The Loba's Howl: A Comparative Reading of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and Diane di Prima's "The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare"

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Abstract

Considering both Diane di Prima's "The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare" and Allen Ginsberg's "Howl", the present essay addresses the ways in which the poets share similarities within their "beat methods of writing" and poetic tradition whilst also accentuating the disparities between the two, showcasing the need for more focus on female centred narratives. The paper begins by emphasizing Diane di Prima's life and work as well as her relationship with Allen Ginsberg, arguing for their status as poetic counterparts within the Beat Generation. Ginsberg's intention of singing the best minds of his generation seems incomplete as "Howl" not only fails to consider female poets but also fails to consider women as more than sexual objects. Through a feminist studies scope, the essay highlights Di Prima's invaluable contribution as a Beat poet, discussing the ways in which the author problematizes the role of women in society, how they're oppressed and the ways in which they fight against it. Additionally, through Di Prima's titular character of her quasi-epic poetry collection "Loba", the paper aims to explore the concept of "feminine rage" in connection to the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States of America during the 60's and 70's and the rise of radical feminism which aimed to weaponize women's anger against the patriarchy and status quo. Echoing Ginsberg, Diane di Prima takes on "Howl" and feminizes it, revisiting and recovering women's place in society.

Keywords: Diane di Prima; Allen Ginsberg; Female centred narratives; Feminist studies; Feminine rage

Resumo

Tendo em conta o poema "The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare" de Diane di Prima e "Howl" de Allen Ginsberg, este ensaio aborda não só a forma como os autores apresentam

semelhanças ao nível dos seus métodos de escrita "beat" e tradição poética, mas também acentua as disparidades entre os dois, revelando a necessidade de maior visibilidade das narrativas de teor feminista. Este ensaio começa não só por enfatizar a vida e obra de Diane di Prima como também a sua relação com Allen Ginsberg, tomando os dois como contrapartes poéticos no contexto da Geração Beat. A intenção de Ginsberg de cantar sobre as melhores mentes da sua geração parece incompleta, porque em "Howl" falha quer na referência a poetas femininas quer na visão da mulher, reduzida a objeto sexual. Através de uma lente de estudos feminista, este ensaio acentua o contributo incontornável de Diane di Prima para a Geração Beat, discutindo a forma como a poeta problematiza o papel da mulher em sociedade, como é oprimida, e as formas que encontra para lutar contra isso. A partir da personagem-título da sua coletânea poética de caráter épico, "Loba", este ensaio pretende explorar o conceito de "feminine rage" ligado à segunda vaga de feminismo nos Estados Unidos da América nas décadas de 60 e 70 e a ascensão de movimentos de feminismo radical que pretendiam fazer uso da frustração e raiva da mulher contra o patriarcado e o status quo. Ao ecoar Allen Ginsberg, Di Prima apropria-se de "Howl" e feminiza o poema, revisitando e recuperando o lugar da mulher na sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Diane di Prima; Allen Ginsberg; Estudos feministas; Narrativas de teor feminista; "Feminine rage"

> "It followed that if there was one Allen [Ginsberg], there must be more . . . all these would now step forward and say their piece . . . . I was about to meet my brothers and sisters"[1]
>
> - Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 180

I was first introduced to the Beat Generation during my undergraduate Contemporary Northern American Literature Seminar, where we delved into the figure of Allen Ginsberg, one of the main percussors of the movement, and some of his most irreverent poems such as "America", a personal favourite, "Supermarket in California", and the infamous "Howl". And while I do enjoy the mainstream beat poets, particularly Ginsberg and Burroughs's poetry, I was happy to find that a great number of women were also "beat" and wrote a great deal, even though they are not read, spoken about, or studied half as much as the men.

In fact, during our Seminar on Northern American Literature II, we were told that Diane di Prima, arguably the most popular of the female beat poets, wrote, not only in a similar way to Allen Ginsberg, but actually wrote a poem reminiscent of "Howl": a feminist version if you will. I was immediately swayed to look into it and much to my surprise, and excitement, I found Diane di Prima's *Loba*, a three hundred pages long poetry collection in which, amongst a myriad of incredibly intricate poems,

we find another "Howl" in "The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare". In it, Diane di Prima mimics Howl's formal composition and links her female subaltern protagonists to similar arduous experiences of those of Allen Ginsberg's "characters".

Di Prima: "a wolf woman"[2]

Diane di Prima emerged as the best-known female poet of the Beat Generation despite it being popularly designated as a "boys club", which speaks to her relentlessness, unconventionality and incredible will to fit in, regardless of whether or not she was accepted by the norm.

Di Prima was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1934, attended the same school as fellow activist, poet and friend, Audre Lorde, with whom she exchanged poems by the ages of fifteen and later supported throughout her entire career; and by 1957 she moved to Greenwich Village, the heart of the artistic scene in New York, where a few years later she met fellow beat poets Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg, William St. Burroughs, Anne Waldman and Amiri Baraka, amongst others. Not only did she become close with the mainstream poets of the Beat Generation, almost dubbed as celebrities at the time, but she became closely, and I'd argue invaluably close, with the "beat" way of writing and culture, claiming for herself a place in a male dominated space, right from the start, right there in Greenwich Village.

The Beats find their roots in the likes of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs but the movement quickly evolved to include many other voices, many of which go unheard. The movement was a form of deviance from the norm, imposed by a society that thought everything from drugs to sex was taboo and that created obscenity laws left and right. Out of this "claustrophobic" society the Beat Generation rose and with it a youth culture that pushed society's limits through movements like the hippie movement, in which both Ginsberg and Di Prima took part, often going on excursions across the country during the 60's and 70's. In 1969, Di Prima was heavily involved in anarchic political movements such as the San Francisco Diggers[3] and is known to have had a renewed focus on Zen studies (Calonne 22).

A prolific writer all throughout her life, Di Prima wrote more than 70 anthologies and over 300 periodicals (Knight 345) as well as numerous poetry collections from *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards* (1958), *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), *Revolutionary Letters*, her "epic" *Loba* (1978), *Pieces of a Song* (1990). Di Prima was also the co-founder of numerous artistic outlets like the New York Poets Theatre in 1968, which produced about four seasons of one-acts, including some by di Prima herself (Friedman 230), a newsletter called *The Floating Bear*, and the Poets

Press, responsible for publishing many works such as Audre Lorde's first poetry volume, *The First Cities* in 1968 (Carden 46).

Di Prima was also an active member of the community around her not only as an artist but as an activist and teacher, implementing new courses and teaching at the Poetic Programme at The New College of San Francisco as well as co-founding the San Francisco Institute of Magical and Healing Arts.[4] Named the city's poet Laureate in 2009 (Carden 50), Di Prima wrote poetry for great part of her life until the very end, and when looking up any videos of Di Prima in public readings and lectures I could find, I stumbled on a video-piece entitled "Keep the Beat: The Greatest Minds of a Generation" released by the *Washington Post* in which Diane di Prima, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Herb Gold speak about San Francisco as one of the backdrops of the Beat Movement and Generation. This piece, released in 2017, came out when Di Prima was 82 years old and still working on yet another book, this one on her own take on Sappho. Rummaging through her notebook, covered in poetry sketches and post its, magnifying glass in hand, she reads a poem:

> It's not a generation
> Dig it
> It's a state of mind
> A way of thinking, a way of living
> Gone on for generations, for centuries.
> (Di Prima, "Keep the Beat")

Diane di Prima died in San Francisco in 2020 but her "beat" goes on, inspiring new generations of writers and activists through her work:

> I'd like my daily bread however
> You arrange it, and I'd also like
> To be bread, or sustenance for
> Some others even after I've left.
> A song they can walk a trail with
> (Di Prima, *The Poetry Deal* 19)

Ginsberg and Di Prima: Poetic Counterparts?

As beat contemporaries, both Allen Ginsberg and Diane di Prima often fought against the system, but every once in a while, the system actually tried to fight them back. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the owner of *City Lights Bookstore*, responsible for publishing *Howl and other poems*, was accused of selling obscenity although the court later

decided in his favour in an infamous public trial. Similarly, Diane di Prima's literary magazine, which she co-founded and co-edited with Amiri Baraka, *The Floating Bear,* series nine, was also accused of obscenity and led to Prima's arrest by the FBI on October 18th, 1961, although the charges were overturned not long after.[5] Before both poets met, Diane di Prima recollects, in her book *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, how she first came in contact with Ginsberg's poem "Howl":

> Then one evening—it was an evening like many others . . . the priestly ex-book-thief arrived and thrust a small black and white book into my hand, saying, "I think this might interest you." I took it and flipped it open idly, still intent on dishing out beef stew, and found myself in the middle of Howl by Allen Ginsberg. (179)

The poem had such a visceral impact on Di Prima that the poet actually got up and left the party to read that little booklet out by the Hudson River, contemplating on the fact that if such an irreverent poem could get published so could hers, writing in her *Memoir*: "I knew that this Allen Ginsberg, whoever he was, had broken ground for all of us—all few hundreds of us—simply by getting this published" (180).

Not long after, both poets would become close friends, going from meeting for the very first time in New York after only exchanging some correspondence and holding an orgy along with Jack Kerouac, to hosting small gatherings at Ginsberg's house discussing Tibetan Buddhism, to doing public readings together in Colorado along with Anne Waldman; to Ginsberg taking Di Prima's photograph, wanting to document the lives of his fellow "beats"[6]; to Diane di Prima writing a poem dedicated to Ginsberg shortly after his death:

> Allen's face stares up at me from a dozen newspapers.
> Never to give his stiff and upright form another hug!
> . . .
> No more that warm, deep, beautiful voice coming between us poets and our Troubles--real or mind-created!
> (Di Prima, "A Moment of Grieving")

They lived many shared experiences, literary or otherwise, which is made abundantly clear through a comparative reading of "Howl" and "The Loba recovers the memory of a Mare", even though the first was published in 1956 and the latter in 1973, in the release of part one of Di Prima's *Loba*.

In the poem I propose to analyse against Howl's backdrop, "The Loba recovers the memory of a Mare", the women represented have taken on some of the same challenges that Ginsberg's protagonists were faced with and their trials and tribulations are recovered. This beautiful idea of a powerful entity like the Loba, which I will discuss further, recovering not only her own life but also other women's experiences, strikes me as fundamentally similar to what Adrienne Rich, in her poem "Diving into the wreck", calls for. To recover the memory of a mare is to dive into women's history and write down ours and others' names into the "book of myths": to remember and recover those whose contributions to society have been forgotten and drowned out.

Why Loba? "The Resurrection of the Wild Woman"

One of the things that struck me as really interesting was the choice for the titular protagonist of the collection, the Loba, and why exactly did Diane di Prima choose this particular entity. Before doing any research on it, I knew that, somehow, there was a connection between the figure of the woman and the wolf but it wasn't until I found Clarissa Pinkola's novel *Women Who Ran with Wolves* published in 1992, that I realized I had heard that expression before. In her book, the American poet problematizes the trope of the wild woman: the embodiment of women's most primal urges, through old myths and folklore stories suggesting that "wolves and women are relational by nature" (Pinkola 1).

In fact, it was uncanny to find that the first chapter of the book is precisely entitled *"The Howl: The Resurrection of the Wild Woman, La Loba, The Wolf Woman"* where the author describes the Loba, this goddess like entity, as a bone gatherer, whose sole purpose is to collect and preserve "that which is in danger of being lost to the world" (Pinkola 11), which is precisely what Di Prima is trying to emulate when gathering and recreating, in this poetry collection, women's experiences and voices: "By whatever name, the force personified by La Loba records the personal past and the ancient past for she has survived generation after generation, and is old beyond time. She is an archivist of feminine intention. She preserves female tradition" (Pinkola 12).

Two Howls: A comparative reading

Even though "Howl" and "The Loba recovers the memory of a Mare" were written and published in two very different decades, we find much of the same concerns as both function as protests and cries of anguish for anything the authors understand to be

oppressive. For instance, Ginsberg was very much concerned with the stunting of society's mind in the fifties, following the Second World War, the rampant rise of the Cold War, the nuclear bomb threat, and conservative tendencies to put people in "little boxes" which often led to depression, excessive drug use and suicidal tendencies as he denounces in "Howl", remembering those "who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine . . . shuddering mouth-wracked/ and battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear light of Zoo." (lines 10-14). Similarly, Di Prima focused on the same effects of society's disillusionment, excessive drug use for one, still ever present in the seventies, with the rise of protests over the Vietnam War and women's rights movement, coinciding with the second wave of feminism and the pinnacle of the hippie movement as she pays homage to those "who walked across America behind gaunt violent yogis/& died o-d'ing in methadone jail/ scarfing the evidence" (lines 11-13).

Nonetheless, even though the poems are similar in both form and content, there is a key difference: who is it that the poets are singing about? If Ginsberg is proposing to sing about the best minds of his generation, as he proclaims in the opening lines of his poem, how come none of them are women? While we understand the poet to be speaking about his own and his counterparts' experiences, the lack of female representation within this ode to the Beat Generation seems to only leave space for the objectification of women. In "Howl", in the only few times women are mentioned they are referred to, not as individuals, but as sexual objects, reduced to "snatches" and "innumerable lays" in "empty lots & diner backyards" among other equally dubious places.

However, in Diane di Prima's poem, not only do women take the forefront of the narrative but they are also seen as much more than just mere sexual objects. The poet makes a point to question women's roles in society by exposing how their experiences are deeply associated with domestic, manual jobs like "working dye into cotton" and taking care of children. Di Prima does not fail either to refer to the underprivileged women sitting at "Sagamore cafeteria", or the ones in Route one, either on the road with their children or prostituting themselves in order to make a living: "& who now remembers her hands /slant of her green eyes / Sagamore cafeteria / who has tears for girls now on Route One, the babies / wrapped in a scarf / the green / always further north / further than you can walk" (lines 48-54). In fact, women's hardships in the poem are only enhanced by the contrasting examples of the problematic, abusive and stagnant behaviour of the men around them, who, while the

women sustained them with “oatmeal and grits”, sat “naked in bed / read Bible / jerked off” (lines 38-39). In order to escape these harsh conditions, women often ran right into other problems to be able to provide for their family and survive under poverty, going as far as doing criminal’s biddings by “scarfing the evidence” and even entrusting their children to gangsters whilst working for them:

> who left tapestries, evidence, baby bottle behind in Vancouver
> & hitched to Seattle for the mushroom season
> trailing welfare checks & stolen money orders
> Chicago gangster in earrings who minded the baby.
> (lines 28-31)

The women in the poem are “unrooted”, going from Vancouver to Chicago, deported and sent back to Fiji, “wiring home for comfort”, forever looking for a safe place for themselves in society, but finding that wherever they go, they are turned down and chased away finding no place in which they are not oppressed.

This recurring imagery of being unrooted suggests a strong sense of vulnerability and right from the start, the way the *Loba* remembers the mare, ergo women, is extremely visual with the depiction of their fragile unsteady ankles and anxious eyes, clearly portraying their fear and unease, in that they are lost with nowhere to go. Ginsberg also reflects on this unsteadiness within his counterparts, recalling and referencing multiple episodes of the ones who “wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts” (lines 41- 42) or the ones who “who vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving a trail of ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall” (lines 37-38): none of them ever rooted nor satisfied.

Unsurprisingly, much like Ginsberg, Diane di Prima also discusses, in her poem, the role of religious institutions in society, because both Ginsberg and Di Prima were Buddhists, and often spoke about a “mystic” approach to religion. In “The Loba recovers the memory of a Mare”, Di Prima exposes just how much her counterparts feel isolated, struggling with their faith and questioning the higher power they used to pray to: “who did we pray/ who did we pray to then” (lines 16-17).The absence of a connection to a higher power led to a deeply isolating feeling which often triggers episodes of drug overdoses and lonely deaths, “laid out flowerless in abandoned basement/ blue stiff & salt injection” (lines 18-19). Not only were the speaker’s protagonists isolated throughout their lives, they are also alone in death, with no one to mourn them, and yet still, they still find it in themselves to warn off others to stray

onto their path: “just out of reach/ wrote lipstick “save yourself” on tin rail of furnished/ room bed” (lines 20-22).This imagery of the warning being written in lipstick is so vivid, because one immediately imagines it as being red lipstick, known to be a popularized symbol of power and strength within the women’s liberation and feminist movements to this day.

Ginsberg also calls out these “hopeless” institutions, as he believed that one is able to communicate directly to a higher power and tap into one’s intuition if in a state of ecstasy (of which, yet again, drugs were very much responsible for). So, we find Ginsberg’s protagonists fallen on their knees in “hopeless cathedrals praying for each other's salvation and light and / breasts, until the soul illuminated its hair for a second,” (lines 67-69), breaking their backs “lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to/ Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!” (lines 89-90).

Moreover, the women in Di Prima’s poem are all victims to an incredibly violent patriarchal society in which not only is their labour undervalued but their bodies are overworked and overexploited, as the poem seems to question the patriarchy directly: “who was the whore of Babylon in the/ kerosene lamp of your childhood?” (lines 40-41).The symbolic figure of the whore of Babylon serves to enhance how women have been consistently perceived in the past, as the Loba both acknowledges this abused past and the still ever-present oppressive reality, trying to create a space for liberation.

The Loba’s Howl: The rise of feminine rage

While both poems “eulogize” a life lived in the margins, I would argue that when it comes to “Howl”, the poem expresses more of a feeling of melancholy about the state of society whereas in “The Loba recovers the memory of a Mare”, there seems to be a latent anger about the condition of women. One of the ways in which the latter portrays that latent anger that pervades the entirety of the text, is precisely through the Loba herself: the personification of the she-wolf who refuses to be caged in and allows for women to embrace their rage against the patriarchy. That we need to record women’s pasts and make sure they resurface comes from a place of anger, and what better way to convey this inherent “feminine rage” with none other than the figure of the she-wolf, untamed and wild?

The concept of feminine or female rage was very much in vogue during the second wave of feminism in United States of America, working as a powerful response to the injustices committed against women, finding its place in activism through

protests, literature, with resurgence lately in television and cinema. That anger and frustration, the same one can feel when reading this poem, was one of the key instruments that propelled many feminist activists and thinkers to demand change in society and to fight for their rights. Feminism, particularly radical feminism, appropriated this idea of anger as a driving force, seen in radical books like *SCUM Manifesto: Society for Cutting Up Men*, written by Valerie Solanas published in 1967, dedicated to the women who were beginning "to raise their voices in heat and anger" (Gornick 22) which was considered as a satirical work of fiction based on valid ideological concerns, in which men are seen to be the source of all that is wrong with the world and women must be the ones to fix it by completely annihilating men. Considering the work as satirical, as a fantasy, is current with the depictions of female rage that almost always happen in the context of cinema, particularly in horror movies, in which we assume that none of it would actually happen because female rage is only accepted and entertaining when it's made known that it's not real, but ironic and fictional.

There are, however, ardent feminists that didn't go that far and still advocated for women to embrace their anger. In fact, Audre Lorde, a great African-American feminist writer and activist speaks of rage as an appropriate response to a deeply patriarchal and racist society in her essay "The Uses of Anger", which she presented at the *National Women's Studies Association Conference* in Connecticut in 1981. Interestingly enough though, the depictions of female rage are overwhelmingly white, which is made abundantly clear on screen nowadays, but there has always been a sense that some women's anger is more acceptable than others, which Lorde explores in her text: "To turn aside from the anger of Black women with excuses or the pretexts of intimidation, is to award no one power-it is merely another way of preserving racial blindness, . . . " (Lorde 9). It is precisely because of their intersectional identities, that an African American woman's anger is unfortunately seen as more compromising and intimidating because it denounces sexism and racism, patriarchy and white supremacy.

According to Audre Lorde "every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (Lorde 8). Interestingly enough, Lorde also makes use of the imagery of the she-wolf as a source of strength and motivation in order to fight the system:"I have suckled the wolf's lip of anger and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no

sisters, no quarter" (Lorde 10).That anger isn't coming from nowhere, and when it's paired with the right discourse, it can seriously make a change, channelling it through political action, organizations, action-oriented art such as poetry, the vehicle through which Di Prima's Loba moves.

The Loba's Howl: a critique?

Although "Loba" as a whole has been described as a form of "feminist revisionist mythmaking" (Grace and Trigilio 229) and "The Loba recovers the memory of a Mare" does, in a way, take on a revisionist approach and "feminizes" Ginsberg's "Howl", it does not necessarily just rewrite it from a feminist perspective: instead, it seamlessly incorporates women's writings and tradition in the predominantly male dominant Beat Generation, encompassing women's experiences and standing on its own merit, functioning, I'd argue, not as a critique but as a perfect response and addition, flowing as part of the original poem, making Ginsberg's intention to sing the best minds of his generation all the more complete.

The Loba begins to take on her journey into "the wreck" calling all women, her "moon sisters", in Loba's first poem, "Ave", in which the Loba becomes one with all other women, recovering their memories, experiences and identities as she, much like Di Prima, seeks to "create and contribute to a tradition of women's literature that only includes the stories of women for themselves and of themselves" (Mathes 54). This "invocation" is made entirely up of the women Di Prima envisions and speaks to, ending with an enchanting mantra which turned "this moment in the book into a ritual that celebrates the community of the lost moon sisters to which the speaker has just been led to by the Loba" (Mackay 82). By the end of "The Loba Recovers the Memory of a Mare", the Loba is still "unrooted" (line 55) as she keeps walking "into the wind", walking into the wind of change, relentlessly challenging the norm, and forever voicing the inequalities and injustices women face on a daily basis, howling loud enough for everybody to hear:

> O lost moon sisters
> . . .
> shrieking I hear you
> singing I hear you
> cursing I hear you
> praying I hear you
> . . .
> I am you

and I must become you
I have been you
and I must become you
I am always you
I must become you

ay-a
ay-a ah
ay-a
ay-a ah ah
maya ma maya ma
om star mother ma om
maya ma ah.
(Di Prima, lines 1; 42-45; 103-115)

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[1] It should be noted that more often than not, this quotation from Di Prima's *Memoir* is cut short in books and academic papers, reading only "I was about to meet my brothers", for instance in (Cook 66), thus excluding both the great number of female writers that were part of the Beat Generation as well as female writers altogether (Goggans 6).

[2] "A wolf woman" is in reference to the preliminary quote, taken from a Tlingit song from Jerome Rothenberg's anthology *Shaking the Pumpkin,* on *Loba'*s Book I which reads: "It would be very pleasant to die with a wolf woman/ It would be very pleasant" (Di Prima, Loba 7).

[3] A social movement that rose in the sixties, where a group of visionary street artists who called themselves: The Diggers essentially gave up personal property, creating a module for what a free society at large would look like, rejecting the current American way as oppressive. The original San Francisco Diggers members came from the San Francisco Mime troupe, founded by R.G Davis, performing for free exploring overtly political themes meant to confront societal hypocrisies (Steele 1-19).

[4] Diane di Prima taught creative writing at the New College of California, California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco Art Institute, California Institute of Integral Studies, and co-founded the Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Politics where she taught along other names such as Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, and William St. Burroughs among others (Carden 50).

[5] According to Goggans, Series 9 was sent to the poet Harold Carrington who was incarcerated in New Jersey's Prison. The censor did not allow for the magazine to go through and pressed charges, allegedly, because of excerpts from Le Roy Jones's *The System of Dante's Hell* and William S. Burroughs's poem *Routine* (14).

[6] All the photographs have been recently released in the book *Beat Memories: The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg* by Sarah Greenough published in 2010.