” that “does not consume” (43). The “she” carries torches to light her way, an allusion perhaps to Hecate who in some versions of the Persephone myth assists Demeter in her search for Persephone and then remains in Hades as Persephone’s companion. The speaker also reveals the female’s power as that which “raise[s] / the pale green grass of spring” (44). Whether allusions to Persephone who births life in the spring, Hecate her sister in the icy-hot of hell, or both, the “she” invoked is a voiceless presence with the power to conceal and reveal, to open and shut — in other words, the representation of oppositional forces that can both underwrite and undermine biopower.

Persephone herself speaks in the poem “PERSEPHONE” in part 4 of book 1, claiming the language of the masters at a point presumably long after Hades has stolen her from Earth and her mother Demeter. One of the more direct and less fragmented of the entire Loba collection, the poem lays out with elegant simplicity the plot points of the traditional myth: Persephone’s

4. In Loba, see “Medusa Gazebo,” which depicts a Latina woman about to commit suicide; the speaker wishes to, but does not, discourage her from going “too near the edge” (271).
ambivalent relationship with Hades, who fell in love with her and abducted her; Persephone being tricked by Hades into eating the pomegranate seeds, which condemns her to spend at least three months of each year with him in the underworld; and Persephone's connection to winter and spring. But it does not include Persephone's relationship with her mother or Hades's rape of Persephone. Instead, an epigraph to the poem, attributed to an “Imaginary Jungian Scholar” who serves as foil, diverts the story from the abduction and rape as well as from Demeter's angry and persistent search for her daughter. In turn, the Scholar envisions Persephone in love with Hades, weeping in the spring as she walks over the barren ground “relying her winter sojourn” (94); ironically, it is her tears of sadness, the saline source of life, that bring the natural world back to life.

The poem depicts a more ambivalent Persephone, who plaintively asks, “And must I return again to that long hell?” as she descends the icy staircase, but whose love for Hades calls her back home to the underworld (94). In combination, the epigraph and Persephone's lyric reify the image of a young woman in a relationship with a man she loves. She clearly has no mother, which might imply that she has successfully separated herself from that most powerful of symbols, both personally and universally, thus adhering to the heteronormative sexual binary. But she also appears sorrowful and without self worth: Powers greater than her own, including those of the man she loves, have constructed her life. Like Helen/Lilith, she acts as an interface, only without agency, linking life and death in an eternal cycle, with the natural world as the space in which she wonders helpless and alone.

“PERSEPHONE” repeats many of the discourses presented throughout the Greco-Roman Thread, but through avoidance, absence, and negation, the poem calls particular attention to the mother-daughter relationship, drawing upon Jungian archetypes and the concept of the collective unconscious. As with many of the archetypes evident in Loba, the Mother can have either a positive or negative impact on the daughter. When positive, the force of the mother guides the daughter to accept her feminine being and her maternal role, generally manifested as qualities of nurturing, caring, wisdom, and the spiritual, all themes evident throughout Loba. When negative, the mother is often associated with the dark, secret, chthonic, and poisonous—again, themes that dominate Loba. In actual as well as imaginary mother-daughter relationships, according to Jungian theory, when the mother archetype acts as a negative, the daughter becomes a wounded individual who has to fight through the complex in order to achieve a balanced, or individuated, sense of self. Not surprisingly, as feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva notes, this process can be extremely difficult, since the female must participate to some
degree as Woman within the symbolic order of the collective unconscious but
must not give in to the masculinist constructs of femininity (Moi 1991, 65),
which relegate the female to zones such as nature and space, in opposition to
the masculine power of culture and time. Many fail to achieve individuation,
becoming suicidal or depressed, as we see in “PERSEPHONE,” a poem, one
can argue, not about successful escape from an all-consuming mother, but
about a daughter who without a mother becomes entangled in an unhealthy
heterosexual relationship. This struggle in multiple iterations demarcates the
Persephone cycle as it moves toward its completion.

“Loba as Kore in the Labyrinth of her Beauty” (165–72 in book 2) fea-
tures the mother-daughter relationship, now with an emphasis on its pri-
mary, unbreakable by even gods as powerful as Zeus and Hades. This bond is
affirmed in another epigraph, again spoken by The Imaginary Jungian Scholar,
but this time in philosophical harmony with the poem’s speaker:

The myth of mothers and daughters is not a
myth of overthrowing (as in myths of the son
& the father) . . . but one of loss & recovery.
For there are realms & realms, in which the
daughter rises to self-knowing, to equal status
with the mother—& in the feminine
universe, while some of the realms may be
distant—“removed”—none is out of
bounds.
(165)

In this set of five short lyrics, di Prima sets Kore/Persephone in a labyrinth of
beauty where she moves back in time to become the ancient Egyptian goddess
Nuit, who presides over a tangled maze of openings and dead ends, a female
world of power that the man-made history of Nemo attempts to erase. The
journey is one of darkness and dim remembrance, eventually leading to the
light of primordial stars—the darkest and most frightful of secrets contained
in the masculinist concept of the Mother archetype—are birthed from an eter-
nal labyrinth that erases masculine primacy.

Eventually, however, the forces of history and the myth of an afterlife—
represented by “the wolf Anubis,” the Greek name for the ancient Egyptian
god of the underworld and eternal life—become reified (“frozen,” according
to the speaker) as Western Time and the Finite, a space in which Kore/Perse-
phone’s beauty—a simulacrum of primordial female power—erodes. Despite
the decline here of female beauty (earlier celebrated as consubstantial with the
beginnings of the universe itself), “Loba as Kore” points out that monist myths of a gendered binary built upon primordial supremacy must be questioned in real time, in and by history itself. *Loba* demands the queering of all binaries based on the often-invisible inferiority of one out of the two, in this respect embracing Keatsian negative capabilities, daring the reader to both accept and spurn concepts such as female beauty and primordial Woman.

A sorority of female goddesses next appears in “THE LOBA PRIESTESS AS BAG LADY UTTERS RAGGED WARNINGS,” with Demeter, Persephone’s mother, assuming equal status with Aphrodite and Artemis, all representing beauty, women, and fertility in various guises. They are accompanied by Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of fertility; Isis, the Egyptian goddess of beauty, motherhood, and the dead; Asher, from Judaic mythology, the great female teller of truths; and Mother Mamaki, mother of the primordial Buddha in Tibetan Buddhism. As bag lady, the Loba channels her Beat sisters from the opening “Ave” of the cycle to warn an unnamed and ungendered “you” to respect the ancient narratives of these goddesses, who as robed priestesses—not naked objects to be bought, sold, or toyed with—encompass the firestorm (or “tzuname”) of “the eternal feminine” (194).

“HERMETIC ASTRONOMY” picks up the Demeter theme once again, but this time positioning her as a denizen of Hades and darkness. In a cryptic mélange of alchemical symbols and folksongs,

Demeter

is ash

is ashes

Isis

all fall

(255)

Subtly, the breath-shaped lines echo the folk song “Ring around the Rosie,” which at least in contemporary folklore is connected with the medieval plague, sending Demeter into death where she becomes hell itself: “DEMETER is Hades translated / Sekmet. Kali” (258). In other words, hell is both where female power (Sekmet and Kali) resides and the female herself. Female potency is named as “winter earth / & / Kore / green,” in other words, the creative life cycle itself (259).

The quest for authentic female creativity takes on its most autobiographical guise in “Point of Ripening: Lughnasa.” The speaker, who eschews Persephone’s underworld in favor of a liminal space in which “there is no myth” to guide her life story, is transmogrified into a grotesque hybrid: an older (and
“ample” [305]) female, a “middle-aged / Hermes” with “large breasts” but no wings—not insignificantly, a poet forging a new trail in the light of the stars. Di Prima’s poems up to this point have through images of birth and creation implicitly connected light in its many manifestations to the Loba as an artist, as we saw in the two earlier diatribes aimed at Apollo, but this poem links light specifically to poetry to situate the ur-generative principle squarely within language as art wielded by human energies, even those of a middle-aged genderqueer. This move reflects the equation of poetry and light as one of di Prima’s major aesthetic principles. As she stated in a lecture given at Naropa in 1975,

The actual stuff that poetry is made out of is light. There are poems where the light actually comes through the page, the same way that it comes through the canvas in certain Flemish paintings, so you’re not seeing light reflected off the painting, but light that comes through, and I don’t know the tricks that make this happen. But I know they’re there and you can really tell when it’s happening and when it’s not. So I’ve been trying to figure out what makes it happen. And I think it’s not very different from the light of meditation. So that I’m beginning to suspect that what makes it happen is the way the sound moves in you, moving your spirit in a certain way to produce a certain effect which is like the effect of light. (di Prima 1978, 13)

She further develops this identification of light with bodily sensation by paraphrasing Cornelius Agrippa, who in *Nature and Occult Philosophy* (1651) speaks to the effects of singing on the body: “Your spirit as a person singing or chanting or reading aloud enters the ear and mingles in the body of the hearer, with his spirit, and so moves and changes the body’s humors and dispositions” (di Prima 1978, 13). Di Prima concludes that the artist, in fact all of us, is “nothing but a physical instrument,” and the effect—be it light or something else—occurs out of changes in that body.

Empiricists and pragmatists of all kinds may scoff at such Hermetic declarations, arguing that they disconnect art from the intellect, thus rendering art historically, politically, and personally useless. However, di Prima’s attention to the consubstantial nature of the imagination, the body, and the physical context in which they reside can be credited with three significant accomplishments. First, it replaces religiosity with poetry as the modern source of spirituality—not an uncommon belief and one that di Prima as well as other Beat writers inherited from romanticism and modernism as neo-romanticism. Secondly, and importantly in the Beat context, it rebuffs the belief that art and life are separate. Poetry as Light, the ur-force of Life, renders Poetry that same
ur-force, meaning that the artist—The Poet—cannot live without art and that all Life is Art (see Moffeit 2004, 88). Thirdly, with respect to di Prima's Buddhist and hermetic practices, the focus on light suggests a quest for release from the tyranny of the illusion of the ego.

These concepts pervade all of di Prima's work, and “Point,” in particular, leaves the Loba with no script to follow, no category in which to fit oneself, wondering if there can be a myth for anyone such as herself in the modern world. Her life has been marked by unsuccessful efforts to find such a myth, as the next poem, “Report to Aphrodite (Evening)” reveals: service to Aphrodite, Buddha, Amor, Eros, the Rose, Mars, and Adonis have failed her, leaving her with only the inadequate and short-lived narrative of drowning in the passions of heterosexism (310).

The final poems of Loba explicitly speak to Jung's question: What myth are you living? And while the answer(s) remains shrouded in a visionary haze characteristic of spiritual epics and much of di Prima’s wild, surrealistic poetics in general (see Libby 2002), the Greco-Roman Thread concludes with a plausible response that underscores the ephemeral nature of both myth and history.

“Ariadne As Starmaker,” the penultimate poem, continues the theme of a female transitioning from the moisture of earth and darkness to the expanse of galactic space and light, thereby also signaling the way out of the labyrinth of female existence, of human history, and of the long poem itself. The configuration of the labyrinth, an escape from death, and the light correspond most directly to the story of Ariadne giving a thread to Theseus so he could find his way back out of the deadly Minotaur’s labyrinth. In some versions, she marries and is then abandoned by Theseus; in others Dionysus marries her, Artemis kills her, Ariadne takes her own life, or Dionysus places the crown he gave her in the stars, thus making her immortal. Di Prima’s vision of Ariadne incorporates this last trope [stars (light) equal immortality], while also rendering Ariadne as a hybrid Penelope who with patience and wiliness weaves time into eternity. The opening stanza cryptically announces this transmutation through doubling and grafting:

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she draws me w/ a thread across the beams
& shuttles of her making
    static web
in which we swim
    patterned ephemerides
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unchanged
exploding instance
terrible freedom
in which the speeding quasar
& the camel
alike are still
in motion
(312)

Water and sky are inseparable, as one swims through beams of light. The physical and the abstract are also one, as one swims through numerical tables showing the position of celestial bodies in human time. The life of an earthly creature and the life of a galactic mass are one, the paradox of static movement, as the camel and quasar are both still and still turning—a subtle allusion created by di Prima’s line break to the iconic line “At the still point of the turning world” from T. S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton.” And the creator and the created are also one, as the “she” is also the “me”: Ariadne creates the speaker, who becomes part of the pantheon of stars, which in mythic lore is Ariadne herself forming the multidimensional matrix of the universe. The female-to-female connection, the continual birthing of the one who gives birth, as the poem suggests, remains inviolable as light.

It is this theme that concludes *Loba*. “Persephone: Reprise,” which functions much like a classical epilogue, returns to the myth of the mother/daughter, life/death cycle. Assuming a vatic voice, the speaker discloses the Loba’s fate, which is to live at the interface, or “the fluid boundary of Hades,” where life and death continuously meet, where shapes shift eternally, where light and darkness flow eternally into each other, and where the mother and daughter remain forever “me” and “thou” as one, nongendered and egoless (314). This becomes not only the myth that the Loba lives but her history as well, epitomizing di Prima’s understanding of the ultimate state of poetic creation and reception: a point where no one has to try to “make sense” but instead comprehends that the uncertainties themselves—the illogical and the imaginary—are the materia of the poem that operates as the crucible of truth, in effect, eradicating the very need to answer Jung’s question. *Loba’s* Greco-Roman Thread, then, constitutes one of di Prima’s primary strategies to restage the female self as subject rather than object as she “empties,” to borrow a term from her Buddhist practices, the female body of the essentialized subordinate figurations assigned to it by sacred and historical fathers.
The Buddhist Turn

As a practicing Buddhist, di Prima characterizes the “historical present” as *samsara*, the everyday world of causes and conditions, “the wheel of the quivering meat conception,” as Jack Kerouac called it in *Mexico City Blues*, a world tyrannized by the attachment to the ego through identity. Buddhist practitioners, particularly those in the Mahayana tradition, try to free themselves and others from *samsara* by study of, and meditation on, the nonduality of phenomena. In Buddhist mythos, such a process began when Shakyamuni Buddha, the first Buddha, gave his initial teaching known as the turning of the “wheel of dharma.” 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.

*Loba*’s revisionist myth-making addresses this danger. Thousands of years of masculinized spiritual traditions are interwoven to dramatize the allegedly outcast feminine and redefine her identity as simultaneously fierce, feral, nurturing, and redemptive. The poem implies that the “no-self” of Buddhist nonduality is untenable until the speaking subject actually can claim agency over her sense of “self.” Despite the speaker’s denial of service to Buddha in “Report to Aphrodite,” the transgressions of figures in the Greco-Roman Thread are reimagined as the beginning of the Buddhist path to enlightenment. As the Loba-goddess asserts in the guise of Eve, “The fruit I hold out / spins the dharma wheel” (73).

In Buddhism, the *empty* self is present *in full*: that is, emptiness, or *shunyata*, refers to phenomena that are empty of essentialist identity and full of unmediated, nonhierarchized frames of reference, a belief underwritten by *Loba*’s Greco-Roman Thread and also aligned with di Prima’s indebtedness to Keats, whom she understands as trying to achieve what Buddhism calls an “egoless state.”5 This emphasis on fluctuations in the material body of an historicized self are illustrated throughout the poem cycle, but emerge with particular clarity in “The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare,” a poem that reflects *Loba*’s status as a visionary excursion and a Beat generation internalized pilgrimage, both grounded in the emptied self of the Greco-Roman Thread.

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5. In her 1987 Naropa lecture, di Prima quotes a letter of Keats’s from November 22, 1817, “If a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel.” This she interprets as his effort to go “partake[e] in the life of every creature. Really, what he’s trying to get at, or describe, seems to be some kind of egoless state” (1978, 13).
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 suggest that the quiet rescue of the uneasy mare is only the beginning of a noisy recovery, a loud reassertion of something that once was lost or buried. The poem echoes the form and content of Allen 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 those whose presence is secretive because they have been submerged. This is not to say that “The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare” is of interest primarily because of its connection to the more famous work of Ginsberg or that it should be read as an antagonistic response to “Howl.” A review of the biographies of di Prima and Ginsberg demonstrates their deep and lasting friendship through the very last days of Ginsberg’s life. More important than the carefully crafted stylistic resemblance to Ginsberg is simply di Prima’s effort in this poem to recover a visionary female Beatitude, another point of lineage.

As the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that di Prima’s mare has not lived life much differently than her counterparts in Ginsberg’s poem. 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, like the moon sisters of “Ave,” 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
> ................................................
> .... on borrowed ceiling
> while friends coughed in the kitchen

(125, 126)

6. Moreover, in a 2000 reading at Columbia College Chicago, di Prima recited this poem as a tribute to Ginsberg.
The mare is still unmoored as the poem ends: everywhere she looks for tradition, for roots, for foundation, she finds nothing but groundlessness—something akin to *shunyata*, or emptiness—and the best she can assert is a question asking of the reader 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 a nongendered 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 in other Beat spiritual quests—“*Howl*” in particular—the traditions of Asia are invoked, but here reinvigorated 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 Persephone 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, a pluralistic collection of “participatory capacities” rather than a static entity (Weinstone 2004, 128). 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” (121).
This copresence can be extended to relations between gendered bodies in *Loba*, where the ambisexual union of deities in Hindu and Tantric Buddhist practice is part and parcel of a coemergent gendered space critical to di Prima’s reenvisioning of Western and Asian traditions that privilege gods over goddesses. For instance, 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.

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 (246). 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, shift 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 offers a reading of spirituality in which the gods do not have all the answers—but humans do. However, such a reading simply offers 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.

In answering the question “what myth are you living?” *Loba* does not withdraw from the material world into a heaven of the individual imagination. Instead, narrative is uttered from a place that proceeds from the nondualistic space of shunyata: a space di Prima 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 H.D., and in di Prima’s own Buddhist
practice, this is a poetics that fuses seemingly incompatible immanent and transcendent modes of representation.7 Sacred experience 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 even if the landscape seems to evoke a patriarchal order, this is, nevertheless, a world in which “the Laws are different” (199). In reading Loba, one learns that 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, religious, and mythological institutions that otherwise would hoard them as a means of control. This is a resolutely heterogeneous and feminist vision, born out of di Prima’s purposeful fusion of revisionist mythmaking—including the Greco-Roman, Buddhist spiritual practice, and a Beat outsider’s questing.

**Bibliography**


7. Writing of H.D.’s influence on her work, di Prima states, “That 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*” (1988, 7, 9).


