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“Whose flesh has crossed my will?” :

The Abject Horror of Diane di Prima’s *Dinners and Nightmares*

INTRODUCTION

The Beat Generation has long been studied as a male-dominated literary movement, one that rebelled against the societal status quo but seemingly left women behind in its search for liberation. However, in recent years, scholars have begun to reimagine the Beat canon, giving credit to women authors who have been historically overlooked in academia. Diane di Prima, for example, is a revolutionary writer, who uses gothic tropes to communicate ideas of motherhood and womanhood in a distinctly Beat way. To understand and unpack di Prima’s contributions to the gothic Beat world, I will first establish key Beat terms and phrases essential to analyzing her work. Discussing di Prima’s biography will ground these sociological and literary terms in her lived reality, and allow for a deeper understanding of her creative works. Building on this context, I will turn to di Prima’s collection *Dinners and Nightmares*, and analyze the various ways she represents motherhood and womanhood through a gothic lens. To enrich my analysis, I will compare di Prima’s work to Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, identifying the ways that di Prima innovates from within the established Beat canon. Establishing these key concepts will allow me to define what I mean by “gothic,” especially the concept of “abjection,” using Beat writer William S. Burroughs as a case study. I will ultimately unveil how di Prima’s use of the gothic and her rejection of misogyny present in Beat circles allows her to stay true to the rebellious Beat mission.

THE BEAT GENERATION

The term “The Beat Generation,” or simply “the Beats,” refers to a literary and semi-political movement that took place from roughly the late 1940s to the late 1970s (Haslam 444). Those taking part in this movement wrote poetry, novels, plays, memoirs, and other forms of prose that defied categorization. The key impulse tying these works together is the idea of rebellion, specifically the idea of rebelling against middle-class American values, also known as middle-American identity (Haslam 454). Many critics have argued that those involved in the Beat Generation were reacting against the Modernist movement before them and learning to create art in a post-Second World War world. Nancy M. Grace and Jennie Skerl explain that post-World War II writers “negotiated identities... that embrace transnationalism and globalism... while simultaneously distrusting these processes as injurious to selfhood, liberation, and literary production” (4). In other words, the culture of post-war America created a climate that was both expansive and restricting, and the Beats endeavoured to fight that tension. The Beats sought to create work that questioned the very idea of what art and literature could be, often using both form and content to critique the status quo of middle America: a society that remained stagnant while the rest of the world opened up. This desire for openness was often interconnected with critiques of the so-called American dream and so, although transnationalism was important to the Beats, they were fundamentally shaped by their experiences in America.

The Beats were also known to work collaboratively with one another (Haslam 453). The Beat Generation can be classified as both a coterie and literary school of thought: they were artists through friendship as well as through a shared philosophy. By borrowing from the Modernists, the Romantics, and the Post-Modernists, the Beats situate themselves in a very

particular moment in literary history. Some critique them for being too radical or for being too free, both in their poetic form and their content, while others question the validity of their rebellion (Haslam 455). Although the Beats can be understood as one movement, they are not a monolith and are also connected to other literary groups. Namely, there is a lot of overlap between the Beats and other American literary movements, such as the Confessional Poets or the Black Mountain Poets (Theado 1-2). This fact raises the question—who gets to be a Beat?

Traditionally, the Beats have been canonized into the “big three”: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs, with other figures like John Clellon Holmes occasionally appearing on the sidelines. This perception of the Beats is ahistorical at best, and largely misogynistic and whitewashed at worst. Multiple individuals who wrote alongside the canonized Beats were not able to rise alongside them in popularity for reasons likely relating to race, class, and gender. Particularly, writers like Ted Joans and Amiri Baraka are rarely discussed in academia as being Beats, yet they were part of the same circles and considered the very same themes as their canonized companions (Wilson 125). Likewise, Diane di Prima was not only working with the same ideas and messages as Kerouac and Ginsberg, but was also directly involved in the Beat circle. She partied with them, wrote with them, and taught with them (Poetry Foundation). In an article with the CBC, di Prima’s daughter—whom she had with Baraka—explains that Ginsberg was her babysitter, and even delves into how her mother felt about Kerouac’s misogyny. Her mother, she says “was unafraid and she wouldn’t hesitate to tell someone they were a bore, which is more what she would be likely to say than ‘a sexist’” (“Beat Poet Diane di Prima,” 00:02:48-00:03:01). Here, we are given a glimpse into the ingrained sexism of the Beat world, and how gender affected the playing field women Beats had to work within.

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand the gender dynamics in Beat culture is by understanding the gendered dynamics of middle America. Middle America, once again, refers to the ideological values and conceptions of the White American middle class, particularly relating to the popular culture one might picture when they think of the 1950s. One of the easiest ways to envision this world is by thinking of the nuclear or “perfect” family, where a man works a nine-to-five and a thin blonde housewife makes a pot roast while keeping an eye on their two children, playing in a safe and happy suburban neighbourhood. The Beats understood this vision as one that was a falsity— a constricting fictional version of reality that deserved to be picked apart and dissected (Haslam 455). However, Beats writers from different backgrounds conceptualized this idea in different ways.

Some of the major themes that Beats often discuss in their explorations of middle-American identity are inherently tied to suburban gender roles. This, then, creates a tension between who exactly is to blame for the oppressive structures that middle America upholds. Many male authors, for example, personify this idealized domestic America in the form of the all-American housewife, who keeps her husband at home and tethers him to the family rather than letting him sow his wild oats. This takes up much of Kerouac’s generation-defining novel *On the Road*, which presents the idea of rebelling against the domestic space as equivalent to rebelling against women. There is a clear desire in Kerouac’s semi-autobiographical novels to depict women as the enemy, as the embodiment of middle America. Kerouac’s “negative terminology towards women, failure to unromanticize them, patronisation of, [and] failure to develop female characters” all contribute to the male toxicity associated with the Beat canon (Duckett 26). However, where the canonized Beats sometimes correlate all women and all domestic spaces with the very core of middle-American values, such authors as di Prima deviate

from that canonized Beat form. Rather than condemning herself to be someone who represents capitalist ideas of how society should function, di Prima exposes the ways that the patriarchy feeds off of capitalism and how the two are interconnected. In her article, “Suburban Captivity Narratives,” Behrent discusses the idea of the American housewife as “the ultimate symbol of the triumph of American capitalism” (261). She further explains that this vision of American capitalism includes a pristine and well-stocked kitchen as a symbol of wealth. The idea of the American housewife, however fictional, is inherently tied to middle-class whiteness and the values that go along with it, all within a sexist and racist hierarchy of labour (Behrent 262). Di Prima takes these ideas and flips them on their head, presenting an inversion of such a perfect, all-American woman.

WHO IS DIANE DI PRIMA?

Di Prima’s work, like that of many of the Beats, is heavily confessional and personal, and as such, it is important to have a firm grasp of her biography. She was born on August 6, 1934, in Brooklyn, New York to middle-class Italian immigrant parents (Genzlinger). Di Prima cites her maternal grandparents as hugely influential figures in her life, explaining that her grandmother Antoinette Mallozzi taught her “what it means to be a woman,” expressing a sense of comfort and growth from time spent with her (*Recollections* 1). Likewise, di Prima took inspiration from her grandfather Domenico Mallozzi, an anti-fascist activist, but also reflected on how his gender allowed him to view the world in the way he did:

he would at anytime throw everything over for an ideal. There were many stories of his quitting an other-wise okay job to protest some injustice to a fellow worker...he would arrive home with the fellow worker and his entire family... [my grandmother] and the six

girls would take in crochet beadwork to keep cash coming in until my grandfather found another, less unjust employer. (*Recollections 2*)

Here, we can see how di Prima prioritizes and unearths the problems of women and the way that their labour is so often ignored by the men in their lives, no matter how left-leaning.

Furthermore, di Prima's relationships with her grandparents are best reflected in her proud identity as an Italian-American, something that bleeds through into nearly all of her work as a symbol of community, power, and spirit. She even changed her name from Diane DiPrima to Diane di Prima to reconnect with her Italian roots (Genzlinger). Although she did not grow up in poverty, di Prima experienced the systemic oppression common to immigrant communities and had to fight for her right to take up space in literary circles both as an Italian American and as a woman.

When discussing di Prima's Italian-American identity, Roseanne Giannini Quinn writes: "Di Prima goes far beyond revealing secrets about family... to unveiling the very secrets of Italian American womankind, not in the persona of the immaculate, mysterious Virgin Mary, but the menstruating, independent, orgasm-seeking Diane" (179). Quinn centres di Prima's identity in her work by asserting the importance of di Prima's background in relation to its impact. Essentially, di Prima's writing can be seen as even more transgressive if we look at the larger picture of her life. Di Prima wrote candidly, discussing her sex life and her desire to be an independent thinker— she was even arrested on obscenity charges in 1961, the same year *Dinners and Nightmares* was published (Murphy, "Diane Di Prima Papers"). This dynamic can be further contextualized by the fact that Italians were racialized in 1950s America. The experiences of Italian Americans in mid-century America were shaped by the racism and xenophobia they experienced at the hands of their Anglo-American counterparts. Southern

Italians, in particular, were thought to be “racially inferior” (Richard 87). In other words, Italians were by and large not part of the white middle America di Prima rebelled against. In this way, di Prima can be viewed as rebelling not only against the white middle America that the Beat generation has been canonized as reacting against, but also rebelling against the expectations of her own immigrant community.

While di Prima’s heritage is important to follow as an integral part of her work, it is likewise vital to understand the events of her life leading up to and during the writing of *Dinners and Nightmares*. Di Prima lived in New York for the entirety of the collection’s conception, and specifically in Manhattan for the later half of it (Ortega). While in Manhattan, di Prima met and built lasting relationships with many Beat authors, such as Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. Within this circle, di Prima was influential in developing what the Beat movement would become, pushing boundaries in her personal work and as the co-editor of *Floating Bear*, a scandalous Beat periodical released throughout the 1950s that pushed political and social boundaries (“Beat Visions and the Counterculture”). As mentioned above, the Beats wrote communally and workshopped and developed each other’s works. This period is likely when di Prima further developed her gothic skills as she came into her own regarding her writing style and content. Grace and Sker describe *Dinners and Nightmares* as “di Prima’s first mature work” that divulges the feminine “sexualities, domesticity, [and] rebellion” which mark di Prima as distinct from the male dominant Beat world scholarship has recognized (87). Di Prima’s work, which academia has long ignored, therefore offers insight into a missing piece of the Beat ethos.

It was also at this time that she began an intimate relationship with fellow writer Stefan Baumrin, which resulted in her first child, Jeanne di Prima. Shortly following the publication of *Dinners and Nightmares*, di Prima gave birth to another child, Dominique di Prima, fathered by

Baraka (*Recollections* 289). Understanding these early pregnancies is vital to understanding some of the content of the collection but also the context surrounding the work. Di Prima writes of her loneliness and isolation, despite the fact she was part of a group of writers, precisely because she was outcast by society at large and also by this very community. Di Prima describes the inescapable trauma of Jeanne's birth, detailing how the doctors put her under anesthesia before the baby was born: "as Jeanne crowned and just as I was about to push her out, an invisible demonic being standing somewhere behind my head forced a gas mask over my mouth... [at] that crucial moment I was not allowed to be Witness" (*Recollections* 170). These traumas carry through into her work. As an Italian-American woman writer with two children by different fathers, one of whom was African American, she experienced alienation at the hands of her family, and felt isolated from her friends as she needed to focus on caring for her children (*Recollections* 181). Before the birth of Dominique, Di Prima's relationship with Baraka had also resulted in another pregnancy that ended in abortion. It's clear from her memoir that di Prima was uncertain about this pregnancy, but felt ultimately forced into the abortion by Baraka: "it was Roi [Baraka] who finally insisted on the abortion... it was Roi who stood beside my bed and said nothing at all... it was as if I was in some way the enemy" (*Recollections* 229). Di Prima expressed her feelings about this event in a poem entitled "Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, After an Abortion." Although this poem is not in *Dinners and Nightmares*, it was written in 1960, making it contemporary to the collection, and it is thematically and contextually related to a poem that was included: "Songs for Babio, Unborn." In "Brass Furnace," di Prima describes the sorrow and pain she feels at what she felt was the loss of a child, and captures something that I argue is at the core of the *Dinners and Nightmares* collection: "I fed my eyeballs to a carnivorous snake / & chained myself to a tree to await your end"(IV ll. 37-38). Di Prima is frequently

waiting at that tree, waiting for something she, or at least her speaker, is never able to find—peace and hope in a brutal, violent, and snake-filled world.

THE GOTHIC

One of di Prima's methods for unveiling this snake-filled world is through the use of gothic motifs. The "gothic" generally refers to literary elements that evoke fear, disgust, and unease (Wagner xxiv). As Corinna Wagner explains in her introduction to *Gothic Evolutions*, "[gothic] is a notoriously slippery term... [it] has been a hotly contested word that has been deployed, appropriated, and re-deployed by competing camps" (xxiii). For my purposes, I argue that gothic literature often seeks to pervert or challenge the reader's expectations and to express emotional trauma in a physical and often violent manner. However, the gothic famously evades a clear definition. This then lays the groundwork for why the gothic was so popular among the Beats—it was yet another way for them to use powerful imagery to subvert the status quo and unearth the unfairness of society. The best-known gothic Beat is arguably Burroughs (Bellarsi 4), but di Prima likewise leaves an incredibly gothic legacy in her work. Both writers use gothic tropes that are necessary to define before discussing their works.

One of the most-used gothic elements among the Beat Generation is abjection. In the most simplified terms, the "abject" refers to a substance that has been removed from inside the body to outside the body. Common examples include blood, sexual fluids, vomit, urine, and feces—essentially, things we would rather not think about. Julia Kristeva defines the abject as "opposed to *I*"—that is, standing in opposition to the idea of a whole human psyche (68). The abject represents the fragmented nature of human consciousness and the disjointed relationship between the body and the mind. The body rejects what it cannot handle, viscerally abjecting the

unwanted to the outside world, altering its physicality in the process. An important complication, however, is that the abject is always lurking on the outskirts of the human mind, reappearing in the unconscious and in the ways we perceive the world (Kristeva 68). Kristeva expands this definition to include other elements too, such as insects, dirt, rotten food, or things expelled from the earth rather than the body (68).

One can also interpret the abject in a more metaphorical sense, as the abjection of the self. As Kristeva argues, the human mind and the collective mind of society abjects what it does not want (69-70). When the dominant society decides to shun certain groups, it functionally abjects them from its view of the world. The dominant group decides that the abjected group is inferior and that the abject would be better off on the outskirts of society. However, these groups are always lurking in the minds of those who have abjected them as they are afraid of what they represent and what they can do (Kristeva 70). There is a correlation between the literal and the metaphorical abject as they begin to represent and allude to the other. Those who are abjected are forced to deal with what this phenomenon does to their psyche and are left questioning their worth in society. The abject person may feel that they are the dominant society's vomit, part of the rejected but hidden truth.

It is no secret that Burroughs has been canonized as *the* gothic Beat. David Punter asserts that Burroughs presents a world that is "frequently in the depths of a Gothic labyrinth," suggesting that a nonlinear style of storytelling and overall "offensive" themes seek to take us on a journey of the ugly and unknown (76). Essentially, Burroughs worked within the Beat framework concerning rebellious themes and topics, but packaged them in a distinctly gothic manner, intending to disgust. Although Burroughs has many texts in which he employs gothic tropes, *Naked Lunch* is the most relevant for my purposes. It was first published in 1959—two

years before *Dinners and Nightmares*— and uses abjection as the main method to communicate themes of rebellion. Throughout *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs uses profanity, offensive language and slurs, bodily fluids, and sexuality to represent the margins of society that the oppressive and controlling middle-America rejects. He does this by telling a nonlinear narrative scattered throughout a series of seemingly unrelated vignettes. Unlike di Prima, Burroughs also focuses heavily on drug use and addiction; however, he also intertwines sex and pornography, particularly queer sex, with that behaviour. As Katie Arthur describes, “*Naked Lunch* reveals how certain bodies are deemed unruly, disorderly, and anti-social; [and it] encourages us to think of bodies as sites for the reproduction of (heteronormative) power and resistance to it” (178). Arthur understands something fundamental about Burroughs here: his connection between pornography and rebellion. For Burroughs, it is not just about sex or free love, but rather about a cinematized view of sexuality and the ways it can be exploited.

In a vignette entitled “Outtakes: The Examination,” Burroughs presents a bizarre doctor’s appointment between a man and a doctor. When explaining how bodies function, the doctor describes a special enzyme he is searching for, saying “I have sometimes wondered if the same enzyme was not instrumental in homosexuality, schizophrenia, and drug addiction” (Burroughs 274). Here, Burroughs plays with medical language to explore activities and identities that are marginalized by society, toying with the concept that something like queerness is engrained into your body. Burroughs continues, writing that “the Lesbian reacts to the male and in her attempts to incorporate loses her desire for the male and the male enzyme” (279). Burroughs medicalizes queer experience and perception in this line, poking fun at how the medical community often treated queer people as people in need of medical attention to “cure” them of their queerness. Although Burroughs was bisexual himself (Burroughs, *Queer*), his focus on lesbians seems

pointed. Perhaps then, Burroughs is implying that lesbians are in a separate category from other queers, othered because of their womanliness and their queerness.

On the one hand, this is an interesting exploration of identity, one that mirrors di Prima's own discussions on the loneliness of the female immigrant experience. But, on the other, it is devoid of any of the humanity that di Prima captures. Burroughs fundamentally misses a key part of society's perception of marginalized women— women are people, with thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of their own, and this is something that he fails to recognize. His representation of lesbians as hard-wired sexual animals fails in his attempt to shock or rebel against society because it is not that different from how dominant society views them. Where di Prima captures the experience of marginalized women, Burroughs uses that experience for decoration in his larger, masculine narrative. In this way, di Prima stays truer to Beat values than Burroughs, rejecting the misogyny of middle America in favour of true rebellion and freedom. Burroughs own preconceived ideas about women get in the way of his reaching true liberation.

DINNERS AND NIGHTMARES

Unlike Burroughs, di Prima uses womanhood and female sexuality as substance rather than decoration. We see this in her first major work, *Dinners and Nightmares*. The collection is organized into several sections, the first large one being “What I Ate Where” (dinners) and the second large one being “Nightmares.” Although the material in “What I Ate Where” is not as graphic or violent, it is just as compelling and often includes other gothic elements. Notably, several poems deal with motherhood and loneliness. The first is “Prevailing Food at Times,” in which di Prima discusses going out for dinner with a family friend, or “fiend” as she refers to them. She explains that the interaction turned into a fight, writing: “then the Old Family Fiend

and i had an argument, which i / will not mention by name, as it was sitting right here staring at me and it is / bad manners to talk about a thing to its face” (26). Here, di Prima describes her child, or the “thing” sitting across from her, in an isolating and objectifying matter. She separates herself and the conversation from them, suggesting gothic themes of alienation and dissociation. Di Prima continues to describe this interaction by stating “[the fight] was the / kind that ends with you are killing your parents, what right have you got to / breathe out just because you breathed in, and there are already too many / babies in new york” (26). In this, we see why di Prima is dissociating from the child in this discussion. She’s both protecting them, and trying to separate herself from them, possibly to accomplish the same effect. She’s being attacked for bringing another baby into society when her parents do not feel she is capable of taking care of it, and that it is not proper for her to do so. There’s an implication here that di Prima is acting outside of her class, outside of what is expected of her. Her “Old Family Fiend” thinks she should be settling down before having children, but di Prima is living a life that rejects the middle-American ideals of what constitutes a proper family. We also know that di Prima wanted this child, as she herself explains that she had two goals “to have a baby and to be a poet” (*Recollections* 162). By putting these biographical elements into her work, di Prima is rebelling against the idea not just that these types of lives are not dignified, but also that they cannot be good. She gives herself meaning in expressing these thoughts and experiences.

Di Prima expresses similar themes in her poem “Songs for Babio, Unborn,” mentioned above in connection to “Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, after an Abortion.” In the latter, di Prima describes the deep emotional pain she experienced after her abortion and also hints at the physical pain and emotional pain of experiencing the procedure and its aftermath: “your goddamned belly rotten, a home for flies. / blown out & stinking, the maggots curling your hair”

(VI ll. 1-2). In this, she evokes the feeling of abject “rotteness” as she feels her aborted fetus is still there, a phantom child haunting her and blaming her for her abortion. However, in “Songs for Babio, Unborn,” di Prima describes a much more tender and gentle experience, focusing on the love she had for the fetus and the different futures she had planned for them: “I won’t promise / you’ll never go hungry / or that you won’t be sad / ... but I can show you / baby / enough to love / to break your heart / forever” (ll. 24-35). In many ways, the melancholic and longing nature of this poem could be confused for a lament to a stillborn child or a miscarriage rather than an abortion. It is only with the lines “whose flesh / has crossed my will?” (ll. 1-3) and “Body / secret in you / sprang this cry of flesh” (ll. 15-17) that it becomes clear that di Prima is using this painful imagery to discuss abortion. The phrase “secret in you,” in particular, highlights a level of shame that di Prima seems to have experienced, creating tension between di Prima herself, her body, and her poem. This poem feels much more vulnerable than the rest of the collection, and is notably in a section labelled “More or Less Love Poems.” Di Prima, then, contextualizes the poem as a letter to a lost loved one but uses violent imagery such as the line “sprang this cry of flesh” to underline the trauma and pain associated with this loss. Exactly what the “cry of flesh” is is unclear, but it could be a reference to the birth di Prima wishes she had had, or the abortion and the subsequent bleeding she experienced. That, coupled with the gentle and soothing word choices throughout, marks this poem as a distinctly maternal piece that completely differs from her representation of motherhood as something to dissociate from, as seen in “Prevailing Food at Times.” Perhaps in writing so candidly about her experience, she is once again rejecting the notion that you have to be a perfect mother. She presents herself, rather, as a broken one who has lost a child.

Di Prima's Nightmare section of the collection takes a different turn, making the feelings of isolation and disgust all the more literal. In "Nightmare 2," di Prima uses descriptions of rotten food and insects to invert the idea of a clean American kitchen. She writes: "Having a cleaner house than usual I did the dishes. Gathering those long / slime worms, dayold spaghetti, I dropped from the sink into the garbage / them whereupon one slithered to the floor and lay there smirking" (ll.1-3). As di Prima reimagines the old spaghetti, representing it as "slime worms" that have to be thrown away, she cultivates a sense of unease by presenting a space that is supposed to be clean and tidy as a place where worms can "slither" around. The fact that these worms are born from the old spaghetti strengthens this uncanny feeling, presenting pests as one with the dishes she makes. In other words, this is not a place of nourishment; it is a place of rot. Furthermore, di Prima's rhythm and short line breaks feel monotonous, presenting a dirty kitchen as "cleaner... than usual," and creating a sense that her cooking space is normally even more disgusting (l.1). The worm that lays on the floor "smirking" at her has agency, as if the rotten food and worms are mocking her. The worms, as well as the "slime" and dirt they bring, have been abjected from the earth but are still wreaking havoc in di Prima's kitchen, always on the edge of the scene as Kristeva describes (68). By opening the poem in this way, di Prima creates a setting of unkempt decay within a traditionally domestic setting, making it the exact opposite of what a traditional housewife's kitchen should be.

Di Prima also presents herself as the abject of society, furthering the sense of filth in the domestic space. Creating the image of a frantic woman, alone and failing to keep her kitchen clean, di Prima writes: "Ugh I said but having a cleaner floor than usual I tried to pick it up, where- / upon it nudged limply over and again smirked. After ten minutes of chase / I with dirtier hands than usual gave up" (ll. 4-6). In this, di Prima shows that the physical grime and vermin in

her domestic space are beginning to affect her person. Her hands “dirtier... than usual” have been infected by the abject around her, representing di Prima as abject herself (l.6). This theme is strengthened by di Prima’s writing style, which flows as a stream of consciousness. This highlights the idea that di Prima is struggling and alone, furthered even more by the repetition of her “than usual” lines. Di Prima’s writing represents her as isolated, not fitting into the ideal mould of an all-American housewife, and abject from society. She is meant to stay within this inverse domestic space filled with pests and decay. In this way, both di Prima’s setting and the way she reacts in the setting show that she has been outcast.

Building on the dirty kitchen she presented in “Nightmare 2,” di Prima adds more elements of the abject in “Nightmare 4.” She tries to make herself dinner, another inversion of the perfect housewife, as she is cooking for one and not a family (ll.1-2). While making her meal, she leaves meat unattended and her unfortunate cat eats it, prompting di Prima to kill her: “[motherfucking] bitch I said and flattened her with the frying pan squashed her bones practically dead and left her for tears” (ll.4-5). The choice to use the word “squash” rather than “break” concerning the cat’s bones makes the poem feel more visceral, creating an uneasy visual that is soft and wet as if to remind us that the cat was a living being. This scene shows a woman who quickly turns to violence, a woman who is near a breaking point—it does not show a composed mother ready to nurture and care for her household. Instead, di Prima uses the abject, bloody imagery and violence to highlight that she is the exact opposite of that ideal figure: “still flat now stiff lay cat all dead... trails of drying sometime blood to floor and back” (ll.8-9). The cat’s corpse does not leave the scene just because di Prima is no longer angry—she is forced to deal with what she has done and confront these actions. This abject is literal, through the blood and other fluids emitted by the cat’s dead body, grounding the piece in reality and forcing her to

deal with it. These feelings are the opposite of what a poised, happy housewife should be feeling as she cooks for her husband. Rather than preparing food for a breadwinner, she has to stop preparing her meal because of her aggressive and harmful actions.

Di Prima also presents the abjected self in “Nightmare 4,” using the form to create a sense of isolation. Both the length of the poem and the narrative flow make it seem like one is in di Prima’s head, and there’s a sense that she does not see people often: “[on] bug- / jumping bed I cried screamed and then cried eventually recover” (ll.5-6). Di Prima avoids using definite articles to string her sentences along in a sense of panic, and her run-on sentences throughout the poem create a sense of unease that mimics how she feels after killing the cat. As shown in “Nightmare 2,” her apartment is dirty and there’s a sense of depression and isolation in her voice. The cat may have been one of the only companions the narrator saw regularly, and this is why it pains her so much when she harms the cat in the same way she feels dominant society has harmed her. She is not a traditional American housewife; rather, she is a lonely woman who only had a cat to keep her company. In this nightmare, di Prima’s children and lovers are nowhere to be found—she is single and without a loving family, manifested in the bleak apartment, and, as such, she is punished as the abject of society. This is an especially interesting choice given di Prima’s background as a single mother of two in an on-again-off-again interracial relationship at this time (*Recollections* 181). Perhaps this is what truly separates the “Nightmares” section from the other poems in the collection: “Dinners” allows di Prima to explore her reality, while “Nightmares” allows her to explore what feels most real, and for her, that’s pain—deep, violent, and hollow pain.

CONCLUSION

Though di Prima has been critically understudied and read, her contributions to the Beat movement are clear. She wrote, lived, and loved alongside many prominent Beat writers who have received recognition, and it feels necessary to rectify her exclusion by reconsidering her work both as something that could exist within the Beat canon, but also as something that deviates from it. Like Burroughs, di Prima has a fascination with the gothic, the grotesque, and the abject, using marginalized experiences and imagery to create scenes of violence, decay, and alienation that highlight the ugly under-belly of middle-American values. However, unlike Burroughs, di Prima does so from a place of care and compassion, using her own experiences with oppression and pain to create a complex picture of Italian-American womanhood, and of motherhood more generally. Where Burroughs attempts to critique middle America by highlighting oppressed groups, he ends up recreating the very things he claims to rebel against, namely misogyny, lesbophobia, and classism. He fails to understand the intersections of identities and how they function in the real world— he would much rather use women, particularly queer and disadvantaged women, as props for his larger point, and in doing so, he undermines himself. Burroughs's use of the gothic is most definitely memorable, but di Prima's truly captures the Beat mission: to reject the idea that you must fit into a specific mould in an already cruel, unjust, and broken world.

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