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Diane di Prima: A Voice at the Heart of the 1950s Beat Revolution

By Karen Pressley

Coming to know the aesthetics of Diane di Prima as a poet, a political dissenter, a feminist, and a brilliant mind requires not only a connection with poetry but cultural history of her era, and how her aesthetics affected women's rights and the feminist movement before the word "feminist" was even coined. Di Prima may have been, in the 1950s, once thought of as marginalized because she was a Beat poet and a lover of Beat poets, but she was not one of the girls-who-wore-black in the fringes who said nothing (Johnson & Damon, 1999). Indeed, her works warrant recognition at the center of the Beat movement as an American cultural phenomenon.

Dr. A. Robert Lee of Hirono University in Tokyo refers to Di Prima in his work, "Pocket Books to Global Beat: Andrei Voznesensky, Kazuko Shiraishi, Michael Horovitz," as a woman of such influence that she, as part of the founding pantheon of the Beat movement—Jack Kerouac, Joyce Johnson, LeRoi Jones, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Ruth Weiss, Neal Cassady, Phillip Whalen, Michael McClure, John Clellon Holmes, William Carlos Williams, and William S. Burroughs—should be looked to for the transnational emergence of the Beat movement in Russia, Japan, and Britain (Lee, 2004).

Diane di Prima shared some of the same guiding aesthetic principles as did male Beat writers. I explore how Di Prima's aesthetic principles speak to the broadened experience of being a female dissenter and poet of the Beat generation. I identify some of the aesthetic principles informing her poetry, prose, and her political dissent, and how her aesthetic principles generated works while America "readily imagined itself if not quite at the end-of-history than somehow in peril from a shared plot to unthread the nation's moral fiber" (Lee, 2004).

Background and influences that informed Diane di Prima's art

Diane di Prima's birth into an Italian family abiding in Brooklyn, 1934, timed her late teen years to emerge in 1950s New York, when dissenters of her generation would shake the rafters of American culture.

Her mother's father, Domenico Mallozi, had been close friends with political anarchist Carlo Tresca, and influenced her youth through his political and freethinking views. By age seven, she began writing poetry, and entered a Manhattan high school at age 13. She went on to study physics at Swarthmore College, which established an interesting comparison for her eventual study of metaphysics later as she delved into magic and the occult.

Biographies of di Prima are filled with her many meetings of the minds and body. Her thirst for discourse and the desire to connect with other strong minds drove her to go out of her way to learn from people she respected, including her eventual, influential relationship with writer Ezra Pound, as well as Timothy Leary, Kenneth Patchen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, and LeRoi Jones. Commentaries on her life show that more than any other woman of this time, Di Prima held a place alongside male writers thought of as the epitome of Beat brilliance (Knight, 1996).

Di Prima's Aesthetic of Dissent and Codes of Coolness

Di Prima's key written works, from political letters to prose and poetry, surfaced from the post-World War II decade into the 1960s and even '70s, during the free speech movement, campus anti-war (Viet Nam) protests, hippiedom (free love, communal living, recreational drug experimentation, crossing sexual boundaries) which could be considered license more than liberty, like a counter-culture conspiracy. In essence, di Prima as one of the Beats moved for a cultural change of priorities, away from the Cold War military/industrial movement, McCarthyism, suburban consumer-materialism, as represented in Ginsberg's *Howl* Moloch.

Di Prima looked for freedom in life through sexual liberation and spontaneity--sexual experimentation through orgies, same sex relationships, frequent change of partners, and a turn to mysticism, occult practices, and Zen Buddhism, counter to the mainstream world religions of her parents

(Christianity). Her comings and goings from Greenwich Village to the West Coast and communal or street living exemplified the Beat lifestyle, living and moving through space freely, like an escape from “square” authority and influences. Her lifestyle and then poetic works challenge stereotypes of the passivity and sexual frigidity of ‘50s women.

Embodying dissent in her lifestyle became an aspect of her aesthetic, like a trademark of the Beats, living “poetically” through written self-expression and keeping herself free to write while not always holding down a nine-to-five job, and instead, doing spontaneous stints of nude modeling for artists, helping to publish poetry with Hettie and LeRoi Jones, writing, protesting, and engaging in meetings of the minds through vigorous dialogue.

Her aesthetic of dissention showed at the core of her “codes of coolness.” Di Prima wanted the life of an outlaw rather than the kind of life mothers of the day had—roped to their homes with no education, career, personal identity separate from their husband’s, or significant social status based on personal accomplishment. Leaving the fate that was intended for her through the culturally-inherited role of women, she just figured out how to live the antithesis of the life of 1950s American order. Di Prima’s lifestyle and works erupted society and helped change the minds of the culture, which would eventually result in a better life for all women (H. Jones to Charters, 1996) by breaking the cultural mode of women’s roles, giving women a voice in poetry and political dissention, and helping women to work and lead collaterally with men.

Her detachment from material possessions that trapped progressive America of the 1950s, and her desire for unencumbered freedom was evident in how she could care less that she lived on the street, took showers in the back room of a restaurant, and stored her clothes in a Chinese laundry which she rotated out daily. Her disagreement with women’s traditional role of being at home in the kitchen showed she cared more about the great pleasure of sitting in an unhurried, uncrowded coffee shop, available to her friends who came in and out, enjoying each morning as it drew to a close when she could know that she wrote at least a few words in her notebook. (Di Prima, 1969).

“Something about the intimacy of our shared space and the code of coolness in effect at that time would have made it unseemly for us to know each other by name, or have anything more to say to

each other than the minimum morning greeting. It would have been intrusion, filling each other's turf and head with rattling chatter and conversation, and the inevitable unfolding of our emotional lives would have destroyed the space that the indifference of the city gave each and every one as her most precious gift. (Di Prima, 1969).

Interconnection of creativity and spirituality

Beat writings emerged like a response to an unofficial call for breakthrough poetry and fiction and an end to academicism—'Poetry as voice not as printing' in Rexroth's perceptive formulation (Lee, 2004). The emergence of publications like *Evergreen Review*, *Yugen* (co-published by Di Prima with Hettie and LeRoi Jones), and *City Lights* created a channel for new Beat generational works, releasing writing like Ginsberg's breath-line, Kerouac's bop-prosody, and Di Prima's poetry. "I am a woman and my poems/are woman's" wrote di Prima in her 1950s poem "the Practice of Magical Evocation," little anticipating how a revisionist Beat circuit would in due course invoke a woman-centered circuit for writers such as herself (and others like Carolyn Cassady, Joyce Johnson, Joann Kyger, Joanna McClure, Eileen Kaufman, Hettie Jones) as a pointer to generational and cultural change.

In a 1999 interview with Peter Marshall, di Prima told Marshall that reading alchemical texts in her youth helped her to understand that everything she encountered meant more than what she thought, and that people thought in a multi-layered way. Her study of Western magical systems shaped her view that there is an interlocking of relations between all different things, which is living, not intellectual. "So the color of something, or its basic energy, or something it exudes, or the number of its petals if it's a flower, all speak to you" (Marshall, 1999). When she read world literature, she did so by letting every statement resound within herself, going to depths beyond their surface. She would interpret all forms of art with an intentional absence of equations like, "this equals that." For example, she felt that saying "life is a journey" is the act of reducing metaphor to equation, making a clear line between one thing and another. Instead, she feels it is important to see that things have energies, or an actual force that moves into the heart, the eye, and the soul, which one can live off of forever. This view was a springboard for her to be a voice for things, rather than attempting to limit things with definitions or single perceptives.

Starting with the world, you come up against the natural object. Where does it turn into a metaphor? Where is the mind? Where is the swift apprehension of relations in the mind? That

bird leaving no trace in the sky is correspondence to one's thought. Thought leaves no trace. (di Prima to Marshall, 1999).

In the interview with Marshall, di Prima offered a description of using metaphor in poetry. This concept provides an insight for us into her approach to writing poetry overall, in that she sees every single thing as multidimensional, and that behind each object in existence are a million layers:

What I'm talking about is some apprehension of correspondences that makes everything richer, constantly richer. There's more than meets the eyes, as we like to say. There's more than actually meets the brain and the thinking part of the brain, too. So that in a good poem, you don't even know why you're taken. Why you're "rapt away"—like the rapture Jehovah's Witnesses are waiting for—into a much larger comprehension of how things speak to us, how things fit together, how there are all these levels beyond the material and yet with their roots right in the material. (di Prima to Marshall, 1999).

Such is just one example of the influence of Buddhism in di Prima's writings. The multi-layered levels that potentially lie behind the existence of objects are beyond the material yet with their roots in the material. This manner of perception and interpretation, in essence, transcends human thought initially, which makes the study or interpretation of objects not easily understood. As the *Diamond Sutra*, or Buddhist *Bible*, says,

"...the Dharma of this Scripture transcends human thought, so the effect and the final result of studying it and putting it into practice is also inscrutable."

Di Prima's beliefs about thought and metaphor can be found in her book-length poem, *Loba*. She told Marshall that she did not pick the wolf in *Loba* as a metaphor for a woman, but rather, connected with the wolf image through a dream and she simply relayed the visual imagery. Yet she told Marshall that it wasn't until 28 years later that she is able to tell people that *Loba* is about the feralness core of women, and of the feminine in everything. She had, over time, discovered the wild nature at her core and sensed that existence in all women. One could consider that feralness can be understood in Di Prima's life in the concept that having escaped from domestication, she had become wild and free. *Loba* is reviewed frequently as a visionary serial poem, and often hailed as the female counterpart to Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. *Loba* was first published in four separate volumes in the 1970s, and picked up by Penguin Publishers in an expanded and revised form in 1998. In a 1998 review of *Loba*, di Prima is

reported to be a “pivotal figure for those who would rewrite the archetypes of the unconscious”

(Publisher’s Weekly, 1998).

Pieces of a Song collects her poems from the late 1950s and early ‘60s. Here she addresses the conditions under which female Beats strove to write: housework, pregnancy, financial struggle. In this work, her exemplary Beat aesthetic rejects boundaries between poetic sensibility and life:

There is no part of yourself you can separate out saying, this is memory, this is sensation, this is the work I care about, this is how I make a living.

She strived to keep herself open to possibilities, which became a form of education for her throughout her life. It was in this manner of interpreting art that she viewed music, viewing paintings, reading literature, hearing people voice their views, all acts that formed her identity.

In “This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards,” she wrote on November 9, 1954:

This to be told in whispers: father, father...
But sly and too quick you moved away and I walked
Out one evening when wind hit the bright trees to find the myth struck dumb.

Di Prima shows that in the “I” of this poem, she emerges as a self, herself, which dissipates the female myth of being a non-person. From this moment, this myth no longer speaks to her and it seems she has found a time and place to emerge as who she is rather than who her culture perceives her to be within the stereotype of a woman at that time.

In “For Baby-O Unborn” (1963) she writes:

Sweetheart
When you break thru
You’ll find
A poet here
Not quite what one would choose.
I won’t promise
You’ll never go hungry
Or that you won’t be sad
On this gutted
Breaking
Globe
But I can show you
Baby
Enough o love
To break your heart
Forever

As is a common denominator among female Beat writers of the time, di Prima writes without any romantic views here of being a writer, or a mother. As an unwed mother and a poet at the time, she shows that she has little to offer (in money or material possessions) the new baby she is bringing into the world. This theme runs through other works, including *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. Here, di Prima describes systems of property, financial struggles, sexual liberation, sexual encounters of both sexes, female sexuality, and women's liberation. In *Memoirs*, she says female Beats subscribe to what she called "our eternal, tiresome, rule of Cool." To some degree, this ethos inhibited many of the Beat women from writing, but it also protected that writing behind a veil of silence. The productivity of di Prima and other Beat women suggests that this "code of Cool" provided a cover for female artists to develop their literary voices (Johnson & Damon, 1999).

In Maria Farland's "Total System, Total Solution, Total Apocalypse: Sex Oppression, Systems of Property, and 1970s Women's Liberation Fiction," she focuses on di Prima's sexually explicit disclosure in *Memoirs* which confesses her lesbian, group, and anal erotic adventures. Here she surpassed the erotica in Ginsberg's *Howl* and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, the male-authored Beat texts prosecuted for obscenity, as she was for this work. Here she exposed through her apocalyptic lens, as had Ginsberg and Burroughs, the source of sexual repression being the bourgeois, repressive economic structure and morality, and thus bridged the divide between male and female writers (Farland, 2005).

Farland's work brings to mind the concept of apocalypse – a way of seeing and interpreting the world— as a means to understand the spirituality of Beat writers like Jack Kerouac. In *On the Road*, he suggests an apocalyptic revelation, "...The sounds you expect to hear on the last day of the world and the Second Coming..." telling how he may have seen himself as having a cosmic view of history as if envisioning both the beginning and the end of an era, infused with an apocalyptic sense of urgency in events of day to day living (Pressley, 2006). Di Prima's vigorous sexual adventures suggest a similar apocalyptic sense of urgency in the events of her day to day living (Pressley, 2006). Di Prima's vigorous sexual adventures suggest a similar apocalyptic sense of urgency in the events of day to day living.

The female Beat anthology, *Women of the Beat Generation* (Knight, 1996), provides only a cursory first gloss in reconsidering female writers as figures of the Beat scene. With their depth of societal influence and impact on American and world literature, Beat literature and Beat culture, are more complex than any overview of writers can suggest, but a deep excavation of Di Prima and other Beat writers surfaces an abundance of treasure from the richly conflicted era of the 1950s. As she writes in her poem “Rant,” whose title echoes Ginsberg’s *Howl*,

There is no way you can not have a poetics no matter what you do: plumber, baker, teacher
You do it in the consciousness of making or not making your world.

The rhythm of this work and benchmark literary era reminds us of the inevitable poetics of our everyday lives, however prosaic or not Di Prima’s writings may be.

While di Prima lived in the San Francisco area, she wrote and taught at the San Francisco Institute of Magical and Healing Arts, and continued to study and practice Tibetan Buddhism, as well as magic, alchemy, and healing. Though she was grounded in the aesthetics of the Modernist style of Ezra Pound, she turned her early influences toward a more mystical, natural Romanticism, which is more subject to contain the irrational impulses of magic, mystery, and sensation. In his work, “Probably Reason, Possible Joy,” Baker-Smith offers this summarizing profile of di Prima:

The real secret to di Prima’s best work, however, lies in her ability to integrate all of her otherwise separate impulses. In what is surely her most fully realized achievement, *Loba*, she pushes her poetry past the charming or easy—perhaps the most damaging temptations of a Beat aesthetic—and past the exclusively natural. The she-wolf provides di Prima with a fierce, elemental female hero: a rapidly moving perspective able to maneuver from ecology and politics to erotics and religion, a perspective alternately predatory and nurturing. (Baker-Smith, 1992).

Though the Beat voice spoke collectively, there was, in fact, a generational divide in this pantheon of characters. Holmes, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Cassady, and Weiss were born in the 1920s, while Jones, Johnson, and di Prima were born in the 1930s. This generational structure shows the Beat’s extended influence in the post-war era the cultural avant-garde (Johnson & Grace, 2002). The dissident, counter-culture voice of the Beats spoke collectively, but each personality can be looked at as having their own working singularity. As a significant contributor to American literature through Beat poetry, Diane

de Prima's artistic works is one significant voice through which one can interpret the Beats, but I believe she would prefer that we learn how to listen to hers among the rest as a voice of a generation.

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